

Peter Ablinger: Grisailles 1-100

It is the Cistercian monastery Heiligenkreuz, south of Vienna, in the cloister of which glazings from the early 13th century have been preserved. The Romanesque cloister glazings are in accordance with what the so-called "Cistercian picture ban" - which actually was a ban to depict - is all about: The window panes seem to trust the effect of various shades of gray, among which there also are black and yellowish-beige ones; and each one of the bow glazings reveals another, in fact even geometric-ornamental pattern of its own. To describe this type of medieval window the term grisaille is being used.

Peter Ablinger, born in 1959 in Upper Austria, studied graphic arts, piano and composition - the latter with Roman Haubenstock-Ramati - in Linz, Graz and Vienna. In 1982 Peter Ablinger moved to Berlin, where he is working as a free lance composer, up to this very day. Peter Ablinger has known and valued the Romanesque grisaille panes in Heiligenkreuz for a long time. Their lack of reference, which aims at transcendency not by representation in the sense of depiction, but by just being there, is what corresponds with the aesthetic attitude of Peter Ablinger. His many years of research into and beyond the limits of traditional views about what is music, art and art-music, often lead him into a paradoxical relationship to what is generally regarded as an understanding. Redundancy, then, does not prove to be opposed to information, but as its facilitator; the ornament not as side effect, but as what is central in the art of depiction of the undepictable. That is why, at the beginning of the nineties, the art of grisaille has, for Peter Ablinger, become the giver of a title for this composition for three pianos. The fact that grisaille windows would cast shadowless light was highly significant for medieval theology. While the more frequent multi-coloured figurative depictions left colour patterns and clear shadows on church floors and praised God in a variety of occurrences, symbols and references, those gray, ornamental, and no clear shadows casting windows outlined a more subtle - or better - more sublime image of God, an image of the finally inexplicable, the non-depictable. Whatever appeared bathed in this light did no longer leave any traces on this earth. That's what is sublime. "Light is all-important in the creation and composition of the world", a medieval theorist postulated; and he went on: "Space and time are but functions of light." One also can listen to Peter Ablinger's composition *Grisailles* in this way: The throbbing standstill as changing tinge of light, as a slow change (of light and therefore of space and time), fifty minutes long. *Grisailles 1-100* for three pianos consists of various levels of overlapping sound-layers. Repeated octaves and small, barely audible sounds made by fingers darting across the keys seem to be two of these levels. Peter Ablinger composed twenty-four layers to start

with - each one following its own time and structure -, before these were being combined in a preliminary'score. And out of this preliminary subject, unplayable in its sheer crowd of three pianists, Peter Ablinger obtained the piece: Sweeping in a selective way across the shimmering wealth of written notes as well as across those gray window panes, his gaze chooses what comes into view, and also what is playable instrumentally-technically. For Peter Ablinger this work-technical analogy of the glance at sheets of music as well as at window panes is more than merely a vague metaphor: In the same way as during the sweeping of the gaze across the pane of glass, the certainty that somehow everything is encompassed in this gaze forms a relationship with the fact that one actually can focus one's gaze always onto a small spot only, the real performable piece stands in relation to the utopically sketched preliminary score. The pragmatism of the performability corresponds with the fact that each and everyone can look at the pane of glass out of a single perspective too, that - the other way round - this real everything of the one glance is fertile only, because a potential everything, something utopian remains perceptible.

Aside from composed, carefully chosen developments as far as the relationship of these sound layers to each other is concerned, it is the rehearsing in the respective acoustic of a room, or recording-technical decisions as to in which way foreground and background act with each other, that also determine, if - in order to stay with the metaphor of light beaming through those glass windows - the subtle nuances in bright noon light become unimportant; or if, at dusk, the background comes closer to the foreground.

Christian Scheib, translated by Udo Breger

GRISAILLES

"Light is all-important in the creation and composition of the world", states Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253) at a time when the great French cathedrals with their unequalled art of light and glass originated. "Space and time are but functions of light."

The grisailles of the Cistercian Order, colourless and non-figurative ornament windows emerging simultaneously, may be regarded, to some extent, as correction and consequence of this thinking. The renunciation of depiction respects the Old Testament's ban to depict as well as the Mohammedan culture of the same epoch. Instead, the infinitely gentle art of the ornament and of the most refined shading of grays develops out

of it in an all the more differentiated manner, in order to embrace the mysterious "light without shadow".

Among the most beautiful grisailles still existing are, incidentally, those in the northern cloister of the cathedral chapter Heiligenkreuz in the Viennese forest. It is due to them that I came upon some essential "elucidations" that were of some help, during all the time I spent with the piece "Grisailles", to win exactitude and transparency.

Louis Charpentier on Gothic glass windows (emphasis by the author): "This kind of glass *does not react* to light as regular window glass does; it seems to become something of the most noble kind which does not let through light completely, but becomes something which *shines by itself*. Even when under unrestrained and brutal effect of the sun, the glass window *does not* - as coloured glass does - *project* its colour onto the floor, but **let's** only *shine through* a diffuse brightness. Independent of the intensity or dampening of daylight, it does not shine weaker at dawn or dusk than it does at high noon!'

From the instructions out of the score of "Grisailles":
Actually the volume as well as the differentiation of the volumes can differ from performance to performance, from room to room [...], maybe analogous to the different concreteness of things visible under different light; clouds or sun etc., or - should the wish occur - analogous to the visual contrast control of a television set.

An example: Generally I would say that the average forte of the B octaves (level I b) has to be just as loud to let the average ppp of the "false overtones" (level 2b) disappear so far that one perceives them as hue and not so much as touch.

Extremes: Yet I do not want to exclude variants within which the powerful sounds almost completely "strike dead" ("bright noon light") the softer nuances, or the other way round, where sounds of levels 2 and 3, otherwise remaining in the background, begin to alarmingly absorb the foreground (level 1, partly also 4) ("twilight, dusk").

ORDER BY LEAVING OUT

I am laying structures - ornamental, rhythmical, harmonic structures on top of each other until everything is so dense that I myself don't know any longer where it's at, until I lose the thread completely, until I have to give up control over structures created by myself. And then I set out to clear a way through the thicket; I do not simply let everything play what has caused the layering of structures, but I take in each

and every moment exactly as much as I can grab (as I can imagine), and thus create: reality. It's true it's only my reality but one reality at least by leaving out. It is like seeing (or thinking): one does not see what is, one sees what is possible to see. Thus I produce possibility. For what simply is doesn't exist for us, we cannot experience it in any way (or?) (God?), it doesn't have any reality.

And yet:

And yet not:

For there is a big difference setting in now (at this point): The possibility to inscribe a new, an additional structure to the thread that was lost, to the impenetrable thicket (that what is), to impose a conscious creation, a subjective order, any order.

Or:

to leave out just as much as to be able to see. In doing so never to - wilfully - allow another idea (idea of order), but to make apparent (or better) visible the existing in all its material denseness and concentration. Actually it's always touch and go between self-loss (in the everything, the too much) and the possibility to have a foreboding of the everything, to sense it, to be close to it.

Peter Ablinger, translated by Udo Breger