

Phonemenon

Sound composition by Andreas Bick
First broadcast: 13th March 2009 on WDR3
Length: 14:40 min.
Singer: Almut Kühne
Speaker: Gunter Schoß

Phonemes are the building bricks of human language, the smallest units of spoken sound used to generate meaning. Every language has a fixed inventory of phonemes which are transcribed with the help of phonetic symbols and systematically indexed in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This notational system forms the basis for the sound composition *phonemenon*, which features many of the (100+) phonemes in the IPA.

Rather than being identical with a concrete speech sound (or phone), a phoneme represents an abstract unit, an idealized sound that is only realized in the act of speaking. For this reason, phonemes are considered part of the higher-order system of language (*langue*), while the actual utterance of the phones takes place in speech (*parole*). This relationship between the specific phone and the abstract phoneme is appropriated by *phonemenon*: the abstract level is represented by the scientific descriptions of the phonemes, recited by a male speaker. A female singer converts these abstract terms into concrete sounds and interprets them in her own manner.

The rule governing the composition of this piece consisted of recording a sound sample for every phoneme in the style of an audio-lesson on phonology, which could then be used and modified in the course of the composition. *Phonemenon* begins with the cardinal vowels A and U. In some cases, the following consonants can only be realized with the help of a vowel, with only vowels already having been introduced being permitted. It immediately becomes clear that the singer is not sticking to merely reciting the sound samples, using the phonemes instead as objects for her own playful musical interpretation. The repetition of individual phoneme sounds forms rhythmic structures and harmonic sequences, resulting in equal parts from the singer's free improvisation with the phonemes and from passages composed in advance which are then combined with one another in further steps. An ironic interaction takes place between the technical terminology of phonology and the singer's expressive treatment of the speech sounds. The dividing line between language and music is blurred, reposing the question of their common origins.

Literature:

- Aniruddh D. Patel: *Music, Language, and the Brain*, Oxford University Press, 2008
- Elmar Ternes: *Einführung in die Phonologie*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999