





Klaus Huber in May 2017 (Photo: Harald Rehling)

Klaus Huber

# Plowed Time

Writings and  
Conversations

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Wolke Verlag, Hofheim  
Printed in Germany  
Typeset in Simoncini Garamond  
Cover design: Friedwalt Donner, Alonissos  
with a watercolor by Albrecht Dürer, *Traumgesicht* (Dream Vision), 1525  
ISBN 978-3-95593-081-3

[www.wolke-verlag.de](http://www.wolke-verlag.de)

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## Foreword

The present texts are a selection of the writings and interviews of Klaus Huber, written or conducted on various occasions from 1969 to 1997 and published in a collection in German in 1999.<sup>1</sup> When reading it today, eighteen years after the German edition appeared, one is immediately struck by its undiminished topicality. Huber's ability to get to the root of the questions raised lends his discussions universal validity and elevates them far above a narrow reference to their time.

One thread running through the selection of texts consists of lucid reflections on the craft of composition. But Huber's thoughts have broader goals. They repeatedly circle around the role of the artist in society and the question how to react to the complex problems of today's world. He confronts this challenge with an innate curiosity of a creative person and with a candor that does not hesitate to confront tortuous self-doubt.

It is no longer unusual today that reflection on composition and on society find room side by side in an artist's thinking, though rarely with the high level of discourse found here. In the case of Klaus Huber, who was born in Switzerland in 1924 and taught composition in the German city of Freiburg im Breisgau from 1973 to 1990, it is astonishing for another reason: he was not the sort of composer who mounted the barricades when young and gained artistic and political momentum from that. His beginnings were completely apolitical; for nearly two decades, he shut himself off from the outside world and withdrew entirely inward. Refined chamber music in the tradition of Anton Webern, settings of religious poetry, and medieval and Baroque mysticism were reference points in this early creative phase.

Fleeing from reality? It might seem that way at first glance. In retrospect, however, it turned out to be a construction of a fortified alternative world. Klaus Huber drew strength from it for his social commitment, which he pursued with a strong ethical impulse. The turning point came around 1970, influenced in no small measure by the student movement of the time. The revolutionary movements of the Third World and so-called liberation theology came to his attention, and in his works he began to combine the worlds of religious and social thinking in an unmistakable way. The Christian idea of salvation blended with the utopia of revolutionary liberation, and the danger of catastrophe to society from nuclear war and the destruction of the environment were evoked with gripping images of the apocalypse. In confessional works such as ... *inwendig voller Figur* ... (... full of figures

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1 Klaus Huber. *Umgepflügte Zeit: Schriften und Gespräche*. Ed. Max Nyffeler. Cologne: Musik-Texte, 1999. 476 pp.

inside ...), which was inspired by a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, and in the political oratorio *Erniedrigt–geknechtet–verlassen–verachtet* ... (Degraded–enslaved–abandoned–despised)—both works are discussed in detail in this volume—these ideas take on suggestive form. Ardent expressivity and subjective positioning never detract from compositional complexity.

In parallel with such works for large ensembles, Huber pursued a path of refining musical expression. In the complex of works revolving around the life and work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, which culminated in the opera *Schwarzerde* (Blackearth) in 2001, Huber explored increasingly from the late 1980s onward the registers of the quiet and fragile. That went hand in hand with a search for a new harmony beyond traditional tonality. He composed in third tones and made use of the Arabic *maqamat* in his composition. For him, it was not simply an experiment with materials: He studied Arabic cultures in parallel and was interested in the political conflicts in the Middle East. He discovered the thousand-year-old humanist core of these culture—years before the fascination for Islam seized Germany and years before its problematic aspects came to the fore.

When composing with third tones and the microintervals of Arabic scales from the 1990s onward, Huber also took up techniques from Renaissance vocal polyphony. Its arts of the canon colored numerous works of his late creative phase, including *Lamentationes sacrae et profanae ad responsoria Iesualdi*, a supplement to the responsories for Good Friday of Carlo Gesualdo di Venosa; the composer discusses the work in an extended interview.

The texts in the present volume are roughly organized into three groups. The volume begins with seven essays that lead directly to the core of Klaus Huber's aesthetics. They concern questions of acoustic perception, the role of the artist in society, the mystery of artistic creativity, the phenomenon of compositional time, spirituality, mystical consciousness, and, related to that, an eye toward East Asia. This section concludes with a long interview by the musicologist Philippe Albèra, in which Klaus Huber discusses his artistic career and the basic features of his creative aesthetics.

The second section is about significant single compositions: the aforementioned sociocritical works and the Gesualdo-influenced *Lamentationes* as well as the spatial composition *Cantiones de circulo gyrante* (Songs of the Rotating Circle), inspired by Hildegard of Bingen and with a text by Heinrich Böll, and the group of works about the life and work of Osip Mandelstam and his metaphor of the plow. Its center, however, is an extended analysis of his own orchestral triptych, *Protuberanzen*; it offers a look into the composer's workshop and demonstrates exemplarily how the linking of ideas concerning the subject matter to the constructive techniques functions in Huber's works.

The third section consists of general reflections on issues of teaching and imparting music in general, on the institution of the orchestra, and on aspects of



European cultural history. Brief portraits of Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg—two important composers for Huber’s career—round off this section.

The present volume, the first English-language edition of Klaus Huber’s writings, was initiated by his wife, the composer Younghi Pagh-Paan. I am particularly grateful to Steven Lindberg for providing an excellent translation, assisted by the copy editors N. Andrew Walsh and Kathryn Puffett.

Max Nyffeler  
July 2017