

## Richter, the Enigma

*What is the limit of snow?*

Not a note of music in his parent's house. An apprenticeship in silence.

*The Fourth Violin Concerto* (1984) has a cadenza which is to be seriously mimed by the soloist without making a sound. A tribute to the house of his birth.

He wore those fingerless gloves even as a toddler, before he became anything like a musical prodigy.

He remains to this day (15 October 1999) almost totally unknown outside of musical circles.

The dissonant Soviet avant-garde persona he loved to put on at parties. Richter, born in that less than restless New Jersey suburb, Upper Montclair, to American parents and given the unlikely name: Gustave Richter.

Once in high school Richter and I sitting on the curb, happily singing Frank Zappa songs. *Call Any Vegetable*, *Saint Alphonzo's Pancake Breakfast*, etc.

Celebrating Edgard Varèse Day. We were despised by the other students. Of course.

Of course we were.

*Density 21.5* performed in its entirety.

Composed for his graduation from the Julliard School of Music: *Uncle Pehrs's Life in Music*. 1978.

Richter walking through snow and Schoenberg.



Richter walking through the kind of snow you just don't see any more. Into music.

B A C H (B flat) The letters of Bach's name appearing as a motif in much of his work.

"History is plundered, irony is rampant, pastiche becomes the only coherence."

The critic says, "He takes the style that mocks the very idea of genius and turns it into an affirmation of genius."

He is a master of modern melancholy and sarcasm. Yes he is.

Irony is a temptation, never a solution.

"Everything which causes disharmony in the world, all that is monstrous, inexplicable, and dreadful is an intrinsic part of the world's order. Disharmony and cacophony 'the world's evil' is knit into what is harmonious and beautiful." Richter in an interview last year.

His last piece: *For the Two Million Armenian Martyrs*.

What Richter loved:  
the limits of perpetual snow.  
Uncle Pehrs.

What concerned him was music, purely music and nothing else, yet there he is adjusting the shutter.

*Hello!*

Jean Sibelius's Uncle Pehrs hanging above his desk to this day.

A birthday party in Spain, that sort of documentation: I, tipsy, hope to find him in the frame, champagne. The neck cut off with a knife. Richter grinning.

No one is commissioning Richter for anything. Money is, as always, a problem. Richter's assistant is despondent, etc. We walk around Central Park. Richter doing a lot of shrugging.



“ . . . the profound and the absurd . . . is the tangible personal struggle that appears embedded in each piece.” That’s my friend Richter all right.

Richter in motion – where are you going?

The little super 8 I bought him as a gift. He aims it in every which direction. We both lament that we do not have the temperament to participate in what is indisputably the most important art form of the century. *You’ve got to admit . . .*

It doesn’t stop him from trying . . . in his spare time. Because, as he likes to explain to me, composers have a lot of spare time.

Set up on a tripod. 25 reels of Richter exist.

*Happy New Year!*

The Age of Discovery. The urge to solve the problem of recreating life in motion was tremendous. The motion picture was truly a child of its time. It was one of many problems solved, concepts realized, and inventions perfected.

Music for film: the sound of one woman weeping. Accompanied by a shimmering chorus of boys.

Richter and I sit and ponder Antonioni’s *Eclipse*. 58 shots that last 7 minutes each. Richter says we are going to play these numbers in the lottery and that we are going to be rich. And we will publish all my unpublishable novels as they are written and we will have performed in the great concert halls for the first time anywhere in this order 1) *Adventures in a Perambulator* 2) *For Blanca and Ulrich Love on the Occasion of the Fall of the Berlin Wall* 3) *For Irina Wherever You May Be* 4) *Uncle Pehrs’s Life in Music* 5) *One Chance in a Million* 6) *That Which Does Not Kill Me, Makes Me Stronger* 7) *Tango For Endurance Dancers* 8) *Themes Heard on the Evening of Good Friday: for the Two Million Armenian Martyrs* 9) *The White Island* 10) etc.

From *The White Island* notebook, the story of August Linder, attempting to sail around the world in a hot-air balloon – an opera-in-progress:



*"17 September: Sited land for the first time yet landing is out of the question – the whole island seems a block of ice."*

Reel 7 – Richter and his page-turner. The score illuminated by a single lamp – all else is darkness.

*"Dear Father, the balloon is now inflated. I feel as if . . ."* Richter looks to the sky.

I scribble stanzas on the back of an airmail envelope. Waving to him.

His mother: *This is the first grief you have brought me August.*

What is the weight of a human life high above the earth in a hot-air balloon?

Richter – his footprints in snow. His favorite way to compose.

*"Uncannily he can change the character of the music from one moment to another. There is absolutely no gap – as if he had improvised on the spot."*

B A C H – a light in the dark.

His life-long idol Alfred Schnittke. *Another stroke, Richter says glumly.*

One middle of the night – *Is Frank Zappa really dead?* Richter, he is as far as I know, still dead. In a manner of speaking of course. Yes, yes, he mutters and hangs up.

*If there is one chance in a million (to be sung) then it must be Alfred Schnittke's! If there is one chance . . .*

How he goes from one thing to the next without transition.

In Garni two million fruit trees planted for the two million Armenian martyrs. A sacred forest. Richter, makes a detour on the way to

Reel 17: The limits of snow, language, music, human sorrow. The newly fallen



motion and the waning century and Richter waving from the perpetual snow.

*There is too much sorrow. Richter in motion.*

Richter in sound.

Awaiting to this day its American premiere.

*Tango for Endurance Dancers* — composed in the early '80s. An attempt on my part to convince the Ramapo High School Reunion Committee into a kind of Richter marathon. Received this afternoon a one-sentence response: "You have got to be kidding."

*Collected Songs Where Every Verse is Filled with Grief.*

I see him still climbing up, up into that mountain with his metal box of 26 reels, into the music.

*Triads*, he said calmly when asked over cocktails what — *triads*, at the top of their register.

Meditations at 33,000 feet. Richter old and grizzled far beyond his years, slumped in his black coat looks out the window and marvels.

*The Age of Discovery*. By five months many babies have both the head-up and bottom-up position perfected but cannot put the two together so as to be on hands and knees. They therefore alternate the two, and look as if they were seesawing — first one end up and the other down and then the other up. By this stage a true crawl with the tummy clear of the floor is very unusual though quite a lot of babies will make some progress across the floor as they seesaw.

Reels 10-26: Richter in motion. That scarf blowing around his head.

*Come on baby, do the locomotion*, he sang once to me from Basel. Was it Basel? And then began to weep.



He was my best friend, but I barely knew him.

Richter on tiptoe: *I ask you, what is the limit of snow?*

The weight of 26 reels of film is surprisingly light. They disappeared with Richter. I can hardly bear to think about it.

Yes, the evidence. The proof that you are, or are not.

*I will marry a woman named Irina* he said on one of those 26 reels.

*I will have children and write them music and never, never leave the house again.*

In my head this well-behaved fictive Richter. Reclusive, OK, but safe. Safe, at any rate.

I once heard someone found a frame of reel 17 preserved in snow in which it appears my friend, he is waving, his arm lifted, a sustained ascending scale, an instant of pure Richter. A perfect instant of Richter, lost, then found, then lost again.

A little bit of Richter is sent back. Lifting that little bit of Richter, I wonder, what is the weight of a human life?

Sprinkled around the potted plant. The hum of him. The little bit of Richter left.

Who Richter was.

Photography is born: the permanent recording of reality. So they say. So they say.

What can be known.

What can be loved (a part of speech, a diminished seventh, the way the ocean . . . the eye flickering as the day opens and the world begins again) *but never known.*

A star glide, the elison of lives, an instant in time, there: preserved by the yearbook photographer: Richter and I singing on a curb,



least likely to succeed, most despised. *Let's make the water turn black.*  
Heard over the freeze frame.

The moment. Eluding the many possible ways to memorialize it.

I might call this little ditty "Richter, the enigma." Because calling is what we seem to do. There is a silliness to us.

He took with him the 26 reels. The evidence we might say.

Richter in reel 3 stumbling toward the lens in silence. Not quite silence. From the back of the room, the projector's whir.

Reel 3:

Richter, swimming. Doing a bit of underwater photography. Singing at below sea level.

Reel 4:

Ice fishing.

Reel 24:

Richter and Irina and baby Alfred . . .

Oh why tonight all these fictive Richters mixing up the so-called real one? What is the point? What is the use?

(ev' i d ns) n. 1. ground for belief; that which lends to prove or disprove something; proof. 2. something that makes evident; an indication or sign. 3. *Law.* data presented in a court or jury of the facts which may include . . .

4. *in evidence*, plainly visible, conspicuous: *the first signs of spring are in evidence.*

I barely knew him. He aims his little Polaroid at the still obscured

Intent on photographing Mount Ararat, and other impossible projects. A photographic essay provisionally titled: *Faith.*

From the blur after 99 days, emerges the subject.

He goes back to work.



He was my friend, Richter, but now he is gone. His footprints in the snow. The first signs of spring are in evidence. All that's left is the sound.

*for G. R. 1955-1999*