

“... where you discover where music came from”

An early masterpiece of the 21st century – Simon Rattle on “in vain”

The image shows a page from a musical score for the piece "in vain" by Georg Friedrich Haas, composed in 2000. The score is for 24 instruments. The title "in vain" is at the top left, followed by "für 24 Instrumente (2000)". The composer's name "Georg Friedrich Haas" and birth year "(1953)" are at the top right. The tempo is marked "♩ = 60". The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for 1. Flöte, 2. Flöte, Oboe, 1. Klarinette, 2. Klarinette, Sopranosaxophon, Fagott, 1. Horn, 2. Horn, 1. Posaune, 2. Posaune, 1. Schlagzeug, 2. Schlagzeug, Harfe, Klavier, and Akkordeon. The second system includes staves for 1. Violine, 2. Violine, 3. Violine, 1. Viola, 2. Viola, 1. Violoncello, 2. Violoncello, and Kontrabaß. The score features complex notation with many notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "pp" and "ppp". There are also some text annotations like "Metall" and "Vibraphon". At the bottom, there is a copyright notice: "© Copyright 2000 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien" and "Kon. III / 2011 Universal Edition UE 34 865".

Georg Friedrich Haas' *in vain* is a really astonishing work of art. How to describe it? First of all, for everybody involved in New Music, it is one of the only already acknowledged masterpieces of the 21st century. And he said himself to me that he could never imagine that a piece lasting just about an

hour for a large ensemble of players, using almost no kinds of conventional tuning, and of which 20 minutes is played in complete and utter darkness – he could not imagine that at first it would ever be played, let alone the fact that it has become really a cult wherever it is played. And it seems never just to be played once: the minute people have heard it they are hungry for more.

When I first rehearsed with the musicians of the Orchester-Akademie, with whom we are playing it, I tried to find ways to describe the piece. And what was fascinating was that actually there was very little music that you could compare it with. Some of it sounds like Ligeti, the kind of scurrying figurations that you hear in the Violin Concerto as though there are a hundred of Alice's rabbits in Wonderland, disappearing down the holes. Some of it sounds maybe like a little bit of Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, with this extraordinary intergalactic stillness.

One of the first great masterpieces of the 21st century.

Simon Rattle

But most of it sounds like simply nothing else at all. If you imagined a kind of Rothko painting in music, you might get close, because the piece, like these paintings, seems to throb and glow. One of the things about the paintings is, the longer you look, the more dynamic they seem to be. This is very, very true of this piece also. There is another wonderful metaphor which he uses, which is that he was very, very inspired by the idea of M.C. Escher and the staircase, which seemed always to be going upwards and you found yourself simply back at the beginning once more.

The way the sound works is almost like an optical illusion. And it is the opposite of the idea of Sisyphus, who simply was condemned to push the same stone up the top of the hill and have it fall down with him again. In this piece you climb up the stairs, and you seem to go higher and higher and higher, but actually you find yourself back where you start again. And this somewhere has to be the meaning of in vain.

The piece was composed as a response to the rise of the far right in Austria at

the end of the 20th century, and has partly to do with Haas' despair at this situation. But in fact it is not a tragic or a political piece, it is more as though you are wandering into some kind of extraordinary forest, some kind of primeval darkness, where you discover where music came from.

So just to describe it, it starts with a flurry of sounds, almost like some kind of aural snowstorm. And through these sounds you begin to ... [sighs] ... if you can hear lights, you hear lights! You have to use mixed metaphors in this piece. But then gradually, as the snowstorm dies down and the long notes become heard, the lights in the audience become lower and lower and lower, and suddenly you are plunged astonishingly into complete darkness. And this is where the music sounds as though it comes out of some kind of primeval swamp, as though it is struggling to be born. You hear the opposition of the pure notes with notes of a slightly lower pitch or higher pitch, as though they are fighting against each other, or as though you are sticking a knife under your skin – I'm sorry for all these metaphors. And at a certain point it is as though the music is struggling to be – it's a very long, slow, patient birth.

The strings come to a pause on a chord, and suddenly the harp is heard playing, and the immediate feeling is a jolt of: "The harp is terribly out of tune!" But in fact the harp is playing versions of the natural harmonics that you get on any instrument, on any brass instrument. With our modern system of tuning, we have had to make many compromises with actually what is a natural chord. And what Haas has done is to go back to the original tuning that you would get if you blow through a horn without adjusting anything with your lips. And it is a very, very particular sound, it has almost a primeval feeling.

Now this piece is all about oppositions of all types: about light and darkness. But it is also about the pure, original tones almost fighting with our modern sounds. And a great deal of the opening of the piece is simply exploring what these chords do, they are like extraordinary halos of sound.

And then it feels to me as though you are hearing the music that could have been in Wagner's subconscious before he started writing the Rheingold, with its extraordinary E flat major, the beginning, which is just one chord. But this is the chords from much longer ago, it is the chords of the natural scale. And the trombones and horns play this, and it sounds as though they are calling us to some kind of ceremony. At the climax of the work there are ten of the most astonishing minutes of music anybody has ever written, and it can only remind me of the level of music that Ligeti was writing, our most recent great composer.

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And at this point, when the lights go down a second time, what you realise is that you are hearing somehow a real, new harmony being born. The players play in complete darkness, they have little modules that they have to memorise, but to memorise ten minutes of music is a really extraordinary achievement, this is what we have been working on – even today, as I speak. And we have been working on it also in total darkness, so it is a shock suddenly to be sitting in front of these lights.

What you hear is based often on C major and the C major chord – but the real, natural C major chord. And it throbs and glows in this total darkness, as though you are seeing some kind of psychedelic vision. And there is a feeling, if you are an audience member, that something really new is happening, and a kind of natural harmony is being found, not only in the music but in the world. I am sure this is what Haas had in mind. And you feel as though you are on the verge of some extraordinary illumination, some understanding that was not there before.

But then, very slowly, the lights come on, and as the lights come on the music gets once more stuck on this extraordinary Escher staircase, and you simply don't know where you are. And it is as though the rhythms of the machine have become jerky, it is moved away from its natural primeval state, and this vision has been lost again. And in fact the piece winds up faster and faster and faster at the end, in the way it had wound down earlier. And then, like the end of Berg's *Wozzeck* or the end of Schönberg's *Erwartung*, it winds and it suddenly stops in mid-air. And it has been in vain.

It has been an amazing experience working with the young musicians of the Orchester-Akademie. Some of them have had experience in contemporary music, some not. Nobody has had experience in music quite like this. If you write not in the normal tones that we play in, but in these microtones – what they call the spectral school of composition – you are almost having to

reinvent music every time you write it. But this piece seems to have such a powerful impact on people that I'm sure it is going to be one of the pieces in musical history about which people can say: "This really began something new."

When we first started to work the musicians said: "What is this? I mean, surely this is crazy, can we do this?" And so I sent them away to listen to in vain and a couple of them said: "Well, we thought this was crazy. But we listened to it last night, and neither of us found we could sleep. The impact is so powerful." It reminds me of the greatest pieces of Olafur Eliasson, very, very strongly; particularly the work in the last Berlin exhibition he had, where you walked into a gigantic room which was full of smoke and extraordinarily bright lights came to you in the smoke, so you were completely disorientated and almost drowned with colour.

The piece has a similar impact to that. The minute I started studying it I thought of Eliasson and his works. There was a very strange moment, the first time I sat down late at night and listened to the whole piece in one sitting. And in the middle of it Olafur sent me an email, which I saw on the computer at the same time. I thought: "Well, this is some kind of sign. We are all thinking of the same thing." And indeed he will come to the first performance, because on that evening we started corresponding and writing about it.

So this can really be a new beginning. Please listen to it, please come and hear it live if you can, otherwise listen to it, experience it, it is really not quite like anything else. It requires patience and it requires trust, but it is a staggering experience and one of the first great masterpieces of the 21st century.

This introduction was given by Simon Rattle for the performance of "in vain" in the Philharmonie, Berlin on 18 January 2013

GEORG FRIEDRICH HAAS

in vain (for 24 instruments)

Orchestration: perc(2), hp, acc, pno, sax, vln(3), vla(2), vc(2), cb

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