

Paul STEENHUISEN - PROGRAM NOTES

PIECE: *wonder*

“...sound is an extension of physical presence... a grain of sound is a tremendously powerful compositional tool” (brian ferneyhough). resonance, interference, focus. every sounding pitch is an orchard of grains, an accumulation of pitches in a unique hierarchy. prime material for wonder was gathered from microscopic analyses (FFT) of brief fragments of sound from a bass trombone (a muted pedal tone), a violoncello (an unstable natural harmonic), a crotale (with metal beater) and a soprano voice (articulating the consonant K). vesalius. swollen from their original scale, they were then grafted and sculpted, “giving long life to short-lived, unique moments” (karl lagerfeld). wonder is an archipelago, layered, resonating on all levels with all materials -separate, but inextricably connected and mutually affecting, a nervous system - an effort toward a representation of the world as “amazingly intricate and amazingly successful with some exceptions... with the perception of life as a dangerous and in some ways inexplicable entity” (alex colville).

WONDER was commissioned by the CBC for the CBC Vancouver Orchestra and first performed by them under the direction of Owen Underhill at the first Vancouver International New Music Festival in the early summer of 1996. It was presented on the concert Music of Extremes. The music is scored for the unusual instrumentation of orchestra, tape and soprano. It is a dense, complex and unconventional sixteen-minute composition for orchestra, tape and soprano voice. The tape component is divided into fourteen segments and runs almost continuously throughout the piece, simultaneous with the orchestra and the soprano voice. It consists primarily of processed instrumental timbres, but also contains musique concrète timbres and computer-generated sounds. The soprano voice figures prominently in one section and appears infrequently elsewhere in the music, in brief episodes. The role of the voice is similar to that of the other instruments in the orchestra - it is an important contributor to the articulation of the form through its content and orchestration, but does not function dominantly as a soloist throughout the entire composition.

The concept of resonance informs every aspect of wonder, including the derivation of the prime material, the battery of compositional techniques, the form, the content and function of the tape part and the choice of texts. Material for the music was gathered by performing a spectral analysis on a unique, short fragment of recorded sound produced on a crotale, a violoncello, a bass trombone and by a soprano voice. The resulting groups of frequencies (one array from each of the four analyzed source timbres) were interpreted in a variety of

ways and amplified out of their originally small scale into the raw material on which wonder is based. Each set of material is presented in its own section of the music, with its original orchestration and characteristic gestural iconography, and is subjected to a plethora of developmental operations, including addition, vibration, movable points of transposition/inversion and time-points. Some rhythmic figures are notated within metriproportional brackets identifying their contents as unsynchronized and ad libitum, performed with reference to the barline and active time signature. The interference form manifest in wonder consists of three distinct strata, each layer mapping related sectional orderings. Formal layers are distinguished by their contrasting durations, and may be active simultaneously or articulated in discontinuous, isolated blocks.

Wonder was a recommended work at the International Rostrum of Composers, UNESCO, Paris.