

Deceptive spirals

On the music of Georg Friedrich Haas

Wolfgang Schaufler



Georg Friedrich Haas

The fact that recognition was a long time coming, but was then all the more intense, may have something to do with the fact that Georg Friedrich Haas conquers new musical territory in his works, step by step and with great consistency, inviting his listeners to join him on auditory adventures whose radical nature and beauty they must first learn to grasp. The word “adventure”

has been carefully chosen. Being prepared to experience the music of Georg Friedrich Haas also means letting go; it means making a journey to an unknown destination. It means taking a risk and entrusting yourself to Haas. There is no other way to find out what lies behind his music. It is a case of all or nothing. And he will reward you richly for this trust.

With his awareness that the system of equal temperament fails to offer him possibilities for expression with sufficient differentiation, Haas develops and refines sounds whose fascination is based on the use of microtonality.

Haas would presumably object to this observation. He stresses that there is not just one single microtonality. Those who restrict it to halving semitones to form quarter-tones miss the essence of the concept. The sensory attraction of the multifarious sound has become a key component of Haas' musical thinking. Shifts, overtone harmonies, pulsing beats – these can form worlds that are in conflict with each other and complement each other as mirror images. Haas' creativity is ignited by this and leads into areas whose foundation is not as secure as it often seems – and so it is hardly a coincidence that Franz Schubert is hugely important to him.

His music often particularly allows audibility of the difference between the familiar and the possible. It is a challenge faced by both musicians and listeners. The listener must be prepared to experience different auditory coordinates – and then can expect to encounter potentially addictive sounds. Haas has composed several works that must be played in total darkness: a tribute to his love of haziness and the resultant sensitivity of perception.

Haas himself says: "I do not see night-time as a romantic concept of sweet dreams, but more as a continuation of the concept of being surrounded by darkness, in the sense of being mentally deranged – as a moment of grief, hopelessness, darkness. The "night side" of things is essential to my music. This concept describes something that plays a major role in my spiritual consciousness (and probably that of many other people as well)."

In response to the question as to whether there is a direct relationship between night-time, light and darkness, or whether this plays out across several different levels, Haas answers: "These relationships probably do always exist, but while composing, and particularly in the case of the Concerto for Light and Orchestra, my focus is very specifically on the perception of darkness – or, as in Hyperion, the perception of light – as a musical instrument. This is something rather different to the metaphorical concept of night that I was talking about before.

However, in the string quartet “In iij. Noct.”, the concept of night is connected to the actual absence of light: for me as a composer, when the historical Gesualdo quotation occurs in the middle of the piece (according to the golden ratio), the link between the actual night-time in which the piece is being played and the metaphorical night-time of the historical quotation becomes tangible as an element of expression.”

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The musicologist Bernhard Günther writes: “When you listen to music, the function of melodic lines, pitch systems of equal temperament and bars whose beats have graded emphasis roughly corresponds to that of banisters, handrails, and also the familiar size and arrangement of the steps when you walk up and down a flight of stairs. Even subtle deviations from the standard dimensions, perspectival distortions such as those encountered in the Vatican or Odessa steps, are unsettling. In a now-famous lithograph by Maurits C. Escher, the upper and lower end of a staircase join up to form a kind of spiral staircase with only one complete turn, creating an unreal microcosm of aimlessness.” He therefore delivers a precise description of Haas’ “deceptive spirals”.

The milestones in Haas’ oeuvre include the Hölderlin chamber opera *Nacht* (1995/96), premiered at Bregenz Festival where the Poe/Kafka opera *Die schöne Wunde* was also realised in 2003. The formally daring ensemble composition *in vain* (2000) is almost a classic work in more recent ensemble literature. As in his Violin Concerto (1998) harmonic structures formed out of overtone rows collide with chords based on tritones or fourths/fifths which lead into sheer endless sound loops. Haas’ recent compositions include large orchestral works which are based on the findings from *in vain* and open the door even further to new sounds and sound experiences. In *Hyperion*, a Concerto for Light and Orchestra, he created “forty-five unforgettable minutes” (*Die Zeit*) in 2006 at the Donaueschingen Music Days. His orchestral

work Bruchstück (2007) was labelled “music of spellbinding power”. And in 2011 the newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung described his work limited approximations for six microtonally tuned pianos and orchestra simply as a “musical sensation”.

At Salzburg Festival last summer Haas contributed a work that was inspired by Mozart’s Horn Concerto, but without a soloist: “... e finisci già?” Haas explains the basic concept: “At the beginning of the concerto movement Mozart places the D major chord exactly in the position of the overtone chord – in Süßmayer’s version this scoring blurs and becomes a rich major chord. This overtone chord is the centre of my short piece, out of which the beginning of the movement unfolds, as written by Mozart – in four different temporal elongations and contractions simultaneously.” He sees Mozart’s fragment as an impressive personal document. Above the notes, which mostly only consist of the bass line and the solo part, Mozart had written Italian texts that give evidence of two different elements for Haas: the fact that Mozart used the parameter of “technical difficulty” with a positively dramatic touch (“Ahi – ohimè! – bravo, poveretto!”) and that Mozart obviously felt the formal specifications of the Rondo to be a constraint. It is easy to imagine that Haas sympathises with Mozart here.

Simon Rattle recently conducted Haas’ music for the first time (see pages 15–17). In a way, this prepared the audience in Berlin for the new work that the Berlin Philharmonic commissioned Haas to write and will even take on tour to the Carnegie Hall in autumn 2014. The timing could hardly be better. This September Haas will take up his post as Professor of Composition at Columbia University in New York.