

## **"Looking upon the Wide Waste of Liquid Ebony" Heiner Goebbels (Frankfurt)**

### **A scenic concert to a text by E.A. Poe**

Scenery/ light/ images: Thomas Dreißigacker (Cologne)

Dramaturgical cooperation: Reinhold Grether (Frankfurt University)

Voice, accordion: Sven-Ake Johansson (Berlin)

Guitar: René Lussier (Montreal)

Voice: Phil Minton (London)

Musicians of the Steirische Kulturinitiative:

Drums, midi-drums: Josef Klammer

Guitar, midi-guitar, computer programming: Seppo Gründler

Saxophone, clarinet: Heinrich von Kalnein

Cello: Michael Moser

Saxophone, bass clarinet: Otmar Kramis

Percussion: Franz Schmuck

Trumpet, flugelhorn: Lars Lindval

Voice, trombone: Bertl Mütter

Violin: Tscho Theissing

Commissioned by Ars Electronica (LIVA, Brucknerhaus Linz), in co-production with the STEIRISCHE KULTURINITIATIVE.

### **... looking upon the wide waste of liquid ebony ...**

"We had now reached the summit of the loftiest crag. For some minutes the old man seemed much too exhausted to speak. 'Not long ago', said he at length, 'and I could have guided you on this route as well as the youngest of my sons; but, about three years past, there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man — or, at least, such as no man ever survived to tell of — and the six hours of deadly terror which I then endured have broken me up body and soul. You suppose me a very old man — but I am not ...'"

Thus begins "A Descent into the Maelstrom" by E.A. Poe, one of the most thrilling stories of literature of such dramatic virtuosity that any attempt at dramatizing it or setting it to music appears superfluous. I, therefore, have sought to draw material from the structure of the story, the strategy of the narration, and the model of the experience, material for a concert composed according to concepts of theater and filmmaking rather than primarily musical ones.

The terror of the maelström of which Poe's main character tells, proves to be an allegory of everything unknown, NOVEL, in the wake of the idea of "modern thinking". However, unlike the listener in Poe's story, socially and historically, we are no longer in the face of this unprecedented experience but in the middle of the rapid velocity of daily gyrations with old experiences and images emerging and submerging — again the maelstrom proves to be a valid metaphor.

When the main character in Poe's story finds that his initial stupor and despair give way to curiosity and courage, his observations finally turn into strategies for survival. An up-to-date version might describe the very position of "postmodern" man, socially and aesthetically: Having miscalculated the circuit, we rapidly descend into the abyss. Reflecting and applying our observations (for instance the abundance of the musical means and formerly "new" inventions now at our disposal and "revolving" with us) we may some time (no more to be known) come ashore. But *"I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden."*

## **looking upon the wide waste of liquid ebony**

### **Heiner Goebbels**

"If you are on a sinking ship and all lifeboats have left, a passing piano lid to hold on to is a welcome life-saver. And yet that does not imply that the shape of piano-lids were the best design for life belts."  
(after a quotation from Buckminster Fuller)

The scenic concert centering on an analysis of the tale "A Descent into the Maelström" by Edgar Allen Poe, follows its principle of construction rather than the various facets of its narration.

To begin with, the two vocalists present the original text: Phil Minton from England the American original (in the role of the fisherman), Sven Ake Johansson, a Swede now living in Germany (the narrator) different German translations.

In the concert conceived especially for Ars Electronica, the topological (situated on the banks of the river Danube), the intentional (as a centre for congresses and concerts) and the architectural characteristics (as a sector of a circle) of the Brucknerhaus will determine the structure of the three parts of the performance. In the flow of the text by Edgar Allen Poe materials by Adorno, Baudelaire, Lem, Melville, and others are included that are directed towards the centre of the investigation:

#### **DISCOVERY & DESTRUCTION**

A Norwegian fisherman guides the narrator to a cliff offering a view of the Maelström, a whirlpool between Lofoden and the island of Moskoe described as a terrifying and incredibly destructive vortex in all accounts. The most exaggerated references, however, only serve to make the experience of the fisherman appear all the more terrible:

For better catches he and his two brothers risk dangerous water passages and one night after having fished they miss the time for slack-water and they are suddenly — things always happen suddenly with Poe — borne by a hurricane towards the Maelström at tremendous velocity.

Right at the beginning of this horrible ride he loses one brother and then in the breathtaking gyrations on the interior surface of the funnel also the second one who is drawn into the abyss with the boat. He himself overcomes fear and terror and an inexplicable curiosity helps him to make observations in the rapid revolutions (with the opposite side of the funnel appearing to stand still) about the velocities of descent of the other objects gyrating with him: a hope dawns on him and lashed to a cask he is saved by his old mates a little time later.

Staging literature today in a musical or theatrical way must mean more than just illustrating the semantics of literature's history. As you see, this can be related in a few paragraphs; not Poe's language, which can be read. Therefore here we have the concert under the aspect of an inquiry into the single elements: language strategies, point-of-view or rather directions-of-view, textual movement, structural properties, etc. within the three areas: VIEWING SPACE, REFLECTION SPACE, ROTATION SPACE.