

ARNOLD WHITTALL

Lonely furrows

Plowed time: writings and conversations

Klaus Huber

Edited by Max Nyffeler

Wolke (Hofheim, 2017); 197pp; €24 pbk.

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Wolfgang Rihm, a chiffre: the 1980s and beyond

Yves Knockaert

Leuven University Press (Leuven, 2017); 339pp; €69.50 PBK.

ISBN 978 9 462 70123 6.

Arvo Pärt's Tabula Rasa

Kevin C. Karnes

Oxford Keynotes

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'**P**LOWED TIME' (*Die umgepflügte Zeit*) is a 20-minute work from 1990 by Klaus Huber (1924–2017) inscribed 'in memoriam Luigi Nono' and using three poems from Osip Mandelstam's *Voronezh notebooks*, 'not so much "setting" them as breaking them down into their facets'. As Huber explains in an essay on the piece included in this short volume of 'writings and conversations', 'the metaphor of the plow [...] is constantly present' in Mandelstam's final works, cutting through the black earth of Voronezh as far as the eye can see. Just as the plow breaks open the earth, poetry [art!] has to break up the time of the present, so that its deeper strata can reach the light of day and become fertile. [...] Just as the plowshare is polished by plowing, so is the poem by the constant, patient work of writing poetry.

For those who know of Huber as teacher (Ferneyhough, Hosokawa) more than as composer, this emphasis on regular, patient craft, and on things earthy rather than things transcendent, seems appropriate. Yet the

dedication to Nono and the association with Mandelstam should caution against assumptions about mundane *Gebrauchsmusik*. Huber shared the visionary, acoustically questing ideals of close contemporaries ranging from Nono and Bernd Alois Zimmermann to Xenakis, Ligeti, Berio, Boulez, Stockhausen and Kurtág. Born in Switzerland, living and working in Germany and Italy and also strongly connected to the Far East, his internationalism was palpable, but the music is never blandly all-embracing. Just how deliberately he could seek to challenge and provoke is clear from comments offered in 1971, in connection with the first performance of *Inwendig voller figur* – a cantata based on the Book of Revelation. 'With my work I am trying to capture [...] humanity's primal fear of the end of the world. [...] I therefore write extremely committed music with the intention that it will alter social structures.'

Such frankly apocalyptic remarks are rare, but Huber's commitment to the ideals of post-tonal modernism are never in doubt. As with his younger Swiss-born contemporary Heinz Holliger, his roots in musical Expressionism break up the 'black earth' of those stabilities, regularities and well-tempered interconnections that classicism had prioritised: and he expressed this with particular directness in his comment that for Mandelstam 'the lack of coherence and the rift are programmatic. Mandelstam believed he was bringing in a lot more reality in this way than with coherence and continuity.' Huber's sympathies also extended into more experimental ideas about another kind of breaking down – 'the separation between the performer and the audience, musicians and listeners', but with the Nono-like aim of seeking to provoke an audience's more intense concentration on listening, not inviting its active participation in sound-making. The sounds in musical compositions 'are not unambiguous but always have multiple meanings': indeed, 'to the extent that it unfolds according to its immanent laws', music is 'free of "meaning" in the usual understanding of the word'.

Huber's commitment to spirituality is highlighted in comments from 1986 on another pioneering modernist:

had it not been for the music of Anton Webern [...] whose entire musical thinking was closely connected to mystical traditions, a gradual fading of our Christian spiritual music – by which I mean a creative continuation of it – would have been likely.

At that time, soon after Webern's birth centenary, it might still have been possible to see 'our Christian spiritual music' so positively: but one wonders if Huber felt the same 30 years later. To what extent did the 21st-century Huber believe that his plea for 'an aesthetic of resistance – [...] a mental attitude that resists the pressure to adapt, the temptation to make superficial, to lie' had been taken seriously by younger composers? Public events requiring such exhortations as 'composers of our time, if you love art, write less music, but better music', and 'deeper art is better and more beautiful art' were clearly not occasions to provide sober, technical chapter and verse about how such ideals might actually be realised.

There are plenty of comments here about music which Huber found appealing and challenging, yet the need for an aesthetic of resistance to the risks of conventional orthodoxies is consistently upheld, as in 1991:

when someone asks me whether I believe in God, I cannot answer. For me it is a mystery that surpasses what I have imagined. As a composer I feel more at ease in leftist milieus than in the milieus of the church: I am not Penderecki! [...] I feel closer to the musical thinking of Webern than to that of those who follow a Beethoven-Schoenberg line. [...] I prefer music with ruptures, cuts, as in a film. Hence I used montage technique early on.'

In a lecture marking Schoenberg's centenary in 1974, Huber – perhaps in a conscious echo of Boulez's notorious reservations – referred gnominically to 'the historical tragedy of this personality', who 'suffered from ambivalences that could not be silenced and whose tensions he was unable to resolve completely to the end of his days'. By contrast, the longer-lived Stravinsky was lauded in 1971 for having managed 'to achieve

– in the warming creative proximity of Webern – the ethereal music of ultimate density and clarity, which promises to remain the most gripping late work of a composer of our century'. Despite the current neglect of Stravinsky's later works, Huber was surely on to something there?

WOLFGANG RIHM has made a striking distinction between Huber and Stockhausen in comments about both as teachers. 'Stockhausen had taught me the significance of intuition and, above all, a sure sense of duration and proportion. Thanks to Huber, the philosophical and ethical aspects of my compositional work had been reinforced.' Rihm has continued to speak of his antecedents in grandly general terms: 'for me, the music of Varèse, together with Debussy, Schoenberg, Feldman and Nono is the freest of this century', and taking such comments at face value suggests a degree of affinity with 'mainstream modernism' that is not identical with Huber's but converges in regard to the intense expressionism of Nono. One of Rihm's most provocative (and/or playful) remarks seems almost like a mischievous challenge to the master's way of thinking and speaking: 'I am not capable of making a work without coherence. I can't achieve it. Nobody can. I say this often: just try to write a work without coherence, you won't succeed'. The love of paradox here is perhaps due to a scepticism about some if not all of the aesthetic principles espoused by the earlier modernists to whom Rihm and his teachers owe so much. For Rihm, it would appear, certain formal aspects of classicism need not be denied, simply because classicism is so easily confronted and challenged by means of style and rhetoric. Yves Knockaert nevertheless prefers to accentuate the paradox, claiming that Rihm 'introduces the organic as a looser (less logical) but at the same time firmer coherence' – which might not leave you much the wiser.

Rihm was born in 1952, the year of Huber's first acknowledged compositions, and his prodigious

productivity has so far deterred the production of comprehensive monographs. Yves Knockaert's book is an uneasy compromise between the general ('the 1980s and beyond') and the particular – the cycle of eight *Chiffre* pieces (1982–88, plus the later *Nach-Schrift, eine Chiffre*, 1982/2004) on which the book's schematically analytical second half focuses, together with the string quartets nos. 5–8 (1981–88). Knockaert's thesis-like approach can lead him to devise his own technical terms rather than use those which might facilitate comparison with earlier composer-theorists, not least Schoenberg, who were perhaps even more directly affected by 'the failed abolition of modernism' by 'emerging postmodernism' than Rihm himself. But then, 'Rihm himself' might well bridle at being associated so directly with such Schoenbergian notions as pantonality and developing variation.

The background in writers as diverse as Artaud and Adorno undoubtedly matters to Rihm, and the insight that 'for both Adorno and Rihm, *musique informelle* remains in the state of utopia an impossible ideal to reach' has the potential to explain the multifarious strivings for both formal and expressive impact found in Rihm's music at its best. But Knockaert's narrative avoids the kind of patient close reading of a single representative score's sequence of events that might have fleshed out causes and consequences more concretely and convincingly. To note that 'overpainting', and 'reusing, resuming, rewriting the same material in the next composition' continue the formative strategy whereby 'his way of improving what Huber indicated as weak moments in his study compositions was not to correct them, but to write a new work' highlights an obvious propensity for cycle-making. But it remains difficult to evaluate the full effects of this approach from the materials and instances included here. It is nevertheless appropriate that, with a book on Rihm of all composers, one should be in a state of permanent flux between then and now, older and newer allusions, as the highly

personal constantly leaches into the archetypal. Or, as Rihm playfully put it, 'identity exists only as flow'.

TO LURCH from Rihm's intense prodigality to Arvo Pärt's fervent parsimony is to experience one of contemporary music's characteristic disorientations; Pärt can be seen to question classical traditions quite as unsparingly and uninhibitedly as Rihm does, yet by arresting flow in a kind of frozen continuity, rather than promoting it. In his Oxford Keynotes handbook, Kevin Karnes homes in on the essential paradox embodied in the two-movement, 27-minute 'polystylistic concerto' that is *Tabula rasa* (1977). 'With its algorithmic processes, the rational unfolding of its pitch structures, and its aspects of Cage-like experimentation', it

might well be heard as building on important lines of Western avant-garde tradition. But the work's powerful intimations of tonality, its echoes of musics of earlier times, the drama at the end of the first movement, and the fade-like ending of its second all conspire to assure its resonance and comprehensibility among listeners at home with mainstream classical and even popular musics.

For much of Pärt's career it has seemed inappropriate to discuss his music from those Russian perspectives which the Estonian has, on the face of it, put firmly behind him. Yet rehearing the inexorable descent into darkness at the end of *Tabula rasa* suggests not so much the decisive establishment of a blank slate, rather a conclusive representation of affinity between the neo-baroque pattern-making that has predominated earlier and a Cold-War-era rethink of the lugubrious catastrophe at the end of Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony. Even if Pärt's spiritual aspirations have prevented him from matching the tortured emoting of Ustvolskaya or even of Shostakovich (contexts not considered by Karnes), the extent to which 'Pärt and his music offered focal points and soundtracks for imagining and configuring a post-Cold War world' in *Tabula rasa*

remains debatable. The 'post-Cold War world' imagined at the end of the second movement sounds to me more like a post-nuclear winter than a pure, promising new beginning. What Karnes describes as Pärt's concern to allow 'the sounds of *tintinnabuli*' to 'ring in the background, grounding his work in a transcendent vision of something stable, lasting and beautiful' might fit with the first movement's dialogues between march-like exuberance and lyric spontaneity: but *Tabula rasa* as a whole turns away from that to very untranscendent, very unstable aspects of earthiness and purely human unease, with more than a touch of Klaus Huber's 'primal fear of the end of the world'.

BOOKS RECEIVED

- Pierre Boulez: *Music lessons: the Collège de France lectures*. Faber & Faber, £30.
- Brian Boydell: *Rebellious ferment: a Dublin musical memoir and diary*. Atrium, £17.95, €19.95.
- Judith Chernaik: *Schumann: the faces and the masks*. Faber & Faber, £20.
- Nicholas Cook: *Music as creative practice*. Oxford UP, £47.99, \$74.
- Tim Dowley: *Christian music: a global history*. SPCK, £14.99 PBK.
- Marina Frolova-Walker, ed.: *Rimsky-Korsakov and his world*. Princeton UP, £62, \$80/£27, \$35 PBK.
- James Garratt: *Music and politics: a critical introduction*. Cambridge UP, £74.99, \$99 / £19.99, \$26.99 PBK.
- Edmund J. Goehring: *Coming to terms with our musical past: an essay on Mozart and modernist aesthetics*. University of Rochester Press, £80, \$99.
- JPE Harper-Scott: *Ideology in Britten's operas*. Cambridge UP, £75, \$105.
- Heidi Hart: *Hanns Eisler's art songs: arguing with beauty*. Camden House, £80, \$99.
- Robert S. Hatten: *A theory of virtual agency for western art music*. Indiana UP, £68, \$85 / £24.99, \$32 PBK.
- Susan Hawkshaw: *Aldo Parisot, the cellist: the importance of the circle*. Pendragon Press, £30, \$48 PBK.
- Deborah Heckert: *Composing history: national identities and the English masque revival, 1860-1920*. The Boydell Press, £60, \$99.
- Deborah Heckert, ed.: *Pleasing and interesting anecdotes: an autobiography of Giacomo Gotifredo Ferrari (1763-1842)*. Pendragon Press, £35, \$55 PBK.
- Ferdinand Hiller: *Conversations with Rossini*. Pallas Athene, £16.99, \$32.95.
- W. Harry Hoyle: *Wednesdays at 5.55: organ recitals at the Royal Festival Hall*. Clontarf Press, £25.
- Barbara L. Kelly & Christopher Moore, ed.: *Music criticism in France, 1918-1939: authority, advocacy, legacy*. The Boydell Press, £65, \$99.
- Valentin Lanzrein & Richard Cross: *The singer's guide to German diction*. Oxford UP, £64, \$99 / £22.99, \$35 PBK.
- Maria Matalaev, ed.: *Valentin Berlinsky: a quartet for life*. Kahn & Averill, £18.95, \$29.95 PBK.
- Richard E. Mueller: *Beauty and innovation in la machine chinoise: Falla, Debussy, Ravel, Roussel*. Pendragon Press, £30, \$48 PBK.
- Giovanni Pacini: *My artistic memoirs*. Pendragon Press, £30, \$42 PBK.
- Robert Philip: *The classical music lover's companion to orchestral music*. Yale UP, £35, \$50.
- Maria Razumovskaya: *Heinrich Neuhaus: a life beyond music*. University of Rochester Press, £80, \$99.
- Alon Schab: *The sonatas of Henry Purcell: rhetoric and reversal*. University of Rochester Press, £80, \$99.
- David Schiff: *Carter*. Oxford UP, £22.99, \$34.95.
- Alan Walker: *Fryderyk Chopin: a life and times*. Faber & Faber, £30.

MUSIC RECEIVED

- François Couperin: *Pièces d'orgue*, ed. Jon Baxendale. Cantando Musikkforlag, NOK 433.69.