

Zwei Lieder nach Rilke (1996)

Die Engel
Aus einer Sturmnacht

Zwei Lieder nach Rilke was written in 1996, commissioned by Robert Aitken and New Music Concerts with the assistance of the Canada Council. I was, and still am, quite taken by the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke. Both Die Engel and Aus Einer Sturmnacht are complex, enigmatic poems. In these musical settings, I wanted to complement the concentration of expression that I find so compelling in Rilke's poetry. I chose the instrumentation for Zwei Lieder nach Rilke with attention to 'choirs' of sound as well as the tessitura of individual instruments.

I used choirs of woodwinds and strings to build dense, harmonically complex sonorities, and also to create a type of 'group counterpoint': layering based upon groups of instruments composed of similar instrumental colour. The piano forms a choir of its own, while the percussion is the most variable sonority, in that it can be attached to any of the three groups at any given time. To give a certain dark tone to the overall sonority, I used woodwinds of low tessitura. This choice enabled me to highlight one of the important aspects of these two poems: the sense of longing, or 'sehnsucht'.

In Die Engel, a prelude-interlude-postlude structure intertwines with three stanzas of text. Because of the concentration of expression in Rilke's poems, I wanted to allow myself the possibility of instrumental commentary on a particular stanza before or after it is sung. In Aus einer Sturmnacht, there is no instrumental prelude, but again I introduce interludes of varying length to comment on material presented in the vocal sections.

Die Engel

Sie haben alle müde Münde
Und helle Seelen ohne Saum.
Und eine Sehnsucht (wie nach Sünde)
Geht ihnen manchmal durch den Traum.

Fast gleichen sie einander alle;
In Gottes Gärten schweigen sie,
Wie viele, viele Intervalle
In seiner Macht und Melodie.

Nur wenn sie ihre Flügel breiten,
Sind sie die Wecker eines Winds:
Als ginge Gott mit seinen weiten
Bildhauerhänden durch die Seiten
Im dunklen Buch des Anbeginns.

Angels

They all have such tired mouths
And luminous souls without seams.
And a longing (as for sin)
Goes wandering through their dreams.

They are all almost alike;
In God's garden they are quiet,
Like many, many intervals
In His might and melody.

But when they spread their wings,
They set the winds in motion:
As if God had gone with his
Sculpture-hands through the pages
In the dark book of the beginning.

Aus einer Sturmnacht

Die Nacht, vom wachsenden Sturme bewegt,
Wie wird sie auf einmal weit—
Als bliebe sie sonst zusammengelegt
In die kleinlichen Faltern der Zeit.

Wo die Sterne ihr wehren, dort endet sie nicht
Und beginnt nicht mitten im Wald
Und nicht an meinem Angesicht
Und nicht mit deiner Gestalt.

Die Lampen stammeln und wissen nicht:
Lügen wir Licht?
Ist die Nacht die einzige Wirklichkeit
Seit Jahrtausenden...

Out of a Stormy Night

The night, moved by the growing storm,
How it has suddenly expanded—
As if it otherwise remained unnoticed
Hidden in the folds of time.

Where the stars resist, it does not stop there
And does not begin in the forest's depths
And not in my imagination
Nor with your appearance.

The lamps sway and know not:
Does the light lie?
Is the night the only reality
That has endured through thousands of years?