

## Interpreting Compositional Process in Wolfgang Rihm's *Chiffre* Cycle

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In Rihm's output the *Chiffre* works occupy a pivotal position. Despite some prefiguring in certain earlier works, such as the last movement of the fourth quartet, these are works which, as he has said, embody a conscious search for a musical language, a means of expression ('*Die Stücke ... sind Versuche, eine Musiksprache zu finden*').<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to try to define key elements of the compositional process which Rihm developed through the *Chiffre* works.

### The *Chiffre* works: introduction

The *Chiffre* cycle comprises seven works with that title written between 1983 and 1985, and an eighth added in 1988. Related to the cycle is *Bild* (1984), which Rihm describes as a '*self-standing composition in the orbit of the Chiffre cycle*'<sup>2</sup> and it is included in the following discussion on account of its relationship to *Chiffre* VI in particular. Other compositions which may also be related to the cycle are *Fusées* (1984) and *Gebild* (1982–3) which includes, like *Bild*, a part for high trumpet. *Gebild* was extended in 1997 with a more substantive part for the trumpet. There was an abortive beginning to a work in this series given the title *Tonspur*, but only six bars were written and it is likely that this work became *Bild*: not *Spur* as might be expected.<sup>3</sup>

In order to give some sense of the compositional development taking place in this series of works, the following article is in two parts. The first part sets out an essential grammar for understanding Rihm's *Chiffre* works, while the second part uses this grammar to develop an analytical understanding of *Chiffre* VI and to explore relationships with other works in the cycle. The first part deals primarily with the founding works, *Chiffre* and *Chiffre* II, because this is where Rihm's compositional processes for the cycle were established. Less attention is given to *Chiffre* III–V since one of Rihm's guiding principles – that 'a sound transforms its predecessor'<sup>4</sup> – indicates that later works in the cycle can only be understood in

<sup>1</sup> Rihm, *Ausgesprochen*, Vol. II, 343.

<sup>2</sup> Rihm, *Ausgesprochen*, vol. II, 335. In 2004 Rihm made a rearrangement (*Bearbeitung*) of *Chiffre* [I] under the title *Nach-Schrift* (*eine Chiffre*). This is part of the process of revisiting works – effectively 'repainting them' – which has connections with his understanding of music as an art form related to the visual arts. However, further discussion of this idea lies outside the scope of the present article.

<sup>3</sup> *Spur* ('track' or 'trace') is an orchestral piece, or rather, an *orchestra-sketch*, written in 1984–85 but apparently unrelated to the *Chiffre* cycle.

<sup>4</sup> '*Ein Klang, der einem anderen Klang zeitlich folgt, formt seinen Vorgänger wirklich um*' ('A sound, which temporally follows another sound, really transforms its predecessor') from 'Mutation (Exkurse)', in, Rihm, *Ausgesprochen*, Vol. I, p. 159.