

Eckart Rahn: For Peter Michael Hamel on his 60th Birthday

When someone has been active as a composer, musician, writer and teacher for a long period of time one assumes they must have had some influence on others; Hamel moreover has always had a tendency to straddle the frontiers of musical genres. This is not strictly accurate, however. Akin to a human millipede he is simultaneously at home in many contrasting areas; he manages to keep one foot firmly in one camp whilst finding new hold and sustenance elsewhere. Therefore it is not so much a question of Hamel wishing to influence someone else; it is more a matter of what material he could absorb, what influences he himself could gather and transform into his own language.

My acquaintance with Hamel dates back to the years of the ensemble Between, around 1970, and has grown into friendship over the decades. It was already clear then how difficult it would be to characterize Hamel's work; in conversation he quickly revealed his taste for ambivalence and tolerance. The lines dividing improvised and composed music became blurred, creation merged with interpretation, his foundations lay in Europe and elsewhere. Feldman and Jazz were his principal influences from the USA; his thirst for contemplation led him as much to Meister Eckart and Nikolaus Cusanus as to Indian and Japanese Buddhism; his roots in Christianity were tempered by anti-authoritarianism and blended with other religions, without the blend ever becoming a potpourri. A further contradiction lies in his fusion of intellectualism and romanticism, as if E.T.A. Hoffman could become an intellectual and meet Adorno the Romantic in an enlightened *entente cordiale* to make music together – just as his meticulous scores would never be complete without the cadenzas and spontaneous ornaments in performance.

I myself was antagonistic to anything academic, not surprisingly, as a child of the 60s. In those days the alternative was the norm. I searched for freedom, found improvisation more attractive than composition. Although Bach remained a constant in my life I was drawn toward Fluxus, Raga and Coltrane, Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman – even to Webern's *Bagatelles*, which seemed to me to have been written in a way that made two similar interpretations by two different quartets impossible. I had never believed in Free Jazz: that was another of those clichés of amateur musicology, imagining that a highly skilled musician could ever play freely; it was more a misunderstood representation of a master's search for identity in a new world. Japanese education teaches us that a pupil can follow a teacher much more closely without written music, as long as the teacher is sensitive to the pupil and the pupil a willing follower. The apparently deep divide between textual fidelity and a more improvisational approach was soon bridged, creating a new fertile plain of possibilities.

Much of this was unclear to me at the time, even if it seemed instinctively valid. In 1980, a decade later, we were working together. Recordings of Hamel's early works for electronic organ and a rare synthesizer named Wave Computer stood at the beginning. We called it *Zeitfarben*, colours of time, combining electronic sounds with the reed organ; later came the sounds of Tibetan spaces in *Bardo. Organum* with its paraphrases on themes by Hildegard von Bingen followed naturally. Kandinsky's 'yellow sound' gave the *Zeitfarben* a European avant-garde flavour. The Middle Ages in Central Europe and in the Himalayas, a blend in the mind. After *Zeitfarben* came *The Arrow of Time* and *The Cycle of Time*; music and time, eternally living in the moment, renewing itself in motion. To this was added rhythm in the mould of those pioneers of world music, Messiaen and Carl Orff, not to mention the reference to ancient Korea in an otherwise clearly European String Quartet.

Later we progressed to printed scores, but not without going through a complex process of reorientation. My experience of the classical music of Asia suggested a path toward a common goal: making music available to other performers, but without constraining their interpretation. Textual fidelity as a matter of opinion allowing if not asking for different views seemed an attractive proposition to me. I remember the first recording sessions with the Alexander String Quartet, which Hamel did not attend. He stated later that he would have made different choices at the time, but was quite happy with the result anyway. When Roger Woodward requested to work through the score of *Vom Klang des Lebens* (Of the Sound of Life) with the composer before recording it, Hamel left after a few hours to return home to compose a further movement. He didn't think his presence necessary, he wrote in an e-mail, as Woodward clearly had all the right ideas.

Over the years I became a committed publisher, although I could never have imagined as a young man that I would one day publish Catholic church music. But *De Visione Dei* is a vision that I gladly pursued. Society sees a distinction between a work and a recording, between creation and reproduction. Hamel makes these distinctions disappear: in the grand scheme everything is a creation, all is subject to the Divine, even if the human messenger must nevertheless accept responsibility for his actions.

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