

## Preparing, Sharing, Changing:

An Interview with Johannes S. Sistermanns

Johannes Sistermanns is a German sound artist.

Last year he was awarded the much coveted Karl Sczuka Composition Prize (Foerderpreis) for Soundart, which has a long tradition in the field.

Sistermanns gave a world premier performance of his work "19.1 Rion Ma" at Xebec on April 11, 1998.

Interviewer: SHIMODA Nobuhisa (Xebec staff) with Christopher STEPHENS (translator/editor)  
This interview was conducted the following day.

SHIMODA (SN): I would like to start by introducing our readers to your work using your new piece, "19.1 Rion Ma," which you premiered here at Xebec last night. Could you tell us something about the meaning of the title and how you came to compose this piece?

SISTERMANNS (JS): It's very autobiographical. "19.1" is the 19th of January, the day I composed this piece. I composed this piece on one day in two hours, and I was inspired by a woman. I used the syllables of her name for the title. I started playing with the syllables until I got "Rion Ma" out of them, and then I started asking myself what the meanings of these words are. "Ma" could mean "mother," or in an archetypical sense it could mean the "great Mother." In some languages, "ma" means "my." Then I went back to "rion." The first three letters in Spanish, for instance, mean "river." If you read it backwards, you have the French word "noir." I like the title "Rion Ma" because it makes you think, and doesn't explain anything to you.

But these meanings turned up later; they weren't the reason for choosing the name. It was a moment of bliss. It was a Monday morning, I went to the piano, and immediately, I knew what I had to do. The whole idea came within a few minutes. Many things in this piece happened completely by accident, and they came together in this piece. For example, I came home and spilled water on some photos. And immediately I had to find some way to dry them. The idea suddenly came to me to put them between the keys of the piano. And I integrated this action into the piece. Putting stones on the keyboard was also something old for me; I first did this thirteen years ago. Another action is related to my piano teacher at the Conservatorium in Cologne, Klaus RUNZE. He had us play with gloves, as I did in the piece last night. Rather than use cotton gloves though, I chose plastic gloves because of the noise they make.

The Experience of Exchanging

SN: Could you give us some idea of how you perform the piece?

JS: In general, the idea of the piece is to have a lot of sounds. First, there are enormous sounds that do many things. And the D.J. in the piece is to have something coming from the outside

irritating me, or another point of very concentrated energy. I have to get all of my energy together to play against him, with him, whatever. He started with a very high intensity and density. There were four parts: The first part was high volume, high intensity, the second was scratching, the third was looping, and the fourth was going into silence. But silence doesn't mean not playing anything. It means just a few sounds. He made sound for eight minutes, and led me into another meaning of "ma," and this is the Japanese meaning. That is, the distance between two points, or the waiting from one sound to the next. It's the expectation, or the expected space. It's not an empty space because even if there is nothing, it is filled with your expectations. Then by putting the postcards and stones on the keyboard, and putting on the plastic gloves, the idea was to make it impossible for me to go on playing, so I would have to switch over to the inside of the grand piano, and work with the resonance. I used pieces of Scotch tape to keep the keys down so that the dampers would go up, and the strings would be free to resonate. I absolutely fell in love with the image of all of these things on the keyboard. It is very beautiful.

I also used a fan, and a megaphone for breathing and whispering. And I used my shaver. I call this silent singing because the shaver was touching my cheekbones, and by changing the shape of my mouth I could form different vowel sounds without really singing. Sound was created by the resonance of my cheekbones. My head became a resonating box in the same way that the piano had become a resonating box. At first, both of these objects were active, and then both became inactive.

At the very end, I used tuning forks as a kind of visible moment of the word "ma." I created two distances and two audible differences between them, and again created a space of expectation. Then I left the space because there was nothing else to do there. I left the instrument as a kind of installation by itself. And the most sensible way to leave was to again use tape, which makes sound, and to follow the line that I made with it.

Recently, I've been thinking about where art happens. Does it happen in the piece? Does it happen in the people who come and listen? Or is art in between? I tend to think that art never really exists, but it happens when these two things come together. Here is the composer/performance artist and there is the audience. There is a space between the composer and his thoughts, the composer and his instrumental improvisation, the composer and the written/painted score, the audience and the music played in the concert situation. Everything that is in between is maybe what we call art. I think art is about sharing, changing and preparing. All I can do is prepare; I just want to open up a field of infinite possibilities. I make an invitation. And after the invitation is made it's up to you whether to let go of your imagination or not. If you do, then you are completely confronted with your self. When people come up to me afterward and say they liked or disliked a certain moment in the piece, I listen to them very intently because it has now become their piece. This exchange can be a changing experience. But for preparing, sharing, changing to take place, a space of freedom in which everything can resonate is needed. For both the composer and the audience to discover this space, we become empowered with an enormous amount of energy, and this energy continues to flow in a cycle with the artwork. This creates presence, being, loving. That's the way I think of

art, and maybe also life.

### The Resonance of Memory

SN: Let's talk a little about your new work, "Orchestra City." The idea for this piece is very fascinating. Can you explain it for us?

JS: The original title was "OrchestreVille." The idea is to have ten or twelve musicians. They are stationed with their instruments at different points in the city, and the city resonates in their instruments. Let's say the points are an intersection, a pedestrian passage, a tunnel, a silent area, a park, and a bridge. The resonance of the city will be amplified into a performance space. In this space, there will be six writers. The writers will write about their memories of sound as they listen to the sounds of the city. They will write on a surface of their own choice, or in a notebook, and the sound of this writing will also be amplified in the performance space.

Every writer will be accompanied by a video artist. The video artist will film the way the writer writes. But as artists, the video artists will have their own solutions about how to make images. These images will be transmitted live on the walls, the ceiling, and the floor of the space. So every writer will have a video artist, and the two of them will each have one surface. There will be six voices, not actors but people speaking in a regular voice; one for each of the surfaces. These voices will read the writing as they can pick out the words or sounds. They will speak very softly, and at first, not as a performance for this space. These voices will be transmitted into the instruments in the city. Then after a while, the musicians will start playing their instruments. This means that there will be three parts: the resonance, the voices, and the playing of the instruments. And these three sound moments will be transmitted again into the performance space. To top the situation, the audience will wear white clothes, or will be able to borrow some reflective, white overalls. They will be free and happy to move around the space. There will be no chairs. Then at the end of the piece, we will take the video projectors away from the surfaces, and focus them on the audience. When they move, the space will become dynamic. People will be walking and they will have letters on their chests, backs, or knees, and then they will move away and the letters will be lost. The people will become the surface for the words. At the very end, there will be no light. The last seven minutes will be in the dark. But the writers will go on writing in the dark. And the musicians will go on playing. And the voices will be able to sing their own songs of memory. I hope these will be songs from their childhood. I'm asking for a very easy song. Maybe a lullaby or a love song or a song for children. That's the whole piece.

The city will be Cologne because I was born in Cologne, and I have lived there for most of my life, and the work will be commissioned by the Film Foundation of the State of Northrhine Westfalia, which is in the middle part of Germany, and it will last for sixty minutes.

This is the first time that I have worked with memory. Years ago I started to wonder what the first sound I had ever heard in this world was. Of course, it was impossible to know. So I changed the question to what the first sound I remembered hearing was. I couldn't find this either because the more I focused on one thing, the farther I could go back in time.

I will pose several questions to the writers in this performance: Find words for the first experiences of sound in your memory. And what were the three most intense sounds in your life? And what are you listening to now? And when you listen to it, what leads you to that sound? Don't call the sound by its name, just make a description of it. And then I will ask them to call out any word—call your name, call your doubt, call your love, whatever.

One part of my work is realizing presence. To be here. To come into the is of this moment. Last year the idea came to me that presence is dependent on having integrated the past and the future into the present. Maybe this is the reason I have begun to go back and try to understand my past. Most of the past is filled with unconscious moments, and all these years have been a trip to become more conscious.