



Erik Büniger, b. 1976, Berlin resident

Erik Büniger may have followed a traditional education in composition, including at the Stockholm Royal College of Music, but he is hardly a run-of-the-mill composer. His works have increasingly come to approach contemporary conceptual art, but his combination of sound and visual is also linked to literary storytelling.

Like many composers, artists and writers before him, Büniger continually uses the material of others, which he then twists and turns, and creates alternate stories. Different timelines are superposed, past worlds and present understandings. Unlike the Haydn variations of Johannes Brahms or György Kurtág's comments to works by Beethoven, Bach and Schumann, say, Büniger's work is open to completely different societal areas.

One good example is the installation *Moonstruck*, which was shown at Stockholm's Kulturhuset in February of 2008, which starts off with Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Kurtág also alluded to this work, in *Double Concert op. 27:2* (the same opus number as the Beethoven sonata), but Büniger lets Beethoven's tones become part of a much broader cultural canvas.

One of the ways he does this is by using a clip from a Hollywood film in which Gary Oldman plays the part of the deaf composer, leaning towards the grand piano in order to hear an inkling of his own music. In Erik Büniger's installation, these both comical and tragic image, which are constantly looped, become a commentary to a culture that tries to listen to its own history but only hears disturbances and din. It is Beethoven as artefact, kitsch phenomenon, decoration. But it is also a gateway to a doppelganger world, the horror dimension of established history.

Erik Büniger has also used a completely different kind of material as a starting-point, for instance one bar of the Velvet Underground track *Heroin*, that is increasingly elongated until it finally breaks up into white noise (*Variations on a Theme by Lou Reed*); a few passages from the refrain of KC and the Sunshine's disco hit *That's the Way I Like It* are chopped up into a kind of fragmentary memorial art (*Variations on a Theme by Casey & Finch*); Hollywood actors' descriptions of other people cut together so that it sounds as though they were all describing a religious leader, some kind of New Age guru (the video piece *Gospels*); a specially written trumpet tune that resounds four times a day in the Polish mining town Bytom, which Büniger asks various residents to sing to him.

This ready-made procedure is partly reminiscent of the work of remix artists like Christian Marclay and John Oswald, but Erik Büniger moves in softer, more melancholy territory. Authors like Philip K. Dick and Jorge Luis Borges are decisive sources of inspiration, as is the French artist Pierre Huyghe, but the most important thing about Büniger's work is not the art or literature context but the transformation that takes place in the specific works. What may seem trivial and inconsequential suddenly becomes the stuff of dreams.

This is made clear in the work *Dark Was the Night Cold Was the Ground*, a 2006 sound and light installation created for the *Treasures* exhibition, which was shown in a cellar under the old

Königstadt brewery in central Berlin. Three curators, Robert Wilson, Rebecca Horn and Janet Cardiff, were tasked to each choose a younger artist who would work with this space specifically, and Cardiff chose Erik Bünger. He had been thinking of using a 1927 gospel recording of the blind blues singer Blind Willie Johnson, *Dark Was the Night Cold Was the Ground*, which he had found long ago on an anthology record at a Stockholm flea market.

The atmospherically charged space, which had previously been used by the Nazis while creating the V2 bomb and the STASI secret service, and which after the Wall came down became the venue for rave parties and other underground activities, lent entirely new dimensions to the blind blues singer's recording, in which he does not actually use words, but sounds that invoke the higher powers. Bünger had three vinyl records made with the same recording. He screwed small light bulbs to the pickup arms of three vinyl players, which became the only light source in the pitch black space. The light from the bulbs reacted to the speed of the records. When the records turned faster, the room was lit up. The slower they went, they seemed to die out and the light almost completely went. What materialised was the spectral dimension of both Blind Willie Johnson's recording and that which had taken place there before.

So sound art enters a no-man's-land reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's horror stories, not least *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, with its speculation on the possibility of erasing the boundary between life and death. But like most things with Erik Bünger, it is only one bit of source material.

