Eva-Maria Houben's *Lyrik*: The "In-Between"

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Music may exist "between": between appearance and
disappearance, between sound and silence,
as something, "nearly nothing".
Eva-Maria Houben[1]

Abstract:
The paper offers a semiotic analysis of Eva-Maria Houben's *Lyrik*, assessing its position, meaning and significance within the historical and cultural context of the twentieth-century musical *Reductionist Post-Cagean* art music. To do that it traces and analyzes some *Reductionist* options, as manifested in the American and European cultural milieu of the second half of that century, focusing mainly on the aesthetics of the *Wandelweiser* group of composers. Hopefully the conclusions will contribute to a richer, more discerning appreciation of thought-trends and styles as they are expressed and materialized in today's music.

Keywords:
Appearance-disappearance; com-position; directionality-indirectionality; Reductionism; Silence/Stillness; Systematicality.

Introduction

My article describes and analyzes a composition for a female singer with piano, *Lyrik*, authored in 2004 by the German composer Eva-Maria Houben (b.1955),[2] to a poem by the German-Jewish poet Hilde Domin (1909–2006), intending to understand its past and present context. In the process of preparing the paper, I jotted down a few notes: "Com-position" (text/music—music/text); Reduction, and the Secret of Reduction; a pre-planned and meticulous system (Systematicality); a feeling of "frozen time"; silences, quiet, and that which is above and beyond them. Then I added: Some might see in this kind of composition "going to the extreme," maybe even reaching over the edge. This music is very different from the "modernist mainstream," also from music often classified as "postmodern." Yet, the works of Eva-Maria Houben and her colleagues in the *Wandelweiser* group[3] have activity centers and fans, mainly in Western Europe and North America; an ongoing, independent distribution of their scores and CD's, and some significant publications to which I will attend later. A few compositions by members of this group have been performed in Israel, albeit rarely, among them, works by Michael Pisaro. Assaf Shatil, a member of *Musica Nova*,

[1] Eva-Maria Houben, "Presence-Silence-Disappearance: Some thoughts on the perception of 'nearly nothing'", 2010.
[2] The score can be found in https://www.wandelweiser.de/houbenscores/ew16.052.pdf. A recording is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nutsb9SNTl4&ab_channel=IreneKurka-Topic. A certain difference between this recording and the first music example (below) is worth noting.
[3] https://www.wandelweiser.de/home.html. For a thorough description of the beginnings and development of this group see Michael Pisaro's "Wandelweiser" (2009) and G. Douglas Barrett's "The Silent Network—The Music of Wandelweiser," *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 30 No. 6, December 2011, pp. 449–470.

initiated contacts with Eva-Maria Houben, bringing her music to Israel.[4] I hope that this article will expand the scope of interest in the *Wandelweiser* composers, particularly in Houben's works. I value their approach to music as a unique, significant phenomenon within the general panorama of contemporary music.

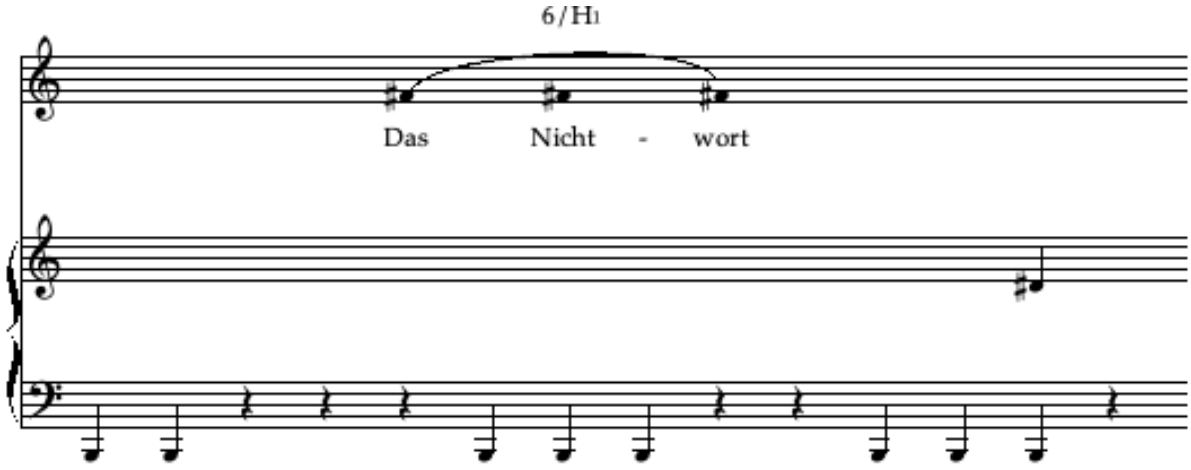
Analysis

Initial Impressions / Initial listening

Duration: approximately four minutes. The text consists of four extremely short lines: two words, one word, one word, three words. The score distributes the poem into five "units" that have no apparent boundaries except for the indication of the precise duration for each (marked in minutes and seconds). The music, as seen in the score, is divided into 16 "sub-units," each shown as a separate system in the piano part of the score. The first 14 systems consist of 14 quarter-notes (or "silent quarter-notes") in each. No division into bars.

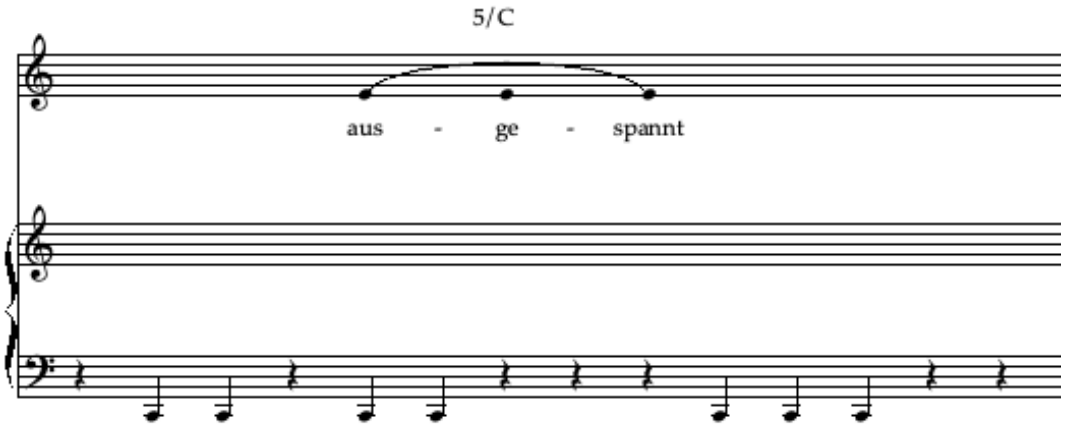
The voice is not continuous: it appears only occasionally within a "time-space," in which the piano's pulsating sounds resonate. The words fade into these sounds, and then into complete silence. The vocal part rests exclusively on two pitches (F# and E), with exceptionally subtle pitch nuances, marked in the score as meticulously particular deviations from the conventional equal temperament. The piano part is mainly based on two pitches in the low register (B and C), and a constant reverberation, with an added D# that appears only four times during the composition, always above the B, as if suggesting a sense of a *B major* chord (tonal memories? tonal sediments? No tonality—certainly no functional tonality—is present in any accepted sense of the word).

***Example 1**. Second sub-unit: 14 beats in the piano part; first appearance of the voice, indicating a slight deviation from the equal temperament; piano adding a single D#*

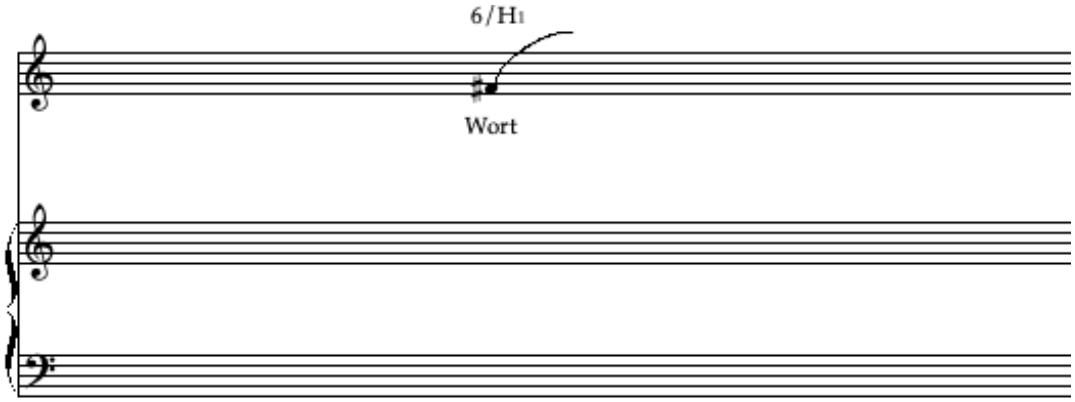


[4] On January 29, 2015, Shatil and Shira Legmann played five of Houben's compositions for two pianos (with Nitai Levy playing the bass clarinet), and in February of 2016 Houben's *Clouds* for two pianos, especially commissioned by and dedicated to Legmann and Shatil, was premiered in Tel Aviv. My thanks to Shira Legmann for this detailed information.

***Example 2**. The piano moves to C, the voice to E, suggesting "a memory" of C major.*



***Example 3**. The ending of the composition.*



***The Text:* Lyrik *by Hilde Domin*.**

Should one analyze and characterize the connections between the poet's words and Eva-Maria Houben's composition as if it were a Lied? I am inclined to say no. A Lied is usually viewed as a genre limited to Romantic, Post-Romantic and Neo-Romantic traditions; it is often based on cultural markers, composed as a "sound interpretation," or a "sound illustration" that aim to share with the listener the feelings (even the excitement) that the text evoked in the composer. The association of Eva-Maria Houben's work with this genre is far from undisputable. I would argue that the infrastructure of this composition, like Houben's other works (and those affiliated with it) was cast within different boundaries. At the minimum, I could argue that it signals a warning: "Stop! Lied's border crossing ahead!" (and maybe, in smaller letters: "It is worth crossing").

I find that in these compositions, as well as in many other compositions since the second half of the twentieth century, composers do not necessarily absorb personal impressions or excitement directly from the words, spontaneously translating them into

sounds.[5] Rather, they closely examine the formal components of the text, as if through a magnifying glass: vowels, consonants and assonants (as sonorities), prosody, phrasing, words' length, the number of words in each line, the length of each line in comparison with that of other lines, in-between spaces (silences), and the general form or shape. All these elements may influence and guide the composition.

I describe this phenomenon as the *positioning* of a *verbal score* that the composer has *selected* **(**a poem**)** alongside the *musical score* that he or she *imagines*; a *com-position*, a dialogue, an interchange between words and music. How will the composer combine the components from both scores? Maybe by "disassembling" some elements of the text, or by "smoldering" together verbal and musical constituents?

Why did Eva-Maria Houben choose this particular text? Her answer strengthens my premise and confirms my starting point: "I decided to compose the poem because this poem brings into words what is really specific to my music."[6]

Lyrik

das Nichtwort

ausgespannt
zwischen

Wort und Wort.[7]

Four lines. Seven words. Seeing their organization in a pictorial way renders four figures, subtly different from each other. Figures 1a-b compare the number of words and syllables in each line; figures c-d compare these numbers *with* the spaces the poet introduced between the lines (see figure 1a-d).

The figures indicate two significant characteristics in the text:

1. Silence (in the original printing: a double space) after the opening line and before the closing line. In the middle: two lines next to each other; for example, semantically, the second line ends with a preposition that invites continuation ("*between*") but it has its continuation only later, after a blank space (silence).
2. There is a larger number of words and syllables on both ends of the poem, and lesser in the middle. Number 3 is the highest and most common number in both word- and syllable-counts in each line. The numbers 2 and 1 appear in half the frequency, and only in the middle.

[5] I recall that the Israeli composer Yehezkel Braun (1922–2014) described it as a process in which the text is "chanted" (מִתְרוֹנֵן, in Hebrew) within the composer's inner world: a beautiful description.
[6] Eva-Maria Houben, personal e-mail to the author; December 14, 2021.
[7] Hilde Domin, "Lyrik," in *Hier: Gedicthe*, 1966, Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, p. 7. The Hebrew translation is by Oded Assaf: הַלֹּא-מִילָה//נִמְתַּחַת/בֵּין//מִילָה לְמִילָה.

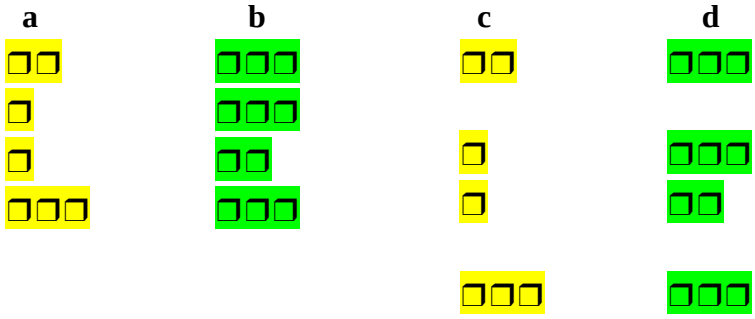


Figure 1:
***a.** The number of words in each line is 2, 1, 1, and 3.*
***b.** The number of syllables in each line 3, 3, 2, and 3.*
***c.** The number of words in each line as distributed on the page (with spaces).*
***d.** The number of syllables in each line as distributed on the page (with spaces)*

The Score

a. The Vocal part

The following figure shows the number of sound-events in the vocal part. The composition has no melismas; the sound-events follow the appearance of vowels and their number in each word.

Figure 2 shows the sound events in the vocal part as they correlate with the composition's sub-units: the vocal part of each line consists of a repeated pitch, alternating between F# and E (as for now, the pitches marked in this figure disregard the intonation nuances indicated in the score. More on that later).

The pool of numbers is small (3, 2, 1) and their frequencies are the same as those found in the other parameters of the composition, a depletion process that also follows the order of the five "units," marked by the composer with precise timings.

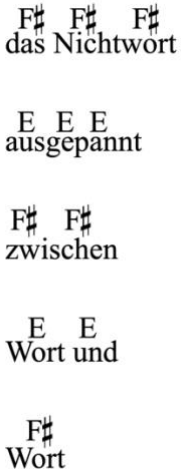


***Figure 2:** The sound events in the vocal part as they correlate with the composition's sub-units.*

The number of sounds in the vocal part is planned within a limited pool: 3, 2 and 1. On the timeline of the piece these numbers appear in descending order, as in a depletion

process. But just as the text is framed by the two occurrences of the same "word" ("*Nichtwort*" and "*Wort*"), so does the vocal part begin and end with F#. Although this may seem to be a "closed form," this is not the case; the first F# resonates with the piano, while the last one is surrounded by silence. Hilde Domin's words, as I interpret them, leave an opening, not a decisive "end of things." So, too, does Eva-Maria Houben's composition (as will be discussed towards the end of this essay).

b. The Piano and vocal combinations

The only duration of which the vocal part consists is one quarter note. In the left hand it is based on two pitches: C (which in the third unit skips down an octave), and B. This allows for four possible intervals between the bass line of the piano and the voice. D#, which appears four times throughout the score, is the sole pitch played by the right hand. And so, just one note appears in the right hand, each interval appears in just one unit, and two pairs of pitches appear—one for the piano left hand and one for the vocal part.

This coherent design is also evident in the contours, both of the vocal part and the piano part; the voice alternates between two adjacent pitches, with a Major-Second interval between them (still without calculating the nuances resulting from displacements in well temperament), and the piano's left hand alternates between two adjacent pitches, a Minor-Second apart.[8] The vocal "space" between the alternating E and F#, superimposed over the piano's left-hand's "space" between the alternating B and C, creates the four possible interval combinations, each appearing just once during one unit of the composition: a perfect fifth (B-F#); a major third (C-E); a tritone (C-F#), and a perfect fourth (B-E). This leaves the last unit of the composition, for just the voice, resounding in an (almost) empty space (see figure 3).

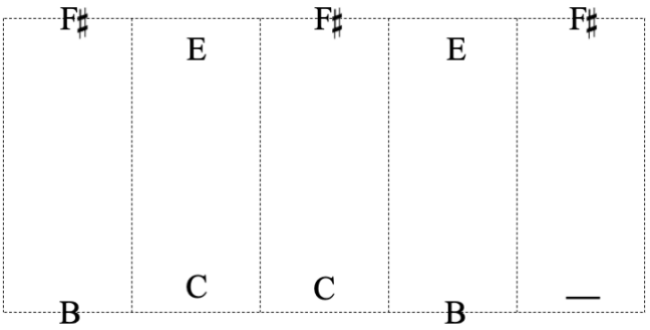


***Figure 3.** Horizontal and vertical musical spaces.*

As mentioned above, the score is arranged in 16 sub-units (each occupying one system in the score). The piano plays only in the first 14, remaining silent in the last two. Each one of these 14 sub-units consists of 14 quarter-notes, whether sounded or silent. The exact distribution of the sounded and silent (but resonant) quarter notes in each sub-unit tends not to repeat itself, although the sounded quarter notes always appear in

[8] The octave-lower C in the third unit is regarded just as an additional depth and overtones to the same pitch.

groups of two or three, while the quarter-rests can appear as single, two or three consecutive rests. At the paradigmatic location of a quarter note in any sub-unit, a quarter note might be played again in the next sub-unit but also might not, being replaced by a silent quarter, and vice-versa. In this respect, and in an overall view of the score, one gets a "kaleidoscopic" impression (figure 4):

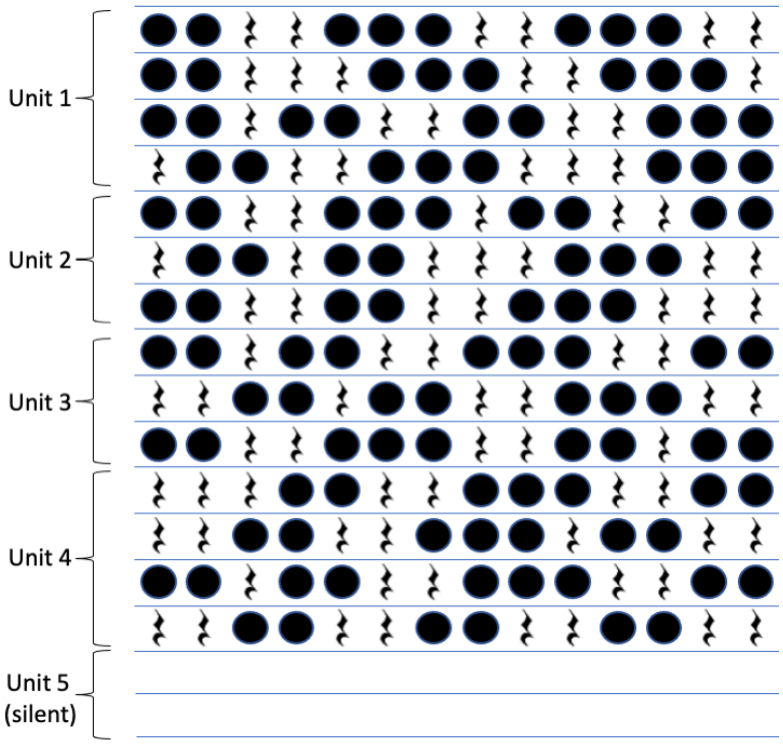


***Figure 4:** Piano left-hand distribution of quarter-note values: 14 quarters in each of* the 14 sub-units.

The first sounding quarter notes in each unit (and sub-unit), whether they appear right at the beginning of the system or after silent quarters, are always two consecutive ones. The first four sub-units (expressed in the score as systems) that are included in the first unit end, each, with three consecutive sounding quarter-notes, regardless of whether they are followed by silent ones or not. Of the next group of three systems, which make for the second unit, two systems end with three consecutive quarter-notes, and one—with two. The third unit comprises, too, three systems, of which two end with two quarter-notes and one—with three. In the fourth unit, which include four systems, all end with a group of two consecutive notes. Looking at the general picture resulting from these system-endings, we can see, again, a process of depletion, ending in the fifth unit, where the piano is completely silent (figure 5):

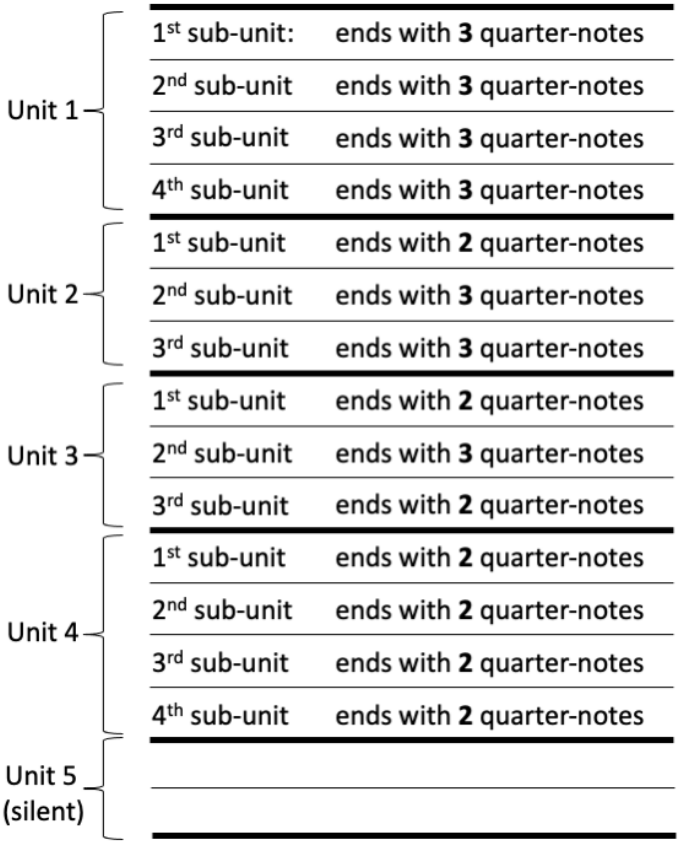


***Figure 5:** The depletion process of the piano sounding quarter-notes at the end of the sub-units.*

c. The "sounding space" between the voice and the piano

Above (in the "Initial listening / Initial impressions" section) the vocal part was described as carrying "exceptionally subtle pitch nuances," deviating from the prevalent equal temperament of the piano. These nuances are marked above each slur of the voice's entries (as a reminder, always on F# or E; see Examples 1 and 2). The markings, in the order they appear, are as follows: $6/H_1$; 5/C; $11/C_1$; $^4/_3$(h), and, again, $6H_1$ (see figure 6). The score instructions specify the explanation to each one of these:

> **$6/H_1$**: 6th partial of H_1, nearly the same pitch as the well-tempered f#^{1} of the piano.
>
> **5/C**: 5th partial of C, somewhat lower (minus 14 cents) than the well-tempered e^1 of the piano.
>
> **$11/C_1$**: 11th partial of C_1, approximately a quarter tone lower (minus 49 cents) than the f#^{1} of the piano.
>
> **$^4/_3$(h)**: a fourth above b, nearly the same pitch as the well-tempered e^1 of the piano.

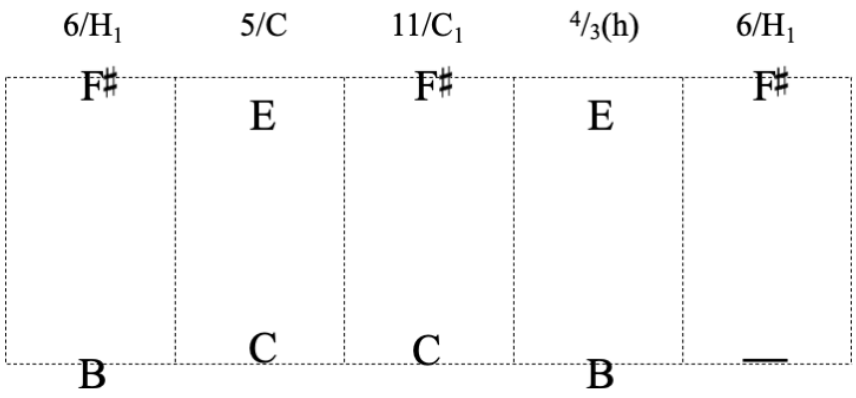


***Figure 6:** The vocal pitch deviations required to be applied to each sung note.*

I do not think that the singer is required (or even expected) to calculate the precise acoustic components as specified on the instructions page. These indications probably expect the singer to "bend" the written pitch in a certain direction, mainly in accordance with her feeling. It seems to me that such "bending" can highlight special, unexpected overtones, not only in the voice itself but also, and perhaps most importantly, in the "sound-space" in which it resonates with the piano. Within this "space," a Perfect Fifth and a Perfect Fourth are not really "perfect," and the Tritone and the Major Third are not as 'clean' as might be expected. As I noted earlier, the work evokes a familiar Major consonance, or even "memories of tonalities" present in the interval C–E and strengthened by the occasional D# in relation to the B) and its anticipation; but it also evokes ambiguity, uncertainty, ambivalence; maybe—if I link it to Hilde Domin's poem—unresolved tension "between and in-between."

d. Construction

The approximately four minutes of this com-position are divided, as already mentioned, into five "units." This is, in fact, *licentia compositorum*, because Hilde Domin's poem is organized in four lines only. While the composer clearly paid attention to the most minute details of the text's structure, she nevertheless disconnected the last word of the poem, "*Wort*," from the fourth line and transferred it, on its own, into an additional "unit." By this step the meaning of *Wort* (Word) was intensified precisely at the heart of the final silence. Given this change, the time proportions among the (estimated) durations of the "units" become even more significant (figure 7):

	Timing as marked in the score	**Duration (in minutes)**
1st unit	0:00–1:00	1:00
2nd unit	1:00–1:45	0:45
3rd unit	1:45–2:30	0:45
4th unit	2:30–3:30	1:00
5th unit	3:30–4:00	0:30

***Figure 7:** A comparison of unit timings.*

The structure of unit durations shows a perfect symmetry within the first four units, in proportions of 4:3:3:4. The additional 30 seconds of almost absolute silence, except for the sole vocal resounding "*Wort*" creates a trail of meaning that breaks the symmetry and with it—the meticulously controlled structure, transporting the composition's significance into a "beyond" where semantics fade into the fullness of silence.

The appearances of the voice in relation to the beats on the piano are consistent throughout the piece: always on the fifth of the fourteen beats of each "sub-unit." Even at the end of the score, when the piano is completely silent, one can locate the last "*Wort*" on the fifth "missing beat." The sung words, therefore, never open a "sub-unit" nor close it; they are always *in-between*, following a careful and unfailing planning.

The building blocks and structural systematic foundations of Houben's *Lyrik* enrich its significance. I see it as a unique artistic achievement, posing a challenge to the attentive and sensitive listener. The meticulously calculated structure may not be discerned at the first; in fact, it may require many repeated listenings, but the result of this effort will be an acquired ability to dive into the hidden depths of this *com-position*'s secrets, deciphering more and more layers of meanings.

Secrets of Reduction, Secrets of Silence, Secrets of Systematicality

1. Definitions, generalizations, possible mapping

It is tempting to classify the reduction in the parameters that make up Eva-Maria Houben's *Lyrik* as "Minimal Music." Michael Nyman contributed to the impressive proliferation of the label "Minimalism" mainly in his book, first published in 1974.[9] K. Robert Schwartz updated definitions and expanded the discussion with new bifurcations,[10] as did Keith Potter in a later book.[11] He maintained the status of the "Big Four," the American "founding fathers" of *Minimalism*: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Phillip Glass, while brilliantly explaining their initial and continually growing differences. Another publication, co-edited by Keith Potter,[12] expanded the discussion about the ramifications of *Minimalist music*. In this book, Virginia Anderson coined an interesting classification to the works of a group of British composers, partners and students of Cornelius Cardew in the late sixties and early seventies: "Minimal Minimalism".[13] An inspection of the compositions by several among these composers, active during this period, including Christopher Hobbs, Howard Skempton, Michael Parsons, and John White, who are mentioned by Anderson—without arguing for a complete resemblance among their styles—may suggest that such a classification could be relevant to Eva-Maria Houben and quite a few of her colleagues. Still,

[9] Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, New York: Schirmer Books, 1974. 2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[10] K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists*, New York: Phaidon, 1996.

[11] Keith Potter, *Four American Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[12] Keith Potter, Kyle Gann, and Pwyll ap Siôn (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Minimalist and Postminimalist Music*, Burlington, VT: Ashagate , 2013.

[13] Virginia Anderson, "Systems and other Minimalism in Britain," in Keith Potter et al., pp 87–106. See pp. 89–91.

considering the variance and differences among those who identify (and are identified) with the label *Minimalism*, and against the background of disagreement over its very definition, I prefer the term *Reductionist Music*. The reason for this choice is that the word *Minimum* alludes to some kind of a precise measurement such as a "zero point" or a "bottom red line" on some given scale, which I feel is inappropriate to describe an artistic activity or an aesthetic experience. The term *reduction*, on the other hand, signifies an attitude and mode of action whose musical results are very diverse, at times contradictory, often resulting in various aesthetic experiences.

The label *Reductionist Music* is definitely appropriate for John Cage's early works for prepared piano or for voice with piano, or his *String Quartet in Four Parts* and *Six Melodies* (1950). This is also true, albeit in a different way, concerning Cage's late "Number Pieces." (1987-1992).[14] The affinity of the *Wandelweiser* musicians to Cage's work is clear and manifested.

Eva-Maria Houben's other compositions for voice and piano, such as her five *Lieder für die Insel*,[15] Antoine Beuger's *Vater unser* for unaccompanied voice, and *Treibgut IV* for Soprano solo by Thomas Stiegler—all *Wandelweiser* members—belong to the same lineage that originated in Cage's early vocal works. The repository of melodic and rhythmic materials used in these works, the range, the texture, the dynamics, are all reduced into a "closed circle," with no extreme internal contrasts or any "development." This reduction establishes what I have described as a sense of "frozen time" (or "almost frozen") and stasis (or quasi stasis). The listener is asked to give up expectations of a "forward" motion and replace it with a very weak directionality, or, in many cases—a complete lack of directionality.

Unlike the "convex curve" structure—part and parcel of Western music for generations, which signifies a development of increased tension throughout the piece towards some sort of "conclusion"—here we have alternative patterns. These patterns vary: they can be likened to a steady wave with very small variations, or to a spiral or "coil," or to a crisscross interlace, or to a straight continuous line, or to a line that is broken from time to time, or to the rotary motion of a kaleidoscope, or to "wandering" among fragments scattered in a "time-space." Walter Zimmermann described Howard Skempton's early works as "*held-still*" or as a "*Moving non-movement*,"[16] terms

[14] To clarify the common traits, as well as the variety of this category, I find it necessary to direct the readers who are unfamiliar with John Cage's compositions to several recordings on YouTube. His writings for prepared piano are among his earliest. For example, *Prelude for Meditation* (1944) and his *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* (1948). His compositions for voice alone, with piano and with other instruments were recorded by Joan La Barbara in the Album *Singing Through*, several of which can be found on YouTube, for example: "Forever and Sunsmell" or "Mirakus." A good performance of Cage's *String Quartet in Four Parts* (1950) is by the Arditti Quartet, with the score, as are his *Six Melodies for Violin and Keyboard* (1950). Cage's "Number Pieces" (1987–1992) is a series of about 40 compositions, each named after the number of musicians needed to perform it. Sometimes a "Number" may have several versions, for various instruments. For One, for example, Cage wrote 13 different compositions. A considerable part of this collection can be listened to here.

[15] For example, No. 3: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myFE_GSK_RA

[16] Walter Zimermann, "Stillgehaltene Musik: Zu Howard Skemptons Kompositionen," originally published in *MusikTexte* No.3, February 1984, pp. 35–37, (accessed December 14, 2022). Michael Parsons refers to Zimermann's article and translates some of his terminology. See Michael Parsons, "Howard Skempton: Chorales, Landscapes and Melodies," *Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music*

suitable for the music of Eva-Maria Houben and of many other composers in her musical environment. There is a long list of compositions in this Cagean and Post-Cagean trend which point to the aesthetic context of Wandelweiser, certainly to Eva-Maria Houben's work.[17]

2. The Secret of Reduction, Secrets of Silence

Reductionism: a wide-ranging yet not exhaustive classification. The uniqueness of Eva-Maria Houben's musical lineage could be described as a cross-breed of three elements: Reduction, "Frozen time," and Silence, but also of four elements: Reduction, "Frozen time," silence, and a meticulously systematic design. A hybrid, in which the first three elements are more prominent, may yield compositions such as John Cage's *Child of Tree* (1975), *Stones* by Christian Wolff (1969), a work to which *Wandelweiser* musicians (and Wolff himself) ascribe special importance, or *Ricefall* by Michael Pisaro (2004).

The historical context of these works is apparent, for example, in the works of the *Fluxus* group.[18] The works of La Monte Young, created throughout the 1960s (the period in which he was associated with the *Fluxus* artists), include verbal scores as well as 'events' which enjoyed wide circulation, such as *Composition 1960 #5*. The score for this "event" indicates that a butterfly (or butterflies) is (are) released in the performance area.[19] The duration of the piece is not limited; it should end when the doors (or windows) are opened and the last butterfly has flown into the distance. The assumption is that a complete silence of those present in this event, and their focused attention, will enable them to hear a gentle flutter of wings. Young's *Composition 1960 #7* is different. The score shows one staff on which is written a perfect fifth, B–F♯, with

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No. 30, Spring 1987, pp. 16–29 (see p. 2) (accessed November 20, 2022). See also Michael Parsons, "The Scratch Orchestra and Visual Arts," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 5–11.

[17] The following list provides some examples of compositions that belong to this trend, all of which can be found on YouTube; the hyperlinks lead to interpretations that I have found particularly convincing: Morton Feldman, *Untitled Sketch* (1950; recreated for glockenspiel) and *Variations* (1951); Christian Wolff, *For Prepared Piano* (1951), *Tilbury* (1969–1970),and *Madame Press Died Last Night at Ninety* (1970); Howard Skempton, *September Song* (1968) and *Snowpiece* (1968); Michael Parsons: *Variations* (1971) and *Luna: Palindromic song No. 2* (1986); Annea Lockwood, *RSCS* (2001); Antoine Beuger (Wandelweiser), *Pour être seule sans reserve* (2009); Jürg Frey (Wandelweiser) *Extended Circular Music No. 2&3* (2014); Eva-Maria Houben (Wandelweiser), *Von da nach da* (2007); Radu Malfatti (Wandelweiser) and Keith Rowe, *Nariyamu* (2010); Anastasis Philippakopoulus (Wandelweiser) *Song for Bass Flute*; Michael Pisaro (Wandelweiser), *A mist is a Collection of Points* (2014); Burkhard Schlothauer (Wandelweiser), *Events in Five Parts—#3.2* (2017); Kunsu Shim, *54 Things for Piano Solo No. 2* (2007); Luiz Henrique Yudo, *The Donald Judd Harmonies (extract)* (2016); Adrián Demoč, *Modré Kvety* (2018); John Lely, *The Harmonics of Real Strings* (2014); G. Douglas Barrett, *Two Voices*; Linda Catlin Smith, *Folkestone* (extract, 1999); Catherine Lamb, *Prisma Interius VIII* (2018).

[18] About the *Fluxus* group see, for example: Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, University of California Press, 2002; Ken Friedman, *Forty Years of Fluxus* (2002) and *Fluxus Virus 1962–1992*, Galerie Schuppenhauer, Koln, 1992; Liz Kotz, *Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event-Score*, in October Files, 2011, pp. 101–114; Nyman, *Experimental Music…* (1999) pp. 72–88.

[19] moma.org/collection/works/127627

no specific duration except for the instruction "to be held for a long time."[20] Such a steady sound inevitably evokes overtones (real or imagined by the listener), and in certain interpretations where a non-tempered tuning is used, other overtones may be heard. The result depends on the performing instrument (or instruments), the duration of the performance, and the space in which it is performed.[21]

In the sense that these works expand the scope of what is music, they—paradoxically perhaps—contradict the principle of *Reduction*. May I consider it as a complementary / dialectic feature. But of course, it is the meticulously systematic design component that renders certain compositions a clearer pertinence to this principle. For example, *Ear Piece* by Pauline Oliveros (1998) shifts the emphasis from the conventional composer-performer-listener triangle to the reader's personal, exclusive choice, following a verbal score. The readers of this score may direct their attention to a state of silence; to careful listening; to deliberation, or to a decision: "Am I hearing music?"[22]

Another example is Christopher Hobbs's *The Castle Keep* (1970) for whispering voices.[23] The text is based on one sentence from Kafka's *The Castle*: "The murmurous silence of the Castle Keep." The sentence is disassembled and reconstituted with various combinations, whispered by two to ten performers, who are asked to simultaneously whisper the different versions (all written in the score) without coordinating tempo or rhythm, creating, for about two minutes, a heterophony of whispered voices. The composer emphasizes: "The text is whispered, very distinctly, but not urgently. The whisper must be voiceless—*not* a low murmur. (…) The voices are to be amplified to a moderate level—not loud."

It is possible that *The Castle Keep* is nothing but an image or an aspiration for solitude in the heart of silence, perhaps for closure and defense against the "outside." Perhaps its embodiment in such a composition could "say" something—returning to the Hilde Domin's poem—about the secrets of the "non-word": *das Nichtwort*, stretched between words (and, maybe, about the disappearance of words among the "non-words, too"?)

Antoine Beuger's work, *Keine fernen mehr* is composed for one person, softly whistling short melodic fragments between prolonged silences. This composition can be described using a biblical expression: "*A sound of thin silence*."[24] It is also a radical

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[20] moma.org/collection/works/127629. See also John Lely and James Saunders, *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Scores*, New York: Bloomsbury Academics, 2012, pp. 424–425.

[21] Listen and watch various interpretations of Young's *Composition 1960 #7* on YouTube. It is worthwhile comparing them to one another.

[22] The verbal score of Oliveros's *Ear Piece* can be seen in Lely and Saunders (2012), p. 289, or online at kim-cohen.com/Assets/CourseAssets/Texts/Oliveros_Ear%20Piece%20(1998).PDF. For her TED talk on the difference between hearing and listening, see youtube.com/watch?v=_QHfOuRrJB8 .

[23] Hobbs's score can be seen at the Experimental Music Catalogue (EMC): experimentalmusic.co.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Hobbs-Word-Pieces.pdf, p. 24.

[24] Kings 1, 19:12. The above is an accurate literal translation of the original Hebrew [קול דממה דקה]. Translations to English vary. For example, in the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) it appears as "a quiet, subdued voice"; in the International Standard Version (ISV) it appears as "the sound of a gentle whisper", and in the New King James Version (NKJV) a still small voice. See https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Kings+19. (editor's note).

musical reduction, expressing a unique inward convergence (Beuger recorded himself performing this work.)

Finally, John Cage's famous "Silent Piece" (1952), *4′33″*, is an "ultra-reduction" that has become an iconic milestone. Michael Pisaro attests to its importance:

> *4′ 33″* was seen not as a joke or a Zen Koan or a philosophical statement: it was heard as music. It was also viewed as unfinished work in the best sense: it created new possibilities for the combination (and understanding) of sound and silence.[25]

There is, however, another way to understand this work. In 1948 Cage spoke about a new idea: a "Silent Prayer." A few years later he implemented a plan similar, but not identical, to *4'33"*. The original title, which he subsequently relinquished, suggests an intention that is not always noticed: Cage did not only aspire to prove the existence of "nothingness" (absence as a "presence"), nor just to use silence as musical raw material, valid as sound, but to create a situation in which the listener becomes open to sensual perception, whose meaning is also spiritual. He explained it this way: "It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower."[26]

Douglas Kahn places Cage's original intentions, including the title he gave to the planned composition, within the broader context of Christian thought and Zen Buddhism: being silent, and silence, as states of prayer and as a higher level of human existence and insight.[27] Cage became acquainted with this philosophy mainly by reading Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945). During those years he also worked on his cycle of *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, as a general, albeit not necessarily specific, expression of the nine "*Razas*" described in Indian traditions: types of mindsets that the performing arts may express and evoke in those who perceive them: love, mirth, sadness, anger, energy, fear, disgust, amazement, and finally—tranquility. In Cage's *Sixteen Dances* (1950–51) the connection with the *Razas* is more specific and pronounced.[28] Cage referred to the *Razas* again in an article he published in 1957.[29] In a lecture given in 1966 he explained the goals of music according to the Indian traditions that he found acceptable: "… to quiet the mind thus making it susceptible to divine influences."[30] In this aspect, too, the spiritual drive of Eva-Maria

[25] See note 3, above. (Pisaro, *Wandelweiser*); see also Barrett's "The Silent Network…", p. 456.
[26] John Cage, "A Composer's Confession": an address given before the National Inter-Collegiate Arts Conference, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, February 28, 1948. See also James Pritchett, "*Silent Prayer*, the first silent piece"; Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4′33″*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 125–127.
[27] Douglas Kahn, "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 556–598. See also Gann, *No Such Thing…* (2010), pp. 134–38.
[28] See, for example, David W. Patterson, "The Picture that is not in the Colors: Cage, Coomaraswamy, and the Impact of India," in *John Cage: Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933–1950*, edited by David W. Patterson, (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 177–215 (on *Sixteen Dances* see pp.204 –205).
[29] "2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance," in *Silence: Lectures & Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press) 1961. (London: Marion Boyardm, 1986), pp. 96–97.
[30] Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.) *John Cage*, (New York: Praeger), 1970, pp.76 -77

Houben and several of her colleagues may be interpreted as continuing the ideological tradition of Cage, though not a reconstruction or an imitation, nor necessarily a reference to the same sources of inspiration.[31]

3. Systematicality and its Secrets

Eva-Maria Houben, in her meticulously planned structure of *Lyrik*, may have directed the sensitive listener to the significance and to the assertion of Domin's poem that is incorporated in it. In an important article that James Saunders dedicated to the *Wandelweiser* composers in 2011, he focused on the systematic principles which characterize the compositions created by them, an aspect that has not previously been identified and analyzed in detail.[32] I have tried, in the section devoted the analysis of Houben's score, to shed some light on other aspects of this systematicality. After all, Cage's *4'33"*, with all its "airiness" and the philosophical charge it carries—and without contradicting these two—also embodies a precedent that established a typically calculated structure. *4'33"* has three movements, bounded by predetermined durations that are measured in minutes and seconds: 30"—2'23"—1'40".[33]

This is not the first of Cage's works to rely on calculated systems. Series of numbers and the relationships among them—described by Cage as "rhythmic structures" or "time structures"—are at the basis of compositions such as the earlier *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano.[34] In this respect, Cage's own words about structure, taken from his "Lecture on Nothing" (1959), are telling:

That music is simple to make comes from one's willingness to ac–
cept the limitations of structure. Structure is
simple be–cause it can be thought out, figured out,
measured . It is a discipline which,
accepted, in return accepts whatever , even those
rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses,
train us to make what we make . How could I

***Figure 8**: John Cage's "Lecture on Nothing" (1959). Excerpt, as originally printed.*[35]

"The Number Pieces", composed by Cage in his later years (1987–1992), were also based on careful planning of time and the timing, albeit in a different way: the duration of each "unit" between "time brackets" gives the performers more room for maneuver

[31] See Nicholas Melia, "*Stille Musik*—Wandelweiser and the Ontological Voices of Silence", *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 30, No. 6, December 2011, pp. 471–495.
[32] James Saunders, "Testing the Consequences—Multipart Series in the Work of the Wandelweiser Composers," *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 30, No. 6, December 2011, pp. 497–524.
[33] On the many transmutations of this composition, the changes in its planning and the creative process involved, see James Pritchett, "Did John Cage Regret Writing 4'33"?" Rosewhitemusic.com, September 17th, 2018.
[34] Chadwick Jenkins, "Structure vs. Form in The Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano," in Patterson, *John Cage…* (2002), pp. 239–261. See also Paul van Emmerik, "An Imaginary Grid: Rhythmic Structure in Cage's Music up to circa 1950," in Patterson, *John Cage…* (2002), pp. 217–239.
[35] See in *Silence…* ([1961] 1986), pp. 109–126. The lecture was printed first in the 1959 issue of *Incontri musicali: Quaderni internazionali di musica contemporanea* that was founded by Luciano Berio and published in Milan by Edizioni Suvini Zerboni. Cage's lecture is printed in *Silence…* in the same format as the original, where the text is distributed over the page in a special manner; see p. 111 for the exact excerpt. https://seansturm.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/john-cage-lecture-on-nothing.pdf.

than do Cage's early works.[36] Branden W. Joseph identified a characteristic trait in Cage's aesthetic principles that seems to me not only useful, but also beautiful: "Architecture of Silence."[37] This hallmark is also relevant to many compositions of the Cagean and Post-Cagean "dynasty."

The number and variety of means that serve such an architecture in Cage's own compositions or in these of other composers who followed him in one way or another, is overwhelming. it includes—but not limited to—numerical series, tables that composers invent for each one of their works, an "independent" numerical arrangement (such as "chance operations," tossing a coin or a dice, or—as Cage did—using the *I Ching*), or magic squares; they sometimes rely on a visual object, on formal elements of a text, disassembled and reassembled in a calculated way, or on a mathematical "Golden Section." There is also an affinity and close connection between some composers in Cornelius Cardew's circle, who identified their work as *System Music*, and the calculating and calculated Constructivist Movement, current in the art of those years, as is pointed out by Virginia Anderson and Michael Parsons.[38]

4. Hence - - -

Eva-Maria Houben's *Lyrik* , unlike some other pieces to which I refer in my article, is not com-posed as "pure silence," interrupted by separate sounds or fragments. Silence is present here in another way. The piece invites some sort of inner stillness through which the listener may hear the music not as a dense mass of sounds that continues to the end of the fourth "unit," but as a delicate texture that is nuanced, again and again, by disappearances. The composer, not coincidentally, chose the piano for this com-position, but deliberately not following any "pianistic" tradition. She explains:

> The sound of the piano decays. It cannot be sustained (…) It appears by disappearing; starting to disappear just after the attack. In disappearing it begins to live, to change (…) There seems to be no end to disappearance.[39]

Every finger pressure of a piano key creates just one short-lived presence with its full sound, quick decay, and then—disappearance, almost unnoticed as it echoes toward the next sound appearance. It is not coincidental that this specific attribute of this com-position is planned according to the same meticulous system upon which the whole of

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[36] See Drake Anderson's article that deals with one of these works in detail: "What can they have to do with one another?": Approaches to Analysis and Performance in John Cage's *Four*," *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 23 No.4, 2017

[37] Branden W. Joseph, "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," *October*, Vol. 81, (Summer, 1997), pp. 80–104. This article is written from the point of view of an architect, while discussing the dissimilarities between Cage's positions and certain commentators of contemporary art and new ideas in architecture. The article expands on Adorno's criticism of Cage's aesthetics. While not directly related to the subject discussed here, I find its title very much to the point. See also: Branden W. Joseph, Experimentations: *John Cage in Music, Art, and Architecture*, New York :Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

[38] See Virginia Anderson, "Systems…" (2013); Michael Parsons, "The Scratch Orchestra and Visual Arts," *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 11, 2001, pp. 5–11; Walter Zimmermann, "Stillgehaltene Musik…" (1984), see note 16.

[39] Houben, "Presence-Silence-Disappearance…" (2010)

it is structured. The pedal is sustained throughout until the end of the first "unit," and then pressed again, to stop only at the end of the third (not the second) "unit." It is then renewed, and finally lifted after the last note of the fourth "unit." Only three times, throughout *Lyrik*, does the sound stop into complete silence: at the end of the first, third and fourth "units"; the numbers, again, are 1, 3, and 4.

Often—too often—one would like to listen to music which is, in essence, stillness and silence (or, as Eva-Maria Houben writes in her score of *Together on the Way* [2020]: "*sostenuto perdendo*,") as an invitation to sheer introversion, relaxation for its own sake, or to "meditation" in its popular sense. Further, one might think that such a methodically calculated system contradicts the spiritual potential of stillness. *Lyrik* may lead us to a totally different perception of silence and system. First, thinking of Antoine Beuger's *Laments* (consisting of—if I may describe them this way—*Sighs and Silence*s). This music is poignant, not only as a very personal expression but also as a statement about the actual global situation. In the liner notes to his CD, the composer writes:

> but what about lament? mourning? grief?
>
> yes it is right to feel sad about terrible things
> and when we express this sadness
> in singing, for example or in fractured silence,
> it arouses our powers (…)

It is clear that the meaning and ramifications of silence and stillness are varied among *Wandelweiser* composers; even in the entirety of Beuger's own compositions. These musicians share aesthetic principles and aims, not necessarily one style or one, exclusive interpretation of stillness and silence. Eva-Maria Houben, in her own way, would stress mainly "(…) the mystery of the vertical line right into eternity."[40]

Hilde Domin, too, could probably add her comments, quoted from her poem *Herbszeitlosen*:

> Für uns, die stets unterwegs sind
> — lebenslängliche Reise,
> wie zwischen Planeten —
> nach einem neuen Beginn.[41]

But what is the role of systematical planning in all this? How come it does not contradict the spiritual, transcendental dimensions of *Lyrik* (and of several other compositions in the same vein), but, on the contrary, actually expands and strengthens their meaning?

[40] Eva-Maria Houben, personal communication by e-mail (December 14, 2021)

[41] Hilde Domin, *Gesammelte Gedichte*, (Frankfurt-am-Main: S.Fischer Verlag, 1987). New Edition Frankfurt-am-Main: Hrsg. von Nikola Herweg und Melanie Reinhold, p. 142. A translation to English by Peter Lach-Newinsky: "For us who are always on the move / — life-long journey / as if between planets — / searching for a new beginning." See https://peterln.wordpress.com/2020/04/05/hilde-domin-three-poems/

It seems that there is no clear answer that an analysis, specification of elements or unadulterated conclusions may provide. I prefer to leave the question unanswered, feeling that, in a sense, such compositions are, and should remain, riddles. Each listener may offer a different answer. How, for instance, could one take refuge under "technical" explanations, or wish to understand the mystery of a traditional *Haiku*—which is open to the deep "inside" as well as to the infinite "outside" with its three short lines, committed to the structure of five, seven, and five syllables? Walter Zimmermann points to the fluctuation in *Limbo* and hanging to an anchor (*Verankerung*) coexisting in the same musical pieces.[42] I could not find any better description of the potential interaction of introversion, quiet, openness toward the infinite, and a strictly calculated architecture than in Avraham Shlonsky, the Israeli poet's words (loosely translated by me). In the poem "The Walls of my Home" he wrote: "Only he who silences his noises, to hear real stillness, hears everything and everyone." [43] And yet, in another poem, "While Awake," Shlonsky writes: "I remember the secret of those who work on gravel (…) lock and rein; that is the masterwork". It is worthwhile mentioning that the Hebrew archaic notion used by Shlonsky as an equivalent of "masterwork" (*M'lechet machshevet*) alludes to a thoughtful**,** pre-planned creation**.**[44]

[42] Walter Zimermann, "Stillgehaltene Musik…", p. 2.

[43] אברהם שלונסקי, "כָּתְלֵי בֵּיתִי", בתוך **שירים** כרך ה', ספריית פועלים, 1971: "רַק הַמַּחֲרִישׁ הֲמֻלּוֹתָיו לִשְׁמוֹעַ הַדְּמָמָה/ שׁוֹמֵעַ אֶת הַכֹּל וְאֶת כֻּלָּם.

[44] אברהם שלונסקי, "בְּהָקִיץ" ב', מתוך **שירים מִסֵּפר האֵנָך**, ספריית פועלים, 1971: "זָכַרְתִּי סוֹד מְחַצְצִים (...) : כָּלוֹא וּבָלוֹם, – כִּי מְלֶאכֶת-מַחשֶׁבֶת".