

Westfälischer Anzeiger

(Translated from the original German)

CHAIN REACTIONS

The avant-garde pianist and composer, Michael Harrison, gave the world premiere of his work, *Revelation*, at the Ruhr Piano Festival in Duisburg

The compact sound formations, which Harrison labels, “clouds,” swelled through the wide entrance halls and passageways of the Wilhelm-Lehmbruck Museum. The tones he produced glowed red-hot with a variety of different colors, including a satisfying contrabass line, and resembled such sounds as the crashing of a gong, the chirping of a harp or sitar, and the sound of a horn... the resonance nearly reached one’s abdomen. Everything fit.

“I’ve used only a couple of keys,” says Harrison, regarding the finale of his one-and-a-half hour long composition. “Anything else you hear comes from the tuning of the grand piano, the ‘pure intonation’.”

The American, Harrison, embraced “pure intonation” as a student and assistant of the minimalist pioneer, La Monte Young. *Revelation* represents a return to the classical harmony of the cosmos in which the oscillating conditions of the intervals have all the numbers perfectly aligned. With Western music, Harrison was oppressed with the development of the equally tempered tuning of the main instrument. The octave is subdivided into twelve equal half-steps thereby allowing the modulation of the keys. According to Harrison, this creates a bad compromise at the expense of consonance.

Harrison studied pure tuning in Northern Indian music, which he also practiced and developed for his 1986 invention of “The Harmonically Tuned Piano.” His piano took three days to prepare for the Duisburg world premiere. On it Harrison could produce fascinating chain reactions of overtones and resonating vibrations to be activated and strengthened. Harrison has reconnoitered the endless fields of microtones in which the pure intonation of the resulting sounds, the commas, are revealed.

The Emancipation of the Comma

A striking aural experience: the first sharp dissonance in the pace of the sound that Harrison developed in ascending lines to gradually sensitize the listener to a variety of vibrations and colors. Harrison aims to remove the barriers surrounding harmonic traditions; “Arnold Schonberg wanted to free dissonance. I seek to emancipate the comma.” This focus frees the work from the melodic structure, no longer touching upon the thematic lead. Everything fits. The ensuing intervals broaden into charming streams, as the chord expanses broaden over flourishing ostinato-bass patterns. His touch stirs up the glimmer of the sound clusters: from the repetition of a single sound swells the richness of the overtones whose fullness is tied to the grooving rhythms. Harrison sits upright before the keyboard and handles himself like a classic pianist, treating his instrument with a deft hand.

The basic elements of the composition seemed to be notated. In other phases the sounds were improvised and adapted themselves to the conditions of the space: the acoustics, temperature, and humidity. The open space of the museum was “exhausting” according to Harrison. He developed “*Revelation*” in a closed hall, and here he needed significantly more volume to fill up the space.

He used the right pedal almost constantly, letting the vibrations somersault and run freely. With a special board made from long screws of various lengths, he pressed specific keys to the felts, resulting in jumps and shadows of sound (as in the passage, *Homage to La Monte Young*). This creates a whole new sound based upon a technical finesse that certainly remains Harrison’s secret.

-- Von Elisabeth Elling