

# A Life for Music in Two Parts

## On the Death of the Composer Klaus K. Hübler

by Michael Zwenzner

The tickets for the weekend at *musica viva* in mid-March, with works by Gérard Grisey and Georges Aperghis, had already been bought (so his friend told me), but the seat in the Herkulesaal remained empty; a painful lacuna in the music world of Munich and beyond immediately opened up. The composer Klaus Karl Hübler, born in the metropolis on the Isar River in 1956, died in his home after a fall that was connected to the disability he had suffered since a severe illness in 1989.

One cannot avoid mentioning this here, for the life-changing interruption by a coma lasting several months and his laborious, only partial convalescence not only divided his life into two parts of almost equal length, but also separates his work – both in its compositional techniques and its aesthetics – into a time before and after.

His early biography reads like the story of an ideal career. After studying musicology and composition (with Peter Kiesewetter) in Munich, he took private lessons with Brian Ferneyhough for several years and, slowly but surely, produced one weighty piece of chamber music after another – including a fascinating 50-minute violin sonata that barely feels so long. These were quickly followed by the first major composition prizes (from Stuttgart and Darmstadt, among others), scholarships in Europe and the USA, and commissions for new works from renowned festivals and performers. An LP on *col legno* with his now-legendary chamber music for strings, recorded by the Arditti Quartet and sadly out of print, is an impressive document of his international breakthrough.

His life was marked by further terrible misfortunes – he lost his wife in 2000 and his only daughter in 2012 – and things grew quiet, although he had resumed composition in 1995 after his partial recovery and faced the challenges of life with an astoundingly positive energy. While the works of the 1970s and 1980s, recognised internationally as pioneering, were characterised by immense structural complexity and transcendently virtuosic demands on the performers, the series of compositions beginning in 1995, though barely acknowledged, reveals itself as a reinvention of a stylistically utterly independent music; a reinvention that, considering the difficulties in the compositional process that had to be overcome, it is no exaggeration to call heroic.

Starting from the threshold of silence and the most basic sound production in both instrumental and vocal contexts, Hübler went on to write almost another 30 works of mostly solo and chamber music, and with *Vanitas* his one true orchestral piece.

Laconic expressivity, structural reduction, existentially-grounded theatrical aspects and often unusual instrumentation immediately captivate the listener. While it may be a noble task for posterity to finally unlock and interpret this phase of his work on a suitable scale, one can be fairly sure that many of Hübler's works written before 1989 will become an indispensable part of the repertoire for future generations of musicians. Many soloists who brave the challenges of such a work seem to remain loyal to this music for life, as one can see from its regular appearances in the programmes of such performers as the flautists Sylvie Lacroix or Carin Levine, the cellist Friedrich Gauwerky or Trio Coriolis. To close, a few words on Munich as a music city. On 4 March 2018, after Josef Anton Riedl (1929-2016), Wilhelm Killmayer (1927-2017) and Michael Hirsch (1958-2017), Munich lost yet another important maverick among the composers of our time within a mere three years. In a city hardly blessed with many native composers of international standing throughout music history, it is extremely saddening that Munich's daily press paid no attention to Hübler's passing. However marginal the scene for composed art music may seem now, given the newspapers' intoxication with pop and opera, it is all the more alive and globally connected. It is thus no wonder, and something of a consolation, that the news of Hübler's death initially spread via the British new music blog *The Rambler*.

As the Anglo-German composer Wieland Hoban remarked to me at Hübler's grave, this composer and his music are known far more widely abroad than at home. Let us hope earnestly that this will change as soon as possible.