

**Principles of the picture sound interaction: *Requiem for fossil fuels* (2004)
of Sam Auinger & Bruce Odland**

by Cristoph Metzger

“On the day of wrath, the world will be reduced to burning ashes“ – so goes a passage in the *Dies Irae*, the central of several parts of the Requiem. In the field of liturgical music, the Mass for the dead is the setting for the ritual ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church. Mozart (1791), Berlioz (1837) and Verdi (1875) founded the monumental genre, whose texts combine secular and sacred elements such as lament, suffering, the wrath of God, elemental forces of nature, and resurrection. Only after the two world wars did Schönberg, Nono and Britten turn to the symbolism of the Requiem to assimilate those recent historical events. In 1983 Gerhard Rühm, the leading exponent of concrete poetry, realized *Wald – ein deutsches Requiem* [Forest – a German Requiem]. The work was awarded the Radio Play Prize of the War Blind in 1984 and with this, the genre itself finally attained symbolic status.

O+A work in this tradition. *Requiem for fossil fuels* is composed using sound material collected over a period of almost 20 years. For acoustic mapping, O+A use a stereo tuning tube recording made on an October morning at 8 a.m., during rush hour, in New York City’s Amsterdam Park. “This quiet park at the north tip of Manhattan experiences rush hour from a safe distance. Soloists such as honking truck horns, car doors etc. sound in antiphonal call and response.” Then a few streets away, the material for *Cantus Firmus*, which O+A describe as “a long river of time”, was found. It too was developed using stereo tuning tube technology, which has a special directional character: microphones are sunk into long tubes each of which, according to its volume, has its own characteristic resonance. It’s no coincidence that these special implements are reminiscent of organ pipes. Their lengths, diameters and materials, as well as the kinds of stoppers and angles of the openings, scale down the natural sound. The passage *Dies irae* (Latin: “God’s wrath”) comes from Grand Central Station at rush hour, and the result can sound like a veritable infernal roar. Here, modified sound material is used to create a dense polyphonic weave of striking events. The powerful brakes of subway cars echoing in endless vaulted tunnels, the drum rolls of countless commuters, air vents, fans, autos, busses and trucks all are rendered into a divertimento of canons, fugues and repeats.

A year later, material was recorded for use in another work created the following summer: *Blue Moon*, a tuning installation realized between May and August at the World Financial Center, works with the resonating space of a huge courtyard built of glass and steel that reflects and alters the sounds of the New York harbor. The broad, hard surfaces especially bounce back sounds of helicopters and airplanes flying overhead, which are tuned by the stereo tube technology to the three tones c, g, and d. The circular movement of sound waves is thus transformed, and this at the site where the two passenger machines were steered into the Twin Towers. Here, sounds recall specific events that are embedded, moreover, in a temporal dramaturgy.

In this way, O+A extend aspects of site-specific art into a musical dimension whose symbolic form, the Requiem, suggests various interpretations. In the section *Benedictus*, recordings of different road surfaces in New York City are introduced as thematic material. The *Agnus Dei* is a soundscape of the largest European container port in Rotterdam, a colossal assemblage of containers that are brought into play as resonating bodies. The work concludes in the movement *Communio (Lux aeterna)* with a simple dream of flight, sounds of flying lessons in a turboprop machine – introduced contrapuntally to the soundscape of the Voest steel factory in Linz, home town of both Anton Bruckner and Sam Auinger.

These are the elements used to compose *Requiem for fossil fuels*, a work commissioned by the festival Inventionen, where it was presented at the Sophienkirche in Berlin Mitte in 2004 as a multi-channel loudspeaker installation. In both musical and art historical terms, a work of great stature.

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