

SHEL(L)TER

Series for ensemble and electronics



Photo: Atomic bunker in Berlin, Clara Maïda, 2004

Clara Maïda

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Clara Maïda DAAD Portrait-Concert
Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD/ *Ultraschall* festival of Berlin co-production
With the support of the French-German contemporary music funds

Clara Maïda

1- Shel(l)ter - später... () ...Winter (p.3)

for clarinet, bassoon, cello, three percussions and electronics
(14'40)

Première on May 16th, 2009. *Les Musiques* festival, Marseille

FRENCH MINISTRY OF CULTURE and GMEM commission
Residency at the GMEM, Marseille (realization of the live electronics)
and at the ELECTRONIC STUDIO of the TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT, Berlin (realization of the fixed electronic part)

Technical processing: GMEM

PERCUSSIONS DE STRASBOURG and NOUVEL ENSEMBLE MODERNE
Direction: Lorraine VAILLANCOURT

2- Shel(l)ter - unter... () ...Gitter (p.4)

for clarinet, bassoon, cello, three percussions and electronics
(14'45)

Première on January 30th, 2010. *Ultraschall* festival, Berlin

Residency at the ELECTRONIC STUDIO of the TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT, Berlin
Technical processing: Sébastien NAVES and Franck ROSSI

L'ITINERAIRE ensemble
Direction: Jean DERoyer

3- Shel(l)ter - seither... () ...Splitter

4- Shel(l)ter - hinter... () ...Eiter (p.5)

Piece in two parts for eleven amplified instruments
12'04 (6'16 + 5'48)

KOMPOSITIONSPREIS DER LANDESHAUPTSTADT STUTTGART 2011

Première on January 30th, 2010. *Ultraschall* festival, Berlin

FRENCH MINISTRY OF CULTURE and L'ITINERAIRE ensemble commission
Technical processing: Sébastien NAVES

L'ITINERAIRE ensemble
Direction: Jean DERoyer

Shel(l)ter is a series of four pieces which refers to a very specific space, one of the atomic shelters in Berlin.

The reduplication of the letter "l" condenses in the title the words "shell" and "shelter", which both evoke the attempt to protect the body against any aggression. But "shell" means at the same time the protection of certain animals (molluscs for example) and a weapon. So the double polarization of this word underlines the absurdity, constant in Man, which consists in constructing quite as many objects of destruction and objects that would protect against this destruction.

Placed in brackets, this reduplication of the "l" indicates at the same time a stop and a junction or the transformation of a repeated element, a rupture, a mutation of the structure of a given material or situation, as well as a separation or imprisonment, the self-destructive perverse effect which all protection is also likely to induce when it leads to isolation.

In *Shel(l)ter*, one can talk of "nanomusic" (in reference to nanosciences which observe and manipulate objects on the atomic scale), since this mobility and this transformation of the properties of the musical fabric result from micro-processes that act on the sound particles. These processes generate variations of masses, forms and paths, but also resistances and persistences. The atomic thus reminds us that everything is particle, everything is atom, the sound field being considered only as one of the possibilities of the infinite field of matter.

1st part: **Shel(I)ter - später... () ...Winter**

for clarinet, bassoon, cello, three percussions and electronics

[14'40]

In this first piece of the series, the sub-title *später... [] ...Winter* – which means in German “later... [] ...winter” alludes to the hypothesis of a nuclear winter which would follow the explosion of several bombs.

According to the modelling processes proposed by scientists, in a situation of this kind, large quantities of smoke and ashes, generated by the combustion of plastics and fuel, would be released in the earthly atmosphere and would induce such a climatic condition. The formation of a layer of particles would greatly reduce the solar radiance. Thick black clouds would form and absorb the light thus inducing extremely cold weather conditions.

The piece is articulated around this dialectics between, on the one hand, an extreme disruption of the musical matter, phenomena which mimic the nuclear fusion, fission or chain reaction, and on the other hand – particularly with electronics –, an elastic coagulation of sound masses which slide as lava flows, and can evoke unsteady layers described by geology, or a collapse of the ground, as well as a state of psychic trauma experienced as a kind of temporal suspension, a freezing of mental faculties or the impression of an inner upheaval.

Nuclear fission is the phenomenon by which a big atom's nucleus disintegrates into several smaller fragments, with an emission of neutrons which releases a great deal of energy.

In the nuclear chain reaction, each neutron emitted during the fission of an atomic nucleus can provoke in turn the fission of another nucleus, and this process will be able to multiply. An A bomb is designed deliberately to trigger a nuclear chain reaction.

Therefore, the musical writing is “atomic”. It results from an assembling of infinitely small particles, which form compact objects and, while energy is accumulating, explode in sound space and disseminate their components.

It is also “genetic”. The disruptions induced in matter call us to mind what can be described on the chromosomal level, with the possibility of errors of replication, breaks, permutations of microelements. All these small modifications thus generate distortions and new [or mutant] forms.

Clara Maïda, November 2010

2nd part: **Shel(l)ter - unter... () ...Gitter**

for clarinet, bassoon, cello, three percussions and electronics

[14'45]

The second piece of the series refers more directly to this strange place that an atomic shelter is.

The sub-title *unter... () ...Gitter* – which means in German “underneath... () ... grille” – evokes, on the one hand, the subterranean aspect of the place which can be related to a cellar or even a vault, for this descent down the town can give one the impression to be buried.

On the other hand, the word “grille” accounts for the oppressive sensation that a closed space can induce. The opacity of walls, the cut with the outside and the silence would thus give rise to a discomfort or an anguish all the more acute as the duration of the stay would be unknown in the case of an atomic catastrophe.

The protective function would then be of secondary importance and the impossibility to leave the shelter would be experienced as an imprisonment.

In this piece, the harmonic structure relies on four aggregates, four bounds which limit space. Four series of rhythmical processes played by percussions (wood) shape some kinds of blocks located between the other times of the piece. The musical sequences are hatched. Each time a development of the material is attempted, it is interrupted as if an obstacle was impassable. Short sound situations are alternately set out but without being able to carry on their trajectory. They come round, but their briefness persists because of the powerlessness to clear the way for an opening.

The musical speech is confronted to this inexorable dimension of confinement which raises a long moan, a kind of panic-stricken monologue, ever more expressing the difficulty to exist in such an environment, the absurdity that one feels, and the proximity of a possible madness, the only bursting out of the framework likely to occur.

The electronic sequences punctuate the piece with instants in which the distorted memory of a lost world seems fleetingly to emerge. But the absence of perspective revives in the conclusion the invasive presence of a sound force, static and pulsating, close to these automatic and stiff gestures done by an individual when he has given up all hope.

Clara Maïda, November 2010

3rd and 4th parts:

Shel(I)ter - seither... () ...Splitter
Shel(I)ter - hinter... () ...Eiter

Piece in two parts
for amplified flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, horn,
percussion, violin 1, violin 2, viola, cello and double bass

(12'04 - 6'16 + 5'48)

This last piece of the series is made up of two parts. It evokes the pulverization of objects and bodies which follow the explosion of an atomic bomb and the disruptions that radioactive emissions operate on organic matter.

In the first part, whose sub-title is *seither... [] ...Splitter* – which means in German “since then... [] ... splinter” – the musical elements which had been used in the previous works are torn to pieces. A world is bursting and jagged fragments fly across sound space in all directions.

Sound objects have lost all cohesion, all polarity. Their scraps collide and suffer numerous diffractions towards a multiplicity of trajectories. One is in a situation of crash and disorder. A falling movement regularly comes back and mimics at the same time the radioactive dust fallout and the collapse of what was.

I had in mind the dynamic image of the shock wave and the huge blast, the fireball which is formed, the mushroom cloud which spreads out in waves, quickly ascending with a very important emission of thermal energy and radiations before it releases its rain of particles.

The second part *hinter... [] ...Eiter* – which means in German “behind... [] ... pus” - depicts the deterioration of matter, the affection of flesh, scars and blisters, the decomposition and the putrefaction of bodies. It is the world of deliquescence which induces the mutation or the destruction of shapes.

In some sequences in which the musical material has rarefied, wind instruments emerge at the heart of grief (mainly the oboe, clarinet, trumpet and horn). They send out multiphonic sounds close to a rattle, a moan, kinds of evidences of the survivors' suffering (paying tribute to the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

These voices express at the same time the psychic trauma and the physical injuries. Their monstrous connotation refers to organic ravages as well as human barbarity.

The shapeless sounds of percussions (the skins rubbed with a super ball stick) or the final texture which superimposes elastic glissandi of the strings calls us to mind that, beyond the immediate lesions of the organism caused by the explosion and the irradiation, the latter is likely to imprint invisible and extremely deep modifications in the cellular tissue. These mutagenic effects will occur in defects affecting the descendants.

Clara Maïda, November 2010