

remains the old “collective war guilt” of the Anglo-American Occupation psychological warfare experts. Asked whether his emphasis on “taking guilt upon one’s self” stemmed from the notion of German collective war guilt, Rihm said with great emotion, “I grew up in a time when this concept was always going around. And I can do nothing without having to think about it, as in the case of this present theatrical subject [Oedipus]: How does it relate to a history, which I must either regret, or deny? And now there is an attempt to construct a healthy world [in Germany], where you can have it good. But one still should know what was. And to simply temporize about what was, to say, ‘It’s history,’ I can’t go along with that. And during a discussion about *Oedipus* I simply put the idea on the table, that this is what is going, when people like Oedipus and Jocasta kill themselves, in Jocasta’s case, or blind themselves, in Oedipus,’ because of guilt, in which they have no subjective, conscious part, but, rather, were suddenly confronted with. And then it leapt into my mind, when history professors in Germany suddenly say, ‘Yes, now we can talk about things as if they were history.’ But they are the present, say I!”

Glasnost West

Some of Rihm’s listeners might argue that his eruptive, atonal style includes the punishment along with the guilt. His most important sponsors, e.g., von Bittenfeld of the “Save Venice” committee, would look sadly upon Rihm as an abortive experiment. Nono, Rihm, and the Western modernists generally have no future, Father Ernetti warns. “All that happens is that their works receive one performance at public expense. It isn’t music at all. This so-called music has no sense at all, because it does not respond to the demands of nature.” By this, Ernetti means the folksy “naturalness” of the Russian composers whom the Venetians favor.

Glasnost has meanwhile overtaken the modernist vanguard in the West. The *New York Times Magazine* March 1, 1987, offered a group portrait of the modernist mafia, centering on pianist Maurizio Pollini, a close friend of Luigi Nono. British journalist Keith Botsford portrayed the softening of the old quasi-terrorist gang, writing, “With Pollini, the talk is not all of music, but also of people, ideas, politics. For there was a time when, like most Italian intellectuals of his age, Pollini was deeply committed politically. He and [his friend, the composer Giacomo] Manzoni, the composer Luigi Nono and others would perform in factories and in poor districts. He still holds to the Socialist ideal, in which he sees no need for authoritarian government. As Pollini and Manzoni say, in essence, their hopes of the early 1970s were disappointed. Manzoni calls it ‘a lovely and wonderful time.’ Pollini would perhaps like to see ‘what would happen if a Prague Spring were allowed to go ahead, to see what socialism could do in a developed country.’ ”

In Venice, even the red menace Luigi Nono has become passé. Meanwhile, the Benedictines of San Giorgio Maggiore stare out at the lagoon, and wait for the Russians.

Interview: Wolfgang Rihm

A preference for Nietzsche and Venice

Wolfgang Rihm was interviewed on Dec. 12, 1987, following the New York premiere of his opera, Jacob Lenz. Excerpts from the discussion follow.

Q: I asked a mutual friend, “Why is Rihm so interested in [the surrealist Antonin] Artaud, Nietzsche. . . .

Rihm: . . . Hölderlin, Lenz . . .

Q: “. . . Büchner, and so on, that is, people who deal with mental illness. Why this preference for mental illness?” But he assured me that you are quite normal.

Rihm: Naturally! Please, one has to be able to separate occupation with something, and the question of identity.

Q: But why are you so interested in mental illness as a subject?

Rihm: Because, I believe, when I look for a literary subject for music, then there’s no point in setting in music a classical piece which is closed in itself; rather, I look for things, that are broken, that explode, that are wounded. And music has much more to do, I believe, with the confusion of the soul, than with the calming of the soul. Music has confused me more than calmed me, since the first time I heard it as a child. And I love music because it gets me going, because it doesn’t leave me where I am, but drives me forward. And therefore I look for subjects which are not complete in themselves, but have energy—subjects that are hurt.

Q: In the classical ideal of music—“All true art is moral progress,” as Beethoven put it, or music for the glory of God, in Bach’s conception—the idea was somewhat different. Would the classical composers have agreed with you?

Rihm: Some of them, certainly. Beethoven in many respects, and, surprisingly, I believe Mozart as well. . . .

Q: Plato would have excluded you from his *Republic*.

Rihm: Plato excluded music from his *Republic* in any event.

Q: There is a chapter in Schindler’s biography of Beetho-

ven, in which he reports that Beethoven was a great admirer of Plato's, and agreed with the intention of Book Six of the Republic, that music should provide for moral progress, and put the listener's soul at peace.

Rihm: That surprises me, since what I know from Beethoven's late works doesn't put the soul at *piece*, but sets it into motion.

Q: Your teacher Karlheinz Stockhausen wants to enlighten the world about a coming "New Age." Do you have something like this in mind?

Rihm: It would be inappropriate, to announce something like this as an objective. I can't say, "I am enlightening an age of the world."

Q: Then you wouldn't agree with Stockhausen's mysticism?

Rihm: I love him very much as a composer, and value greatly his inventiveness, his power of articulation, his discovery of sound *gestalts*. The ideology, the mysticism, doesn't appeal to me, because of my nature. I have a different character.

Q: Tell us something about [your librettist] Heiner Müller.

Rihm: He is a very privileged man in East Germany; he can come and go to West Berlin whenever he wants. I took his piece *The Hamlet Machine* as the starting point for a musical theater piece. I think that Heiner Müller is a universe in drama. The man has moved mountains. The fantastic thing about his writing is that he doesn't articulate theater as a machine of action and consequence where everything fits together, but he puts a generational block in the space, and says "Look at this, do something." And then you have to work.

Q: Let me read you something that you once wrote. "The bringing forth of music in the routine course of a concert preserves remnants of the rituals from which it arose."

Rihm: I mean "ritual" not in the religious sense, but in the sense of the primeval, archaic situation. I believe that music is the only art which still has much to do with atheistic archetypes, ritualistic procedures, which are strongly linked to our consciousness. Reflex-like events which we cannot direct intellectually, but whose symbolic importance we experience on the psycho-physical plane. When I write an accent, a beat on the drum, or a chord that disappears—shshshshshsh—*descrescendo*, or, Boom! attacks, those are events, which have their image deep in our souls. But I must not say, "Here, exactly this, find the image for this." That would be the kind of hermeticism I want to avoid. But one has to know: We are playing with primeval matter.

Q: I notice that you have a special preference for Nietzsche.

Rihm: Very much so, because his texts permit music. They let music in. They invite music.

Q: One of your Venetian admirers, who first recommended your music to me, quotes from Nietzsche, that "music is

Venice, and Venice is music." Do you have a special relationship to Venice?

Rihm: I link Nietzsche and Wagner together with Venice. I have been there several times.

Q: You had a great success there in 1981, at the Biennale.

Rihm: There was a beautiful performance of my work at the Biennale, that's right; and Venice interests me because it is a city which once represented the whole world, where all paths met.

Q: I find it interesting that you admire [the Venetian composer] Luigi Nono, and he you. Can you say something more about your relationship to Nono?

Rihm: When we met in 1980, he naturally knew nothing of mine, while I knew much of his work, but he had a hunger to get to know things, and that inspired me, this openness, this unaffected, simple ability to get access to the other person. He wanted to get to know things ever so much, and I played things for him on tape, and he wanted to hear more, and more, and more, and for me that was—I had never experienced anything like that, that a great composer of my father's generation wanted to know so much. And since then we have been in contact, and meet often. I try to be just as open as he is, and that is what I can learn from him. Where that concerns my musical language, he certainly has radicalized various tendencies in my work, and removed the constraints, or the images, which underlie them.

Q: No doubt Nono would agree with you that music should stir people up, rather than content them, for his own political reasons.

Rihm: That is also a political question for me. What can I do with people who only groan along to music, who stuff themselves with music, who use music like a drug? I want people who take music as an impulse to think, as a kind of challenge to another kind of thinking, rather than pursue it as a confirmation of their thinking.

Q: One thing that interests me is that the Soviets have also picked up your music.

Rihm: Really?

Q: There was a long article in the Soviet music journal, *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, about your music.

Rihm: I didn't know that. It's funny. I had no idea.

Q: Who are your favorites among the young Russian composers. Schnittke?

Rihm: Schnittke, naturally. But what the really young ones are doing, of my age, I don't know. I would like to find out.

Q: There are people in the West—for example, a Benedictine monk in Venice at San Giorgio Maggiore, Father Pellegrino Ernetti—who think that the "naturalness" of Russian

music means that the Russian sort of neo-Romanticism will conquer the world. What does that have to do with the idea of "New Simplicity"?

Rihm: A horrible idea! I hate it! But I would say, that if it is Romanticism as such, then it has no chance. Romanticism as such I find too artificial; it has come from inside itself. But you ought to know, when you use the conception "New Simplicity," that this was an idea introduced by concert promoters and publishers for the most incompatible things. They brought under the same hat minimalist music, neo-expressionist music, post-serial music; everything was packed into this idea, and nobody knew exactly what was meant by it. There was a weekend program on WDR, and one of the editors invented the title for it. And I wasn't even there, and they didn't even play any of my works. and in the next few weeks, it was out everywhere, that I was the principal exponent of New Simplicity! It's ridiculous.

Q: I would like to go back to the idea of the ritualistic in theater. In the commentary to your opera *Oedipus*, one reads, "The search for the determination of being, according to the necessity of action in the world and its consequence, is the principal subject of philosophical thought in both East and West. While Eastern wisdom seeks to overcome the constraint for action through meditation, Mediterranean culture focuses its chief attention upon the entanglement of the actor in guilt. Two ideal figures of conscious assumption of guilt upon one's self, who are linked as antipodes, are Jesus of Nazareth and Oedipus."

Rihm: I didn't write that. I would be careful there.

Q: The idea of taking guilt upon one's self isn't yours?

Rihm: That is a thought which I employ.

Q: Does that have anything to do with the so-called collective guilt of the Germans after the Second World War? Did you come to this question that way consciously?

Rihm: I didn't come into this process, that is, I was born into this process. I grew up in a time when this concept was always going around. And I can do nothing without having to think about it, as in the case of this present theatrical subject [Oedipus]: How does it relate to a history, which I must either regret, or deny? At the moment, there is a dispute among German historians; there is a tendency among historians to relativize the guilt.

Q: And you don't agree?

Rihm: I don't agree with the tone of this tendency at all, because it is an attempt to construct a healthy world where you can have it good. But one still should know what was. And to simply temporize about what was, to say, "It's history," or as the Federal Chancellor has put it, "the mercy of being born late"—a frightful idea!—I can't go along with that. And during a discussion about *Oedipus*, I simply put the idea on the table, that this is what is going on, when

people like Oedipus and Jocasta kill themselves, in Jocasta's case, or blind themselves, in Oedipus's, because of guilt, in which they have no subjective, conscious part, but, rather, were suddenly confronted with. And then it leapt into my mind, when history professors in Germany suddenly say, "Yes, now we can talk about things as if they were history. But they are the present, say I!"

Q: It's no new insight to say that [Schoenberg] expressionism is an appropriate musical style for the representation of confusion. But may I refer your attention, on the contrary, to the *Four Serious Songs* of Brahms [the setting of Biblical texts, including I Corinthians 13 of St. Paul—ed.], his last songs, where he explicitly treats the concept of *agape*. Have you ever tried to treat the concept of *agape*, in the sense of universal love?

Rihm: I think that if you purposely try to do this, and if you are not in a situation like Brahms was when he wrote the *Four Serious Songs*, that is, deathly ill—he had liver cancer—when you purposely attempt to articulate this love, then something wrong comes out. You really have to be, like Brahms, at the end of your life to do that, in a situation of extreme need, to formulate that, and not to simulate it out of the hectic quality of day-to-day life. One should not do that.



SEVEN DAYS IN SPACE
(A WEEK ABOARD SPACE SHUTTLE "DISCOVERY")

The first video documentary shot in outer space! Launch into orbit on a tour of the Space Shuttle, guided by the astronauts and controllers of the mission that returned two malfunctioning satellites to Earth! • 88 minutes of being there! • 16 pages of background notes • Narrated by the crew of mission 51-A

HV
HALCYON VIDEO

Order with check or m.o. for (U.S.) \$32.95 ppd.

HALCYON FILMS AND VIDEO
110 BEACH RD. BOX 15
KINGS POINT, N.Y. 11024

or call
1-800-426-0582
m.c. or visa accepted

Seven Days in Space is narrated, in part, by Rick Hauck, the scheduled commander of the next Space Shuttle mission. Satisfaction guaranteed or money refunded.