

'The Spell': Beethoven in the mixer

The coronavirus crisis indeed has interrupted all routine. Without it, admittedly, our culture industry would have celebrated the Year of Beethoven in the way it already masters perfectly: in big concerts with top-scale orchestras for a seated audience. But there also are projects that do not submit to the ironed-out conventions of Classic Radio. Projects that take Beethoven seriously as the avant-garde artist who lived through a time of crisis. Projects that pay respect to Beethoven by caring exactly as little about such respect as he did in his time.

This is the core of 'The Spell', a music video project from two artists in Frankfurt, the electronic musician Jan Peter Schwalm and the filmmaker and graphic artist Daniel Hartlaub. Schwalm, the project's initiator, deconstructed the adagio from Beethoven's Fourth Symphony and shot it through an electronic mixer. A complex landscape of sound emerged, in which a menacing underground beats time while electronic salvos burst through the tender skips of the violins. The grainy images from Hartlaub's hand-held camera stagger across this heaving floor. The filmmaker shot his images on 16mm film in the New York of the late 1990s. They show sequences from a woman's nightmare, chased by something undefined and indefinable as she hurtles through the city. In their universal space, fixed in neither time nor place, these images act upon us today as if they have only just been recorded. When the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center appear, these pictures finally point to their era - showing a past that also could be our future. Precisely in our crisis-ridden age of the coronavirus, this thought imposes itself brutally upon us.

At the turn of the last century, the short film was shown under the title 'Chicken Bitch' at prominent international festivals. For 'The Spell', Hartlaub re-edited the footage and incorporated unpublished scenes from his original shooting. Along with these dancing images, Schwalm's driving music transforms Beethoven's personal situation and transports it to our panicked present. The decline of the Viennese nobility during the Enlightenment, and the attendant rupture of their economic clout, forced the young musician and composer to devise radically new marketing strategies. He found his own way to success and even to wealth but later turned his back on such commerce, preferring to create music whose impressive echo still rang in the avant-garde of the 20th century. 'The Spell' pays honour to Beethoven's life as an artist - since we, like him, all must learn to dance on the quaking ground of our own epoch. In these times of fundamental change, we spin faster and faster in the maelstrom of global crises.

Roland Wengenmayr

J. Peter Schwalm's version of the Fourth Symphony from Ludwig van Beethoven premiered on 15.12.19 in the Frankfurt Mousonturm as part of the event 'The LOKAL Listener - Gregor Praml meets Ludwig van Beethoven'.

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