

Music without drama

At first glance, one may be surprised to encounter works by Hanne Darboven here in Amsterdam Orgelpark, a decommissioned church building now destined for music, instead of in an art museum or gallery. After all, Hanne Darboven, subject as much to media pigeonholing as anyone else, is usually grouped in with visual artists and not with the admittedly small group of female composers. Yet, without the least amount of charity and setting aside both the meagre number of female composers and the issue of whether or not their centuries of neglect remain relevant, Hanne Darboven deserves to be seen, and most of all heard, as a composer *sui generis*.

Hanne Darboven was born in Munich in 1941, rather by chance, in view of the turmoil of World War II. Her family was deeply steeped in the area of Hamburg: Her father Cäsar Darboven was the owner of the coffee company J. W. Darboven, while her mother Kirsten proudly remained a Dane until the end, serving her guests liverwurst sandwiches with jam. Hanne grew up as the middle child in this merchant family of three daughters in an upper class, cosmopolitan atmosphere in the rural outskirts of the city district, a place named Rönneburg. The Darbovens were a family that valued the fine arts, thus insisting that their daughters be educated in drawing and music. I remember that once during a visit to her home at Burgberg 26, Hanne Darboven told me that when she was young, she was undecided for a long while about whether she would turn to art or to music, with her instruments to have been organ and violin. The thorough organ training that she received in her youth instilled in her an affinity for music that far exceeded basic piano lessons.

I should note that the whole scenery – the business of her father, the family residence, her school – was situated in the Prussian city of Harburg, separated from the city of Hamburg by the Elbe River and the extended harbour, an independent city until 1937, when the Nazis, in a bit of economic strategy, incorporated Harburg into Hamburg. When Darboven repeatedly alludes, both in her life and work, to Prussian virtues, the cause is partly biographical. Prussian austerity and self-discipline were fundamental to her, surely

the contrary of the simplistic mind of many Hamburg natives, who receive ridicule from their fellow Germans, perceived as being a tribe of shopkeepers uninterested in the arts.

While still a student at the Hamburg Academy of the Fine Arts, she left in 1966 to spend two years in New York, where she developed her style in the milieu of conceptual art and minimalism. Even there, her isolation was intense, her work at the time featuring systems of simple numerical procedures, e.g. 3 5 7 5 3, with complex variations. The focus on process, so apparent in her mature works, was already in place. The support from major figures and promoters of the scene, such as Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard and Kasper König, aided significantly to the rapid development of her international career.

In 1968, Hanne Darboven adopted the date as the basis of every future work. The starting point is the sum of the date, the "K value", which she named after the German words "Konstruktion" (construction) and "Kästchen" (box), which make the date a visual reality. Key moments are the K values of the first and last day of the years 1900 and 1999: 2 ($1+1+0+0$) for New Year's Day of a new century and 43 ($31+12+0+0$) for New Year's Eve of that same year. In a similar way, the last year of the century equals 20 ($1+1+9+9$) for 1 January and 61 ($31+12+9+9$) for 31 December. At the core of her thinking and writing, and here I rely on the writings of Ernst A. Busche about the work of the artist, lie less the individual dates and more the processes of the K values and the "from" and "to" texts, together with their variants, diverse and increasingly elaborate, in which large forms such as angles and semi-circles are visible. In knowing difference from the conventional concept of art, Darboven made her works using the tradition of literature: They are written by hand with a very solid Montblanc fountain pen or printed by a typewriter on individual sheets, sometimes intended as a book or arranged into books. Individual works could include many thousands of sheets or even remain incomplete, as in the "major work" begun in 1971, containing more than 40,000 sheets at the time of her death on 9 March 2009.

These calculations derived from the calendar also form the basis of the compositions of Hanne Darboven.

Indeed, the whole of her work, even her pictorial output, is founded on a complex system of calculations, which one could rather reductively interpret as a means of making the passage of time visible. Periods ranging from one day to a century are capable of being experienced in her calendrical calculations. Herein arises a surprising parallel, not immediately apparent, to music, which could be defined quite easily as time meaningfully experienced, or, to paraphrase John Cage, "music fills time with utter determination".

Composition knows many methods. Counterpoint and harmony came to dominate Western music by the mid-17th century, a reign that stretched until the middle of the 19th century, serving as guiding procedures behind composition, but were not at all the only valid means. Arnold Schoenberg's method of composing with twelve equal tones related only to each other, the notorious "twelve-tone music", long ago ceded its undisputed status to the matrix patterns of minimal music, sine waves created on a synthesiser in electronic music, the serial compositions of Pierre Boulez, or the aleatory music of John Cage and Witold Lutosławski. Now, with chaos theory as the latest step in this musical journey from Bach's numerical symbolism through to dodecaphony, matrix calculations and spherical trigonometry, what is striking is how close music has always been to arithmetic and mathematics, whether elementary or advanced.

Around 1979/80, Hanne Darboven began to think of her notated calculations as musical scores. She started to speak now of number scores, or "Zahlenpartituren", to use her word. Though she pretended that music had always been intended while she wrote these calculations, this claim is difficult to verify. Here in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum is her work "24 songs B-Form" from 1974, a remarkably early work referring to music thus supporting her thesis. Anyhow, from the beginning of the 1980s onward, the musical allusions become more numerous in the titles in her work – we find repeatedly the word song or songs, plus titles like "The Four Seasons", or her Op. 25 from 1988 entitled "Ludwig van Beethoven", which is based on the number score "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe", whose preface, in turn, revolves around Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Her

first musical performance was that of the work "Wende 80" ("turn 80"), which was premièred in 1981 in New York at the Leo Castelli Gallery.

True, the compositions by Hanne Darboven mostly emerge from a pictorial work, yet one could not accurately describe the music that will be heard during the concert today, her Opp. 19, 20, 21, and 22 from the "Requiem", written between 1985 and 1988, as being secondary in function to the pictorial aspect. Although the music mostly took shape at a much later time than the visual element, Hanne Darboven insisted, and I repeat it, that music was intended from the beginning.

The requiem in four parts, by far the largest musical work that Darboven completed, encompasses a calendrical view of the 20th century. On its title page, she is clear in her citation of the Brockhaus encyclopedia and its list of significant "Requiem" compositions in musical history, spanning Orlando di Lasso to György Ligeti and including the "German Requiem" of Brahms. Despite this acknowledgment, she incorporates no material from these compositions in her "Requiem", opting instead for the Toccata and Fugue in D minor for organ by J. S. Bach, BWV 565, as published by Edition Peters and at the time indeed still attributed to Bach. The Toccata helps to give form to both the pictorial element and the musical one, serving as a quotation/intermezzo in the latter. However, the focal point of her requiem is not a musical work, but rather the verse epic "Winged Earth – A Song of Love and the Wonder of the Seven Seas", written by Max Dauthendey in 1910, a work of musical poetry rich in cross-references to music proper. So, what we are going to hear tonight are excerpts from those mentioned parts of the Requiem, i.e. 6 pieces from op. 19, followed by the Bach Toccata, then 6 pieces from op. 20, again followed by the Bach-Toccata, then 3 excerpts from op. 21, followed by the Bach-Toccata a third time and finally 3 excerpts from op. 22, leading again to the Bach-Toccata, which will terminate the concert.

Darboven has grouped her calendrical calculations as much around this book as the Bach score. As a reminder, I note that what is at work here is no more than the continuity of sums taken from consecutive calendar days. Since centuries are not taken into account in her calendrical calculations, the lowest conceivable date is 01/01/00, sum of 2, while the highest conceivable date is 31/12/99, sum of 142. Nonetheless, Darboven typically

reduced her calculations by splitting the year, so that the latter date becomes $31+12+9+9$, sum of 61. What inevitably results is a specific distribution of frequency: The sum of 2 and the sum of 61 occur only once, 3 twice, 4 thrice, etc, thus an extremely normal distribution curve. Other methods of generating sums yield 42 or 19 different totals, so that Opp. 19 and 20 consist of 42 books each and Opp. 21 and 22 of 19 books each.

The final product of the computational models employed by Darboven is a series of numbers, which offer the possibility of musical interpretation. Darboven consistently referred to these calculations as "number scores", with multiple options for use as musical scores. Here, the five lines of the staff plus their four spaces correspond with the numbers one through nine, which is not to suggest a renunciation of the half-steps E/F and B-natural/C, but of the chromatic semitones such as C-sharp, E-flat or B-flat. The musicologist Reinhard Ermen, not without humor, compared the numerical system used by Darboven with the toy piano of Charlie Brown's friend Schroeder, which has only white keys, because the black ones have simply been painted and serve no function. Nevertheless, on this very special instrument the realm of the possible knows no end.

Following her logic, Darboven developed an A form, in which 1 equals the lowest staff line, thus E in the treble clef, while 9 takes the top line, or F. Her B form is the same in reverse, with 1 now F and 9 now E. Similar mirror forms are among the essential items in the toolkit of twelve-tone music. Her music is centred on the note E in the A form and the note F in the B form. Her music is thus diatonic, while resembling in its sound the Lydian or pentatonic scale.

Whether the sequences of notes that result are played as melodies or as condensed chords is left to the performers. On the rhythms, too, Darboven makes almost no comment. The final areas in which performer intervention plays a rôle are in the choice of instruments and movement. Her earliest musical pieces are dominated by organ or harmonium, by string quartet and by chamber orchestra, realised with the assistance of Friedrich Stoppa. The major project of ten symphonies, Opp. 27 to 36 is, at least theoretically, a way of one-upping the mystical number nine written by Beethoven, Dvořák, Bruckner, and

Mahler, has an orchestration of flutes, clarinets, bassoons, and strings. Both instrumentation and duration then evolve gradually to the brink of megalomania: Her Op. 60, a symphony for 120 instruments, was premièred in 2005 at the Berlin branch of the Guggenheim Museum. Completed yet unperformed is a symphony, for 120 instruments as well, which lasts for more than 32 hours.

Her Opp. 19 through 22, each work based on sum calculations of a calendrical century, share a notation for organ and a melodic approach. In Opp. 19 and 20, the tones are ascending, while in Opp. 21 and 22 they are descending.

Although Darboven, in the process of making music out of her calculations, was always presented with countless options, and thus decisions, her music bears an atypical degree of objectivity. Armed with knowledge of the methods used in converting the calculations into music, one could easily specify the origin of each note on the calendar. Hanne Darboven allows decision-making and detours from her compositional principles only in prescribed places and only if certain rules are followed. The subjectivity inherent in invention and expression is limited to a considerable extent, which ultimately serves to limit the emotional subtext that is generally associated with music. Though music is different than music theatre, in which music and drama have a direct link, it nonetheless often points toward dramatic ends. The development section of a sonata movement by Haydn or, better, Beethoven certainly contains dialogues between themes of differing characters that reach the point of battle. Any such expressive, emotion-loaded subtext is utterly alien to the music of Hanne Darboven. It is music that never arrives and never even starts, for that matter: It is simply there. Her music presents itself with an almost unassailable clarity and transparency, with any possible therapeutic side effect from such musical meditation being neither the purpose nor the goal. The music of Hanne Darboven is the way that it is and it is no more than what it is. Just music without drama.

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