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BALLADE.RAUSCHEN

HANS THOMALLA
YUMI SUEHIRO

In opposite to the more gestural writing of recent piano music, the instrument in *Ballade.Rauschen* (2014-15) presents one long and almost uninterrupted line. The narrative aspect of this focus is obvious, as the linearity evokes concepts such as “storyline” or the German *Lebenslinie* (the course of one’s life). This ever-continuing melody does not remain unaffected by outside forces, though, the strongest of which might be quite drastic accelerations and decelerations that are pushing this *Lebenslinie* into temporal extremes.

Others are the sudden thickening of the melody into hand-or arm-clusters, the gradual changes in loudness, and, referring to the title’s *Rauschen* (noise), a layer of pedaling that transforms the otherwise transparent line into tremendous buildups of resonance—a sonorous violence that seems to wipe out almost all melodic identity whenever it occurs.

Ballade.Rauschen was commissioned by WDR Radio and Wigmore Hall and it is dedicated to Nicolas Hodges.

Fragment for Piano (1994) was written during the composer’s last semester of high school. While the influence of Stockhausen’s piano music as well as that of the late Nono is evident in the densely textured clusters of the beginning, the piece eventually charts its own course, leaving behind the sonorous explorations of its models as it begins to pursue its very own attempt at melody.

Played at the edge of audibility and at a tempo so slow that its single notes seem continually at risk of losing connection, the melody appears sonically radically subdued and formally fragmented at first. It nevertheless brings an almost songlike expressivity into focus that foreshadows Thomalla’s operatic writing as well as his later piano music.

Born in Osaka, Japan, pianist Yumi Suehiro began studying piano at age 6, and marimba a year later. In Japan, Ms. Suehiro won numerous national and international competitions, including the top prize at the Kobe International Competition as the youngest winner.

An undergraduate scholarship student at Lehman College (CUNY), she graduated magna cum laude, and she received her Master of Music degree in piano performance from the Manhattan School of Music as a student of Zenon Fishbein and Peter Vinograde. While at Manhattan she won second prize in the school's 2010 concerto competition (with John Harbison's Piano Concerto), and in 2011 was chosen to perform Richard Wilson's "Flashback" for Pierre-Laurent Aimard's master class.

Ms. Suehiro has appeared at numerous festivals for contemporary music, such as June in Buffalo, the Princeton Sound Kitchen, NUNC! (Chicago), Red Note (IL), New Music New College (FL), Sound of Stockholm, and the Darmstädter Ferienkurse (where she received an honorable mention). She is a core member of Ensemble Mise-en in New York City (<https://mise-en.org>), with which she performed Ligeti's Piano Concerto in 2017. She has served on the faculty at Lehman College Continuing Education.

Piano Counterpart (2008) is a rhapsody. The keys are struck seemingly without aim, like a child tapping curiously on unknown objects, listening with concentration to how that sounds. But not only single tones are presented this way in *Piano Counterpart*. Entire boulders of musical language appear: a continuation of the piano strings into the history of the instrument, into layer after layer of musical meaning. *Piano Counterpart* strikes these layers, lets them ring and excavates them at the same time.

By means of reduction to fewer and fewer pitches at the border of the instrument, and by a constant diminuendo, the piano strings and their

sonorous characteristics themselves come increasingly into focus. The now uncovered tones are connected mechanically at first, following the given chromatic layout of the keyboard. But their relation grows increasingly free, and like the loose connections between the ruins of musical languages in the beginning of the piece, the newly emerging musical figures now relate to one another spontaneously, unpredictably, triggered only by the musical moment. The piano "speaks" almost as rhapsodically as it was struck in the beginning of the piece.

Piano Counterpart was commissioned by the Zürich New Music Days and it is dedicated to Nicolas Hodges.



Hans Thomalla is a German-American composer living in Chicago and Berlin. A particular focus of his work lies in music for the stage. He has written four operas, *Fremd* (Stuttgart Opera 2011), *Kaspar Hauser* (Freiburg and Augsburg Opera 2016), *Dark Spring*, and *Dark Fall* (both Mannheim Opera 2020 and 2024).

He has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis, the Composer Prize of the Ernst von Siemens Musikstiftung, the Christoph Delz Prize, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. During the academic year 2014/15 he was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and in 2024/25 he is a Villa Massimo Fellow in Rome. He has written music for numerous ensembles and soloists, including the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks, the Münchener Philharmoniker, SWR Radiosinfonieorchester, The Crossing, Talea, ICE, Ensemble Modern, Musikfabrik, Ensemble Recherche, Arditti Quartet, Spektral Quartet, Nicolas Hodges, Irvine Arditti, Sarah Sun, and many others.



Photos: Ilja Mess (Thomalla), Nancy Nassiff (Suehiro), Noah Thomalla (cover photo)

Thomalla was Professor of Music Composition for many years at Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music, where he co-founded the Institute for New Music. Since 2024 he is Professor of Composition at University of Chicago's Department of Music. He studied at the Frankfurt Musikhochschule and received his doctoral degree in composition from Stanford University. From 1999-2002 he was Assistant Dramaturge and Musical Advisor at the Stuttgart Opera. He has been associated with the Darmstädter Ferienkurse for a long time, where he has served for many years on the composition faculty.

Hans Thomalla is the co-founder of the Chicago-based record label Sideband Records. He appears as a character in Alexander Kluge's story collection "Anyone Who Utters a Consoling Word Is a Traitor: 48 Stories for Fritz Bauer".