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MUSIC REVIEW | 'STIFTERS DINGE'

Haunted Air Piano (sans players) on a wintry night

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

In its promotion of “Stifters Dinge,” Lincoln Center has been reluctant to reveal too much about the piece, which is equal parts musical performance, theatrical presentation, art installation and environmental space. Now that I have seen this strange and captivating work, which opened at the Park Avenue Armory on Wednesday night as part of Lincoln Center’s boundary-blurring New Visions series, I can understand the wariness of the public-relations department.

It is not that the experience of “Stifters Dinge” will be spoiled for audiences by hearing it described in advance, as I am about to do. But Heiner Goebbels, the German composer and creator of unconventional music-theater pieces, who conceived, composed and directed the work, does not want people to arrive with some fixed idea of what they are going to experience.

On Wednesday the house doors were closed until right before the performance started, lest the audience become acclimated to the eerie environmental space that Mr. Goebbels has devised within the cavernous armory, or overexamine the elaborate set by Klaus Grünberg, dominated by a series of movable walls on which five pianos are affixed in space.

“Stifters Dinge” (“Stifter’s Things”), first presented in 2007 at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne in Switzerland, is teasingly described in the program as a composition for five pianos with no pianists, a play with no actors, a performance without performers, “one might say a no-man show.” Although all of this is true, the 80-minute piece does have specific sources and recorded texts, and even a sort of story.

The work was inspired by Adalbert Stifter, an early-19th-century writer, poet and painter, best known for his intricately detailed and mystical descriptions of nature. A recording of a long excerpt from a Stifter piece, “The Ice Tale,” provides a central episode of “Stifters Dinge.”

In the text Stifter describes a wintry village in which the townspeople have spread sand and earth atop swaths of ice that cover the paths to their houses. Traveling from the town into the forest with a friend in a horse-drawn sledge, Stifter hears a strange distant sound, “as though thousands, if not millions, of glass shards were rustling and clinking against each other.” It turns out to be the rattling from frozen tree branches falling on ice.

This scene, with its atmosphere and specific sounds, are all evoked before we hear the text read. “Stifters Dinge” begins with delicate sounds from the five pianos, operated through computerized player-piano mechanisms, producing gentle patterns of steady beats, scraping noises, melodic bits and hints of cosmic harmonies. Mixed in we hear the sounds, recorded in 1905, of songs and spoken stories of natives from New Guinea.

Visually, at first, the walls with the pianos are seen in the distance, behind a series of what look to be three huge sandboxes on the stage floor. The only people in the piece are two silent stagehands who spread salt atop an elongated sifter, which they shake over the boxes, as if spreading sand over ice. Then, from tubes attached to three clunky tanks, the boxes fill with water, making beautiful inky patterns.

At times the walls slide on automatic rails and move closer to the seating area (for only 165), as if the piano were in attack mode. The most astonishing musical episode comes when the looming pianos play a dizzying barrage of chromatic scales up and down the lengths of the keyboards, creating a dense din of steely glissandos.

From my perspective “Stifters Dinge” comes across mostly as a musical piece in a theatrical framework. All of the musical elements are produced live, though the sounds are amplified and electronically processed. The only recorded elements are the spoken texts. During one episode, after the long extract from the Stifter story, one of the pianos plays the pensive slow movement from Bach’s “Italian” Concerto. Halfway through the Bach, in a burst of French that rattles the mood, we hear the voice of the philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss in a radio interview from 1988. (Subtitles are projected on one of the screens that descend on the set now and then.)

On one level Stifter’s writings are an invitation, a plea even, for people to see the evidence of pervasive natural forces in the matter of everyday life. When Lévi-Strauss is heard saying that he really does not see any reason to have much faith in humanity, it is hard not to think of the contentious World Climate Conference taking place right now in Copenhagen.

Reading the list of recorded voices that Mr. Goebbels incorporates into this work, including William S. Burroughs and Malcolm X, may make “Stifters Dinge” sound like some heavy-handed rant. But the texts are used as much for their expressive and musical elements as for their content. And Mr. Goebbels has a keen feeling for how to structure and layer an 80-minute piece of music drama.

You do not have to know that the final section includes the recorded sounds of a traditional Greek song, a lament sung by a woman offering good luck to fishermen, to be affected by the earthy beauty of the music and its rightness for the moment. As we hear the singing, pellets of dry ice are dropped into the three pools, creating gurgling ripples and clouds of steam. The pianos glide back into place, playing bare intervals, some of which behave and resolve into tonal harmonies, others of which hover, unmoored and inconclusive.

Afterward the audience is invited to wander through the complex installation, which only makes its intricacy seem more magical.

“Stifters Dinge” runs through Sunday at the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street; (212) 721-6500, lincolncenter.org.