

## **Nothing to it: No - plot magic in N.Y.**

By David Patrick Stearns

Inquirer Classical Music Critic

NEW YORK - Rarely is music theater intriguing for what it doesn't have. Stifters Dinge has no actors, singers, musicians, or plot. Imported from Switzerland and produced by Lincoln Center, the work is being experienced at the Park Avenue Armory through tomorrow.

In place of performers, Stifters Dinge has player pianos, recorded sounds, from industrial noise to New Guinea chanting, plus screens and lights creating an entrancing 80 minutes of - something.

Surely, it's a quality-control breakthrough; it can be enacted three times today (at 3, 7 and 10 p.m.) without wearing anybody out. But whom do you applaud? Technicians? They deserve it. The piece could have been as impersonal as a light show or art installation. Instead, much of this was magical.

Stifters Dinge is the creation of Heiner Goebbels, 57, the composer/theater artist whose works make the rounds in European modern-music festivals and are recorded on the adventurous ECM label. His champions include Simon Rattle. Often, Goebbels assembles music as much as he composes it. His *Surrogate Cities* contains a concerto for sampled sounds and orchestra. Another piece samples the Beach Boys.

Like Charles Ives, Goebbels embraces a wildly heterogeneous world with a quixotic faith that it's all connected in the end. His works don't exist on the usual good vs. bad continuum; the question is whether he broadens your senses. And here, he certainly does.

A collaboration with Théâtre de Vidy in Lausanne, Stifters Dinge shows Goebbels in a maturing state of consolidation. The central inspiration is Biedermeier-era German author Adalbert Stifter, specifically his description of the beauty and danger of a forest after a severe ice storm. Read in a voiceover, Stifter's writing is gorgeous - and has inspired a narrative of images. At first, the long, narrow thrust-style stage has a light dusting of snow, evolving into frozen rain coming from the sky, and finally a thaw in the form of wading pools with lights, screens, and ripples, suggesting Claude Monet.

In between, elements include the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Malcolm X, plus simultaneous player pianos with their outer covers removed (revealing their chattering hammers) and crowded into a tableau-style sculpture with bare winter trees. Their cacophony suggested Bach pieces played backward and simultaneously - manically suggesting the pulsating force of nature. The absence of humans had subtle perceptual advantages: The piece entered you less literally.

One audience member, composer William Bolcom (who is giving a recital with mezzo-soprano Joan Morris at 8 tonight at the Curtis Institute), compared Stifters Dinge to Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Licht* (a cycle of operas), which, like Goebbels' work, cast a wide net of expression, free of arias.

One key difference is Goebbels' desire to communicate. Stockhausen let you eavesdrop on his brilliance. Goebbels embraces a world that includes an audience. Same thing with his new

ECM disc, the more aggressively political Landscape With Distant Relatives. Goebbels will be heard. And he has lots to say.