

Composition Focus Presents Steve Takasugi
Experimental Theater, Conrad Prebys Music Center, UCSD
Thursday, February 23, 2017
6pm

Strange Autumn

text by Wieland Hoban

version for reciter/vocalist, percussion, and electronics (17'10") 2003

Madison Greenstone – *recitation/vocals*

Tyler Border – *percussion*

Celeste Oram – *electronics*

Johannes Regnier - *electronics*

Letters from Prison

based on the prison letters of Ernst Toller

version for electronic playback with an introductory reading of selected letters (5') 2005-06

Steven Kazuo Takasugi – *reading*

Die Klavierübung

Movements I, III, IV

version for electronic playback (10'38", 9'58", 7'20") 2007-09

Kyle Adam Blair – *piano*

With grateful thanks to: Johannes Regnier, David Espiritu, Jessica Flores, Brady Baker, Neal Bociek and Rand Steiger

Strange Autumn

Wieland Hoban's bilingual poems are infested with paradox. They evade the space of one language or the other or both. Where are they then? Imagine a bilingual edition of a volume of poems. Imagine the original poem (conventionally on the verso page-side) and its translation (on the recto side) both sliding into the seam between the pages—or a poem resulting when both verso and recto meet, original and translation pressed against each other. Such reflects the structure of the poetic space, but in either case, the possibility of reading is no longer available. Likewise, with Hoban's poetry, any attempt to disentangle one language from the other in order to circumvent the semantic cancellation of the two languages, presents only another implacable uncertainty in its place. Despite these perplexities, the poetry manages to penetrate into the interior of the conundrum we call existence, and like a house of mirrors, acquires its illusory dimensions and volume from the accumulation rendered by a multitude of false reflections. One might then begin to understand my interpretation of the poetic space at hand. To translate this into a piece for reciter, percussionist, and electronics was the task of *Strange Autumn*. It was begun in 2003 and written during the first year of the occupation of Iraq by US-led coalition forces. It is dedicated to the poet.

Letters from Prison

Letters from Prison was composed in 2005-06 in the wake of reportage on Abu Ghraib and the torture and abuse of Iraqi prison detainees by American forces emerging in late 2003. This occupied me quite heavily at the time.

Nonetheless, the work's central reference is a certain poignant letter written by Ernst Toller, the German playwright and revolutionary working in the early 20th century, while imprisoned at Stadelheim in 1919. In my readings, I came across a rather striking "mistranslation" in an old English translation by R. Ellis Roberts: the German word *banale* into the English word *trash*.

The complexity here of torture (Toller's other letters speak of the torture and murder of his revolutionary comrades), sex, and imprisonment are surprisingly moving and candid. But of course, these are letters after all, and are personal: perhaps only to be shared between two intimates.

Die Klavierübung

Die Klavierübung (roughly translated as *Piano Exercises*), might be subtitled *A Journey Through Falsehoods*. The original version is a 40-minute, four movement work to be heard on headphones. There is no piano after all, there is no pianist, there is no practicing.

Perhaps it is about the recorded piano samples, digitalized manifestations, that still believe they are a "real piano," disembodied as they are, attempting to create for themselves some fiction in which they can believe they are still live, even beautiful.

They gather themselves as if the pianist were still present and imagine he is sitting at the keyboard—"on the bench"—or leaning precariously forward, head under the top-lid, plucking and striking the strings in a variety of manners, bringing them to life. Nonetheless, he always cannot help but notice that the ear, unlike the eyes, perceives not a resonant chamber with a fixed and solid soundboard, but rather an endless abyss of eternal resonance and echoes. For the ear, then, the danger is to fall inside the piano—into a chasm of its own imagination.

The creation of any fiction, as a hallucination, is inevitably subject to other unintended, unforeseen forces. The piano samples find themselves in contexts they never wished to be: as references, they turn up even peering at themselves as synthesized midi-piano samples, falsehoods gazing at their still false reflections.

They flee from this piano-nightmare, from coerced roles of alienation, but from one falsehood to another, to find their own sonic bodies distorted beyond recognition. They seem strange: internally detuned, though notes are coherent, intact, each key no longer the *tre corde* in tune with themselves, rather many strings detuned within a quarter-tone interval: a note has become more a microtonal wobble. "What's wrong with me?" This line of questioning has its consequences.

By traversing through, not around, the falsehoods of their nature, their medium, their culture, these samples hoped to reclaim the "real" and "true" for themselves, though the arena for this was far more remote and the source of its energies far more extreme than what they ever imagined them to be.