

Paul STEENHUISEN - PROGRAM NOTES

PIECE: *Vorwissen*

The bedrock of *Vorwissen* is the retrograde/palindrome problem. In a temporal medium such as music, retrogradation is a concept or sensation, but ultimately an artificial distortion of time. Presenting material forward and then backward creates a central fulcrum of energy around which material is outwardly distributed. Movement is made from the beginning toward the centre point (without knowledge of its location or existence), followed by the journey away - tracing unrealistically backward through the material while time moves forward (a 1 2 3 2 1 statement of materials competing against time's momentum of 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9...). The mercurial conflict between forward and implied backward motion is like two flints being rubbed together, their friction both complex and inflammatory, outward and inward.

As well, the contrapuntal overlapping and superposition of normal-form and retrograded materials highlights the issue of objectivity. Material presented simultaneously in opposite directions (as in Bach's "crab" canons) implies a predetermination outside of the work. Otherwise, how would one know the location of the middle and end points that are folded over one another? Simultaneous and varying attenuations of the primary material heighten the stress of the objectivity, and the conflict with time's forward momentum.

In a page right out of history, the plethora of retrogradation in Bach's music is matched only by the palindromes of Olivier Messiaen. Both are devoutly religious composers, and therein rests the problem that for years necessitated my compositional ban on retrogrades. Are objectivity and material predetermination metaphors for the "Hand of God" in music? Are retrogrades and palindromes artistic symbols of faith? Such backward thinking was the inspiration for *Vorwissen*.

Commissioned by Roger D. Moore for Soundstreams Canada. First performed by the Gryphon Trio. Dedicated to Karen, Cézanne, and Kuusta