

# Dépons Cycle

Music Theater, 1991–93

## DER FALL LEIERMANN

Music Theater for One Actor on a Sonic Set, 1991

*Der Fall Leiermann*<sup>1</sup> was originally conceived as a small-scale music-theater piece but later integrated into two larger works: *Dépons/Der Fall* (1992) and *Der Fall/Dépons* (1993). *Der Fall Leiermann* is written for a solo performer sitting on a chair, spotlit but otherwise surrounded by darkness. He plays a so-called “crank recorder.” The sonic set consists of a four-track mix of ambient sounds.

The solo performer plays the part of Franz Schubert in his role as the *Leiermann* – named after the song “Der Leiermann” from Schubert’s Lieder cycle *Winterreise*. A *Leier* is a street organ, and a *Leiermann* is an organ grinder, one who tries to make some money by playing a barrel organ hanging from his neck, often with a small monkey sitting on his shoulder. The crank recorder used in *Der Fall Leiermann* consists of the remnants of a 1960s Webcor tape recorder stripped of nearly all its innards, including the motor. The only thing left is the bare deck, with spools and a few buttons. The tape transport is hand-powered. The tape recorder is fitted with an old coffee-grinder handle, which explicitly refers to the crank of the street organ. The instrument sits in the performer’s lap.

It is a strenuous, laborious task for the player to turn the crank evenly enough to reproduce the Schubert song more or less in tune. This is what the performance is about: the impossibility of making music while knowing that death is slowly but surely approaching. Schubert’s song expresses this impossibility, and having to work the crank recorder adds an extra handicap.

### Heiße Tränen

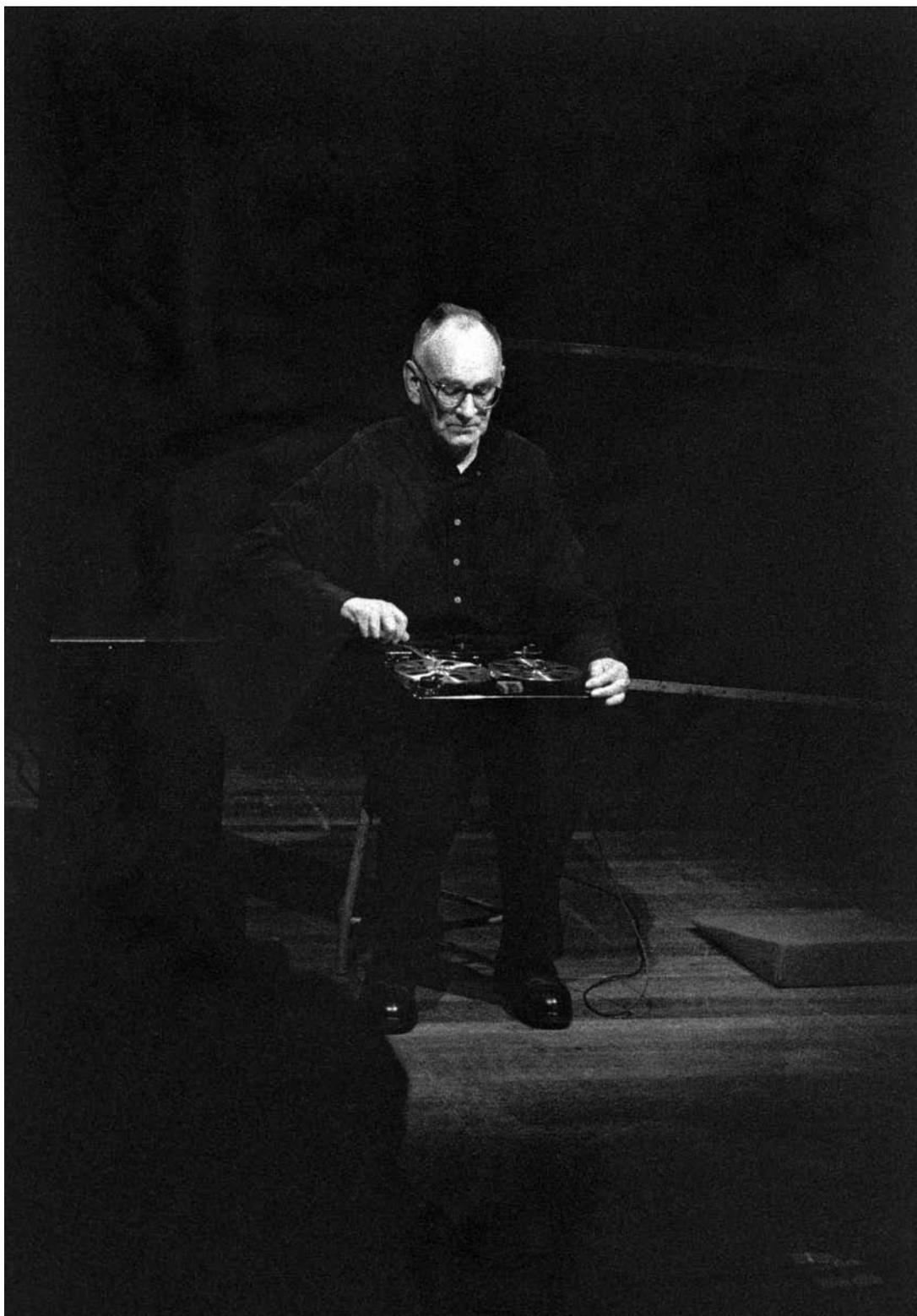
*Der Fall Leiermann* is composed of three parts that flow seamlessly into one another. All three are based on the end of the television film *Mit meinen heißen Tränen*, also known

as *Notturmo* (1986), by the Austrian movie director Fritz Lehner. This particular fragment depicts the last years of Franz Schubert’s life. Schubert is being chased by Death, in the guise of an invalid tramp dragging himself along on a pedalless wooden bicycle, a kind of walker. When the Schubert character walks down a long flight of steep stone steps to the courtyard of an old Viennese tenement, the tramp has difficulty following. Once he is down the steps, Schubert waits with his back to them until the tramp has managed the dangerous descent with his bicycle. Schubert is challenging Death to come and catch him. In *Der Fall Leiermann*, this is the point when the organ grinder carefully starts cranking the tape recorder. At first, nothing can be heard, but eventually the first notes appear.

The sonic backdrop depicts a quiet, warm Sunday morning. The silence is intensified by the distant pealing of church bells, which reverberates against the stone walls of the courtyard and mixes with the sounds of a colony of pigeons that has alighted there. The tramp must perform a perilous balancing act in order to descend the staircase, almost falling with each step. The ensuing sounds – the clatter of the bicycle’s wheels, the groans of its disabled rider, the metal money tray slipping from his hands and the coins spilling like marbles down the steps, the flapping of the startled pigeons – are greatly emphasized by Lehner visually and acoustically in the quiet summer setting.

In *Der Fall Leiermann*, all these sonic details, recorded on tape from Lehner’s film and processed for concert performance, are spatially expanded even further by means of a set of speakers distributed throughout the concert hall. The audience sits, as it were, in the middle of the courtyard and is surrounded by what took place there in a dramatic and symbolic sense in 1828, the year of Schubert’s death. The organ grinder is startled by all these noises; he stops playing and sits tensely waiting to see what will happen next. When calm has returned, he cautiously starts playing his organ again.

1. On *The Complete Tape Music of Dick Raaijmakers*, Amsterdam: NEAR/Donemus, 1998.



Raaymakers during the performance of *Der Fall Leiermann*, Theater Kikker, Utrecht, the Netherlands, February 24, 1996

When the "cranking" of the song is nearly finished, a group of Schubert's friends interrupts and tries to entice him to join in a night on the town. They boisterously throw stones at each other and, when Schubert refuses to come with them, they break into a drunken rendition of "Der Lindenbaum." They leave the stage, still singing discordantly.

This episode, too, is stretched to its extreme in *Der Fall Leiermann*: we hear the group approaching from one side of the hall and fading away a little later on the other side. This scene is the second part of *Der Fall Leiermann*.

When the group is out of sight (or earshot), the crank-recorder player remains seated expectantly, keeping very still. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, we hear a dreamlike rendition of one of the interconnecting pieces that Luciano Bério composed in 1989 to fill the gaps in Schubert's unfinished *Tenth Symphony*. These sounds herald the beginning of the third part of *Der Fall Leiermann*, in which the organ grinder sits motionless but with great concentration. He is listening too, as it were.

Of the *Tenth Symphony*, on which Schubert worked during the last four weeks of his life in 1828, only seven complete pages have been preserved as a fragment. The rest is roughly notated on a few staves. Bério gave the title *Rendering* (meant not only in the sense of conveying but also of returning and expressing) to his interconnecting pieces together with an orchestration of the original fragment and a summary of the handwritten outline. He strove to create an intuitive recollection of the symphony rather than to complete it exactly; it is not a supplement in the style and tempos prescribed by Schubert but a vague, blended memory of the original. *Rendering* is true *Fernmusik*, calling up associations with a world of emptiness, dreamlike nocturnal atmospheres, the past, and imminent death.

In *Der Fall Leiermann*, Bério's reflections on Schubert's music are so alienated that one can hardly recognize the original. The orchestral sounds are stretched into long ribbons of notes through a series of tape manipulations and led upwards in a spiraling movement lasting five minutes, all the way up to the heavens. The fading out of these tones closes the third part of *Der Fall Leiermann*.

## Slipping Away

The mise-en-scène of *Der Fall Leiermann* focuses mainly on illustrating the affectingly lonely presence of the crank-recorder player: the *Leiermann*, i.e., the Schubert character. The audience immediately sees the connection between his uncontrolled wavering in pitch and tempo and his obvious efforts to strike the right tone. On another level, they experience how, in the course of the piece, Schubert's life is slowly but surely slipping away.

In fact, with his interconnecting pieces, Luciano Bério sought to answer Schubert's *Tenth Symphony*; a symphony

that had eluded Schubert at the last minute, just as Bério had to let Schubert slip away, and just as the maker of *Der Fall Leiermann*, in turn, had to let Bério slip away. The term *Der Fall* underlines this loss, through the sheer impossibility of giving anything back to Schubert, certainly in the way Bério attempted to with *Rendering*. The only thing genuine that ultimately remains is a dismantled tape recorder and its alien coffee-grinder handle. Yet it is a real musical instrument, albeit one fit to interpret only one song: *Der Leiermann*.

### Wilhelm Müller's text of "Der Leiermann" from Franz Schubert's Winterreise

Way behind the hamlet  
stands an organ man  
and with freezing fingers  
grinds the best he can.

Barefoot on the snowbank  
swaying to and fro –  
and his little plate has  
ne'er a coin to show.

No-one comes to listen,  
no-one comes to greet,  
and the dogs are growling  
at the old man's feet.

And he lets it happen,  
lets it as it will –  
cranking – and his organ  
never standing still.

Strangest of the ancients,  
shall I walk with you?  
Will you, for my Lieder,  
grind your organ, too?

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