

Paul STEENHUISEN - PROGRAM NOTES

PIECE: Les enfers éternels des gens désespérés

Starting with the initially severe restriction of using only the vowel E, texts from Christian Bök's remarkable Eunoia provided both the direction and challenges for setting his indirect account of Helen in the Iliad. How to set such a text? How to animate the structure of and its consequences while enabling the confluence of descriptive imagery and sonic variation contained within the single vowel? How to activate the 3 SPELLS and 6 HELLS (the 7th being of your own invention), the grain of the writing and the implied textures beyond the isolated word? Whenever text is sung, *les enfers éternels des gens désespérés* employs the system of musical cryptography used by Olivier Messiaen. Elsewhere, pitches are also converted to source durations, and multiplied to form mensuration canons in the spirit of Johannes Ockeghem of The Netherlands School. While the sung music explores the poetry in layered, embedded statements by converting the letters to pitch and duration, the dislocated imagery of the electroacoustic "word-painting" simultaneously (possibly) reverses the empress' hexes. Additional electroacoustic source material is derived from recordings of the *sornã*, an instrument native to Afghanistan. This work is dedicated to Mr. Adnan Kashogi and his colleagues.

TEXT, from Eunoia, by Christian Bök

Whenever Helen sleeps, her essence enters the ether - the deep well, where she feels herself descend deeper, deeper. Her descent seems endless; nevertheless, she lets herself be swept wherever the gentle breeze sweeps her. She regresses. She sees levels never seen except when men enter the seven hells (*les enfers éternels des gens désespérés*): the fell dens where beetles creep, the deep fens where leeches dwell - there, the sewers reek. The stench repels; nevertheless, the sleek green eels feed themselves the excrement (the expelled feces, the excreted dregs): then the serpents breed themselves.

Whenever Helen enters Hell's deepest recesses, she sees Hell's meekest dwellers. She meets the repenters, never redeemed. She greets her decedent elders. The elder seers, when greeted, tell her: 'repent, repent - never let the tempters here tempeth thee' - then these helpless wretches tell her three spells best kept secret, lest the tempted empress reverse these hexes, then set free de-mented spectres, held here, bespelled. The three spells, when reversed, sever these hexed fetters; hence, the berserk efreets, when freed, screech 'hell's bells', then flee these endless deserts where the embers swelter.

Commissioned by the SMCQ

First performed by the Hilliard Ensemble at the Montréal New Music Festival.