



Whatever is achieved is immediately abandoned again

The Composer Beat Furrer and His Art of Breaking New Ground in Each New Work

by *Claus Spahn*

Translation: *Wieland Hoban*

He wants to be back at his composing desk at the Gesäuse that evening, says Beat Furrer when we meet at a Viennese café. Gesäuse? One can almost hear the quiet of his work retreat in that name [translator's note: *Gesäuse* can mean 'rustling, murmuring']. The Gesäuse is a national park in Styria, a corner of a valley that is cut off from civilization, surrounded by high limestone mountain faces, three and a half hours by train from Vienna. Furrer inhabits an old forester's lodge there, and withdraws to it to compose. He likes to be alone when he writes, surrounded by forests, crags and a great deal of snow in winter. His only neighbour is the nature reserve's gamekeeper, who sometimes goes shopping for him in the village. At the moment, Furrer's time in the lodge is devoted to making the final score of his new opera *Violetter Schnee*, set to premiere at the Berlin State Opera during the 2018/19 season: 360 pages of short score need to be written out in full. The deadline is approaching, says Furrer, but he is making headway – sometimes the pace is quicker, sometimes slower. Trying to force his composing tempo is pointless, he says; completing a work simply takes however much concentration, quiet and time it takes. And that is what he finds at the Gesäuse.

This image of the artist who withdraws from the world and seeks solitude in order to create a new work is almost a Romantic cliché – but it goes well with this Swiss-born composer who has lived in Austria for over four decades. It goes well with the introspection and high degree of reflection one finds in all his artistic work, with the thoughtfulness and radical devotion with which he engages with his compositional subjects. 'Don't worry, I'm not a hermit', Furrer says. He only withdraws during certain phases of his work, 'otherwise one becomes a little strange.'

The withdrawal contrasts with the composer's attentive perception of the world. Furrer registers very precisely – as a conductor and composition teacher too – what happens around him, in contemporary music, film, theatre and visual art. He is a man of books; the list of poets and writers who appear in his works reads like a comprehensive educational canon, from Ovid and Virgil to Marguerite Duras, Cesare Pavese and Vladimir Sorokin. Furrer is a highly attuned intellectual with very sensitive antennas. At the moment, he says, he has a bilingual edition of Tacitus on his bedside table – 'extremely gripping reading'.

The essential quality that Furrer so values in the Styrian valley of the Gesäuse is echoed in the places where he takes listeners time and again in his works. They are non-places of mythical expansiveness, outposts where humans are thrown back on themselves, states of existential self-estrangement. There is the world darkness, for example, which he already explored in his first opera *Die Blinden*, premiered in 1989 and based on Maurice Maeterlinck's one-act play *Les Aveugles*, as well as texts by Plato, Hölderlin and Rimbaud: eight blind people are searching for their lost leader, the only one who can see, and finally come to the realization that he is no longer among them except as a dead man. The piece feels its way in the black night of human existence, between the burning search for insight and a futile waiting that recalls Samuel Beckett. Lack of orientation, fear, threat, glimmers of hope – Furrer explores all these things

with a music that is suggestive, chamber music-like in its sparseness, showing multiple interlocking perspectives and sounding out its space as if by sonar. The opera deals with blindness in modernity and the inexhaustible human drive to banish all fears of darkness. With this music theatre debut, Furrer already made a distinctive mark on the map of contemporary music.

There is, for example, the fascinating wasteland in his music theatre work *Wüstenbuch*, premiered eight years ago in a production by Christoph Marthaler. It is hard to imagine a place that is further from life. Furrer takes the listener to extremes and endpoints of existence in this work, regions of incredible emptiness and exposure, timelessness and proximity to death. Furrer's desert is not a piece of real opera scenery, admittedly; it only appears before the listener's inner eye as a musical imagination in a music theatre with no story and no figures, created out of sifted sonic debris and silence, fragmented speech particles and vocalises that wind like outlines of expansive curved landscapes.

The piece is more an installation made of music, language and mirage-like visual fantasy than an opera. The extremely reduced libretto, which almost seems bleached by the hostile desert climate, is based on short poetic texts by the Austrian playwright Händl Klaus, erratic ancient Egyptian papyrus passages brought to the composer's attention by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, and notes from the *Wüstenbuch* [Desert Book] by the poet Ingeborg Bachmann, who travelled through the no man's land between Cairo and Sudan to find herself again after her traumatic separation from Max Frisch.

Beat Furrer loves the sort of compositional expeditions into the inhospitable and existential that he undertook in *Wüstenbuch*. One can therefore think of him fundamentally as an eternal seeker, as an extreme traveller who embarks on a journey to unknown lands in each new work. Don't all composers do that? There are more than a few purveyors of this craft who settle down once they have found an aesthetically fruitful area for themselves, and subsequently provide whatever their well-explored surroundings will yield. Beat Furrer is not one of them; in each composition he seems to examine and question the preconditions of his work. He takes nothing for granted when he begins. He seems compelled to get to the bottom of everything anew, to arrive at individual answers viewed from a new angle.

To Furrer, for example, singing is anything but a self-evident feature of music theatre. Whether and how text can become song via language, and vice versa, how song dissolves into language, phonemes, breath; how the sound of language is related to the linguality of sound; how the voice can trigger sound and vice versa; where music-theatrical meaning ensues in what is spoken and sung, beyond the meaning of the words – Furrer reflects on all these questions intensely, and finds varied and newly-crafted solutions in each of his works.

Furrer was never going to be one of those contemporary composers who just cheerfully string notes together in vocal lines when they write an opera; he already made this strikingly clear in his second music theatre work, premiered in Graz in 1994 – *Narcissus*, for two speakers and one female voice, based on text fragments from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The topic is the ancient myth of Narcissus and Echo, the tragedy of the beautiful, vain youth who, incapable of communicating, causes the nymph Echo, who loves him, to be petrified and – trapped in a hall of mirrors created by his constant self-viewing – is ultimately doomed by his own self-love. Furrer made this Narcissus a 'processual figure' (in his own words), dividing him up into two speaking voices that are denied song as a medium of communication, and seem to have lost the semantic level of the spoken word. Corresponding to the self-infatuated youth's inability to communicate, they produce only disjointed and stuttered syllables, vowels and consonants. This opera begins in a pre-linguistic state: words, sentences, meaning, pronunciation and sound first have to be found, developed and composed. The piece begins with isolated notes,

whispered abbreviations of motifs, particles of language, percussive sounds and smeared string chords. Connections, thematic continuations or references to preceding elements only develop gradually, crafted and concentrated in processes of mirroring, refraction and metamorphosis that are virtually impenetrable for the listener. The process of composition and the discovery of language itself become the focus of the work. Here, in the act of probing, searching, exploring and listening, music theatre arrives at an unmistakably individual language character – a creative dynamic that is characteristic of Furrer's compositional approach.

Furrer's output pushes towards the theatrical, towards an engagement with language, the voice and sound within space. He has written seven music theatre works in the last thirty years; they form the heart of his work, even though his oeuvre is also full of orchestral works, ensemble pieces and chamber music. But one cannot unreservedly call any of them an opera, because they lack what one usually associates with this traditional art form: linear narratives, consistent 'acting' figures and emotional sensibilities crafted into arias.

Furrer seeks to develop drama not from a story, but from the sounds, the utterance and singing itself; he strives for a theatre of simultaneity, of structural interpenetration and concentration through stratification, refraction and superimposition. Describing his strategy in the context of *Narcissus*, Furrer states: 'Whatever is achieved is immediately abandoned again, and any order that establishes itself is immediately fragmented, mirrored, distorted, multiplied.' This multi-perspectival character lends his works an enigmatic, kaleidoscopic quality that develops its attraction through the enormous sensuality that is always displayed by the sonic events. However considered and elaborated Furrer's compositions may be, they never sound coldly constructed.

The 'theatre of listening' *Fama*, which was premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival in 2005 and ultimately became one of Furrer's most successful pieces, is an outstanding example of this. Once again, the composer transports the listener to a mythical place: in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells us that Fama, the goddess of rumour and hearsay, lives 'at the centre of the world, between the earth, the sea and the zones of the sky', in a house 'of sounding ore' that is open on all sides, day and night. Fama hears everything spoken among humans. Every sound reaches her keen ear, and she reflects everything she hears back into the world as an echo. As a theatrical location, Fama's house is not the site of any one story, but rather the intersection and collecting point for all the tales of humanity. Furrer conceived a very real sonic space for this house: a wooden box in which the listeners are seated, while the musicians and singers are placed around it. The box is fitted with highly adjustable slats, hatches and openings that filter, control and reflect the sounds and voices as they enter the box from outside, creating impressions of nearness and distance, immediacy and echo, focus and diffusion. The piece, 'for sound edifice, large ensemble, eight voices and one actress', has a grippingly suggestive effect – a theatre of world perception that challenges and refines all the senses. In a review for the weekly newspaper *DIE ZEIT*, the music journalist Volker Hagedorn described the Donaueschingen premiere of *Fama* – directed by Christoph Marthaler in collaboration with an architect and an acoustician – quite simply as 'a miracle'.

In *Fama*, as in many other pieces, Furrer's work deals with the age-old longing of composers to intervene in the passing of time, to make it move more slowly and more quickly, to make acceleration turn suddenly into stasis, to make it stumble and stutter with polymetric tricks or to lead it nowhere by dissolving the boundaries of the sonic space. Furrer always composes against the linear flow of time in his works – whether in *Wüstenbuch*, where everything temporal seems dried-up and withered, or in the opera *La bianca notte/die helle nacht*, premiered in Hamburg three years ago, about the Italian poet and bon vivant Dino Campagna, who was attracted to futurism and ended his life in madness; using loop-like, circular processes, it creates veritable vortices of time.

In *nuun* (1996) for two pianos and orchestra, Furrer's title even evokes the mythical figure of Nu, who, according to legend, was able to bring time to a halt, and the work spans a range from the *tutti* ensemble to isolated piano notes, from *fortissimo* to *pianissimo*, from a true flood of simultaneous musical events to silence. 'No beginning: everything present from the beginning', Furrer once said about his approach to time, 'the beginning is the start of our compositional act, the end is the double bar line, nothing is resolved, nothing returns: the idea of entering different forms of time.'

It will not be long before Furrer draws the final double bar line for his latest work too, out in the solitude of his forester's lodge in the Gesäuse. And once again, he is taking on a new challenge – the form, new artistic partners, the subject. He had imagined a more consistent, less fragmented poetic libretto for this project, closer to figures, a story and a concrete world. He commissioned the Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin, whose work he values very highly, to write the libretto. They met only once, says Furrer, in Berlin. He told Sorokin how important Andrei Tarkovsky's film adaptation of Stanislav Lem's novel *Solaris* was to him, especially one very long shot in which the camera eye gazes from the space station at an unknown planet and the blackness positively seems to suck in the viewer. 'There I sensed the possibility of music.' *Violetter Schnee* will be set in the wake of a global disaster whose form and scale remain unknown. But this much is known: the sun no longer rises in that world, it constantly snows violet fallout, and people have lost the ability to communicate with one another. In Furrer's case, it goes without saying that the Russian text provided by Vladimir Sorokin was far away from what would ultimately be heard on stage: Händl Klaus wrote the libretto. The result will be something new again – but ultimately a Furrer composition nonetheless. Unmistakably.