

NORIKO HISADA
PROGNOSTICATION
ENSEMBLE FÜR
NEUE MUSIK ZÜRICH



Noriko Hisada was born in Tokyo in 1963 and grew up as an only child in Kamakura. At the age of fifteen she decided to become a composer, that is to take up a career which in Japan is traditionally reserved for men. Today she is considered one of the most interesting Japanese composers, and yet she is less known than Toshio Hosokawa, for instance, who also lives in Japan, quite regularly travels around Europe as a guest composer, and is played and reviewed a lot. Both of them teach composition at the same school they also attended, the renowned Tokyo College of Music. Since graduation Noriko Hisada has been working at one of the major music academies of Japan to ensure her existence as a free composer. In 1991, one of her first journeys to Europe brought her to the World Music Days in Switzerland – you could find her at the Alte Kirche Boswil where the “ensemble für neue musik zürich”, playing her music for the first time, performed the premiere of *Prognostication*. Since then her music has become part of the repertoire of the ensemble, which has commissioned her to write pieces and initiated this first musical portrait as well. “To compose means to expose one’s own views,” Noriko Hisada says, yet she sends scanty information about herself to Europe and doesn’t reveal any secrets in a conversation. She’s definitely not into self-marketing, as it is successfully practised by artists today. Nevertheless, with a friendly translator at her side one still manages to uncover a couple of biographical details. Her piano teacher and her parents “did not make a happy face” (as they say in Japan) when she decided to study composition, nor did they when she presented her first work in the manner of European tonality at the age of eighteen. And although she took piano lessons from the fourth year of her life on, this instrument no longer plays an important role – since she graduated in 1988 and began receiving various awards (international ones, too), the course of her life as a composer seems to be cut out for her.

“I’m Japanese and write music the same way other people do!” she disarmingly remarks as we talk about any possible connections to the Japanese music tradition. Unlike Toshio Hosokawa, who explicitly refers to Japanese art music, she does not want to make any deliberate references to it in her own music. “I did not study Gagaku,” Noriko Hisada explains, thus hinting at the fact that this sophisticated court music is not part of the daily life of the average Japanese. Nevertheless she claims that the first music she heard as a three-year-old was Gagaku, composed by her grandfather, who played in the Gagaku Ensemble of the Imperial Household Agency. Her mother plays the traditional three-stringed lute, the shamisen. Noriko Hisada does not let herself be pinned down as to whether or not Japanese tradition clashes with the Western dominance of the music establishment. Only the first impression of her music sounds like Western European New Music that does not reject tonality and follows strict methods of musical organisation. In addition, there is Hisada’s predilection for extended as well as microtonal melodic patterns and her antenna for the dramaturgy of extremes. Toru Takemitsu, the most renowned Japanese composer of the 20th century, once took a critical view of the “Japanisation” of the avant-garde and made a statement that could apply to Noriko Hisada too: in the painful tension between East and West all one can do is to find oneself and deal with the irreconcilable by way of one’s compositions.

The first piece in Noriko Hisada’s catalogue of works is ambiguously entitled *Prognostication* (1987/1990). According to the composer, it is in fact structured to give a prognosis of later works by placing constraints on the selection and use of the musical material. Here, it is restricted to two elements: to the selection of specific groups of notes, which are organised freely and reappear throughout the composition, and to the

determination of certain main tones. "To me it isn't important whether this means progress or regress in terms of music.

I'm interested in the impact such a technique will have on future compositions." The restriction of the artistic means in this piece is also an invitation to follow the music. It starts out with signal-like sound blocks and before long will lead to the sound spirals of the perpetually falling glissando and to the wild gestures of the trills. The form shifts from closed to open, the dense texture gives way to empty space, the tutti yields the solo. The dramatic struggle between high and low registers eventually leads to the competitive cadences of piano and double bass. But in the end a piano pizzicato of the double bass has the final say.

Progression (1992) for piano could be referred to as Noriko Hisada's "Minute Waltz". The composer does not quote Chopin, yet she otherwise exhausts the history of the piano within the most limited space. The Webernesque gesture of the beginning is followed by a pounding bass ostinato in the middle section, which leads up to a relentless stretta and an equally extreme acceleration. This minute composition was inspired by an invitation of the Japan Society for Contemporary Music to submit short piano works. "What interested me most about this challenge was to explore the expressive possibilities of the piano in just two minutes."

In Noriko Hisada's music you'll again and again discover the glissando with its power to go beyond the limitations of the diatonic scales of European music. One could, in addition, recognise the formal principle of jo-ha-kyu, the balance of the three elements, an aesthetic concept governing the rhythms of the Gagaku form where a non-metrical structure of the opening is followed by a main part with the development of the music, and closes with a very short part at a fast tempo.

But Noriko Hisada's references to Japanese music are never folkloristic, she rather scatters them over her creations. *Landscape* (1991) could well be read as a Japanese scenery transferred to the idiom of New Music. Commissioned by the "ensemble für neue musik zürich" and premiered in Hong Kong in 1992, the piece is very dear to the composer's heart, since it illustrates an important aspect of her music: "Intense perception of the almost infinite possibilities to organise sequences of tones. In this work I tried to give a clear form to subliminal and playful relationships between sequences of tones."

In *Continuance* (1999), a duo for violin and violoncello premiered in the "Zen-on Contemporary Music Series", Noriko Hisada explores the characteristic qualities of these related string instruments, and delves into the different directions their sound energy can take. As the composer emphasises, this energy should never "break off". Only occasionally does she cross the borders of the "beautiful" sound while trying to keep the energy throughout the music, that is when the dynamic progression is coupled with the increasing pressure of the bow. The delicate piece in a way also lingers at certain points throughout the history of music: the violoncello unfolds the rich vibrato of Late Romanticism; in the dialogue with the violin one detects the third and sixth, harmonious intervals as well as passages in unison; and the lively pizzicato part in the middle section evokes the mood of the New Realism of the twenties. Again and again, the music runs up against the edges of that history: the spherical sound and the glissando of the Orient.

In her current music Noriko Hisada focuses more and more on antagonistic principles: standstill versus actionism, incision versus seam, virtuosity versus fading away. The six instruments

(flute, clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, violoncello) on *Prime alpha* (2001) act antagonistically from the standpoint of blowing versus bowing, or beating versus plucking. After glissandoing (again) downwards in an introduction of one minute the piano explodes – what has been materially built up is subsequently reduced to a thousand small pieces. This structural principle also characterises the entrance and exit of every solo part. With this commissioned piece the composer celebrates, last but not least, the long-standing collaboration with the “ensemble für neue musik zürich”, and gives its musicians the welcome chance to perform demanding and elaborate solos.

Corinne Holtz

music editor at the Swiss radio station DRS2

November 2005

(translated by Friederike Kulcsar)

1.

PROGNOSTICATION

for 5 players (1990)

Hans-Peter Frehner *flute, piccolo*

Urs Bumbacher *violin*

Daniela Müller *violin*

Aleksander Gabrys *double bass*

Jürg Henneberger *piano*

Bruno Stockli *conductor*

2.

PROGRESSION

for Piano (1992)

Jürg Henneberger *piano*

3.

LANDSCAPE

for 5 players (1991)

Hans-Peter Frehner *flute*

Hansruedi Bissegger *clarinet*

Urs Bumbacher *violin*

David Riniker *violoncello*

Daniel Stalder *percussion*

Jürg Henneberger *conductor*

4.

CONTINUANCE

for Violin and Violoncello (1999)

Urs Bumbacher *violin*

David Riniker *violoncello*

5.

PRIME α

for 6 players (2001)

Hans-Peter Frehner *flute*

Hansruedi Bissegger *clarinet*

Urs Bumbacher *violin*

David Riniker *violoncello*

Viktor Müller *piano*

Lorenz Haas *percussion*

Jürg Henneberger *conductor*

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NORIKO HISADA (1963)

PROGNOSTICATION

ENSEMBLE FÜR NEUE MUSIK ZÜRICH

first recordings of

- 1 **Prognostication** for 5 players (1990) 15:34
- 2 **Progression** for piano (1992) 2:01
- 3 **Landscape** for 5 players (1991) 8:24
- 4 **Continuance** for violin and cello (1999) 10:50
- 5 **Prime α** for 6 players (2001) 11:25

Total Time 48:18

DDD ²*Bit*

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Pika-Don
hat[now]ART 151

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The Freedom Of Speech
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Enactments
hat[now]ART 161

Pierre Boulez
Notations & Piano Sonatas
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