

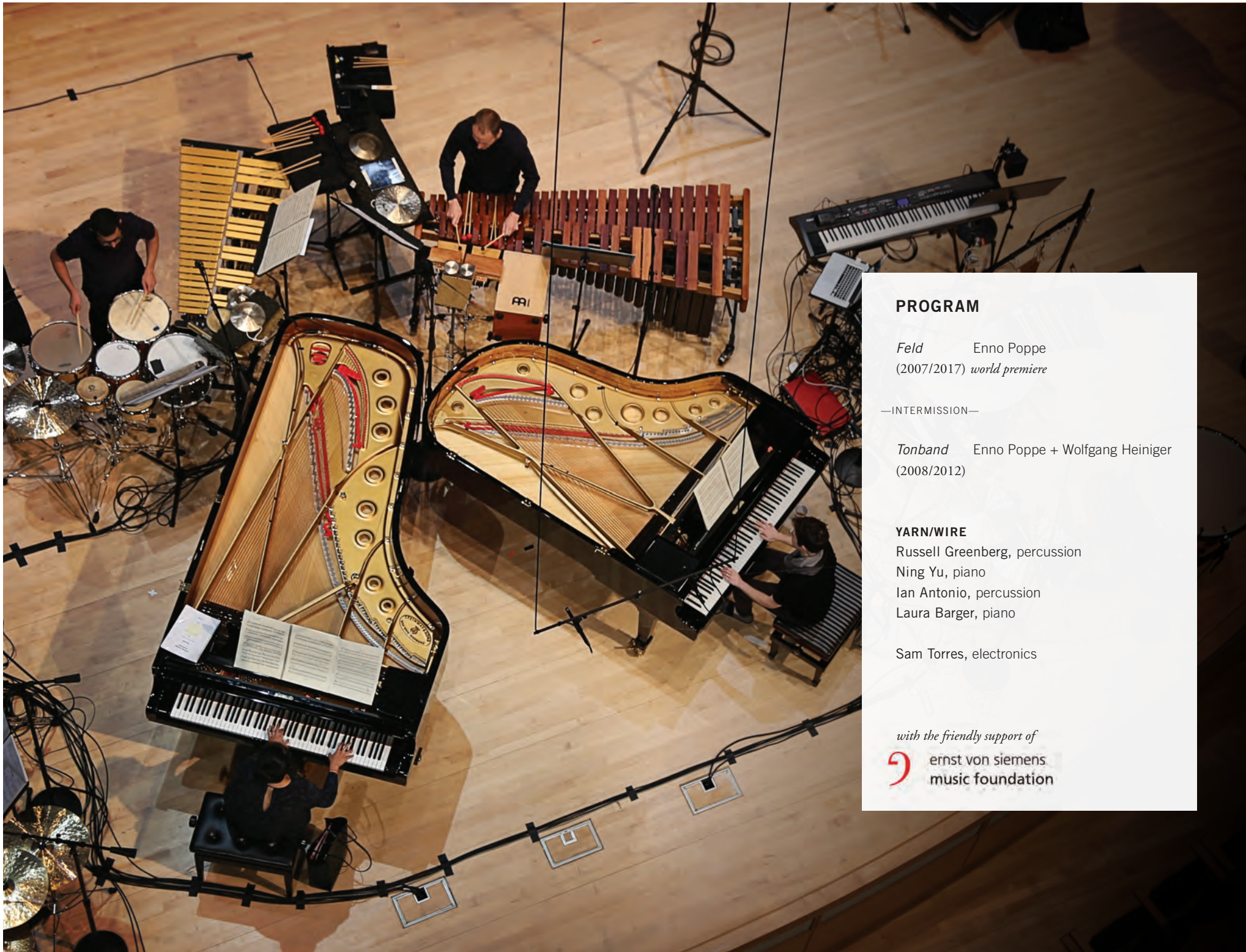
EMPAC

YARN/WIRE

**THE
MUSIC
OF
ENNO
POPPE**

**FRIDAY
SEP 22
7:30 PM**





PROGRAM

Feld Enno Poppe
(2007/2017) *world premiere*

—INTERMISSION—


Tonband Enno Poppe + Wolfgang Heiniger
(2008/2012)

YARN/WIRE

Russell Greenberg, percussion
Ning Yu, piano
Ian Antonio, percussion
Laura Barger, piano

Sam Torres, electronics

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music foundation

NOTE

If you're listening to this concert and think the music sounds weird—fear not! You are not alone. The general consensus among the “new music” specialists involved in tonight's performance (myself included) is that German composer Enno Poppe writes really, really weird music. Throughout the past week, during which the quartet Yarn/Wire has been in residence to rehearse and record an album of the music presented tonight, “weird” has been the most frequently repeated word in our conversations. Other things frequently said about Poppe's music? Challenging, complex, intricate. “15 out of 10 on a difficulty scale.” But the word “weird” sticks out because it's not commonly used as a descriptor in the rehearsal of contemporary music, since it tends to have a negative connotation that isn't very helpful.

The Oxford English Dictionary offers one definition of “weird” as “Suggesting something supernatural; unearthly.”

From a certain perspective, “weird” is not inherently a bad thing. It is something that defies our earth-bound logic, beyond our understanding of the natural world. It has no reference point. A music that doesn't exist anywhere else and sounds like nothing else. This seems to be exactly the correct word for the music of Enno Poppe.

Poppe's music, which he summarizes as “dented nature,” grounds itself in compositional guidelines influenced by acoustics, biology, and mathematics. As his compositions unfold, he gradually disobeys his own rules, contorting material to create an unstable, constantly evolving, almost hallucinatory atmosphere of unexpected sounds. The notes, rhythms, and textures are purposefully wrong in relation to the natural order.

Feld, for two pianos and two percussion, creates its harmonic complexity through shifting combinations of sound. Pure, unaltered piano tones blend with unspecified percussive sounds—metals, woods, skins—to create new timbres and texture at every turn. Each of the two movements take their inspiration from one half of the ensemble. The first is traditionally pianistic in its flowing, almost cinematic evolution of musical line and melody, while the second transitions into percussive alternations of noise and sound, highlighting the resonance and “space between” sound. *Feld* was commissioned by EMPAC and is receiving its world premiere tonight.

Tonband, for two percussion, two keyboards and live electronics, is a work co-authored by Enno Poppe and percussionist/electronic music composer Wolfgang Heiniger. Generated through a series of improvisations and experiments, *Tonband* can be thought of less as an ensemble piece and more as a collaboration. The keyboards do not produce sound themselves. Rather, they act like constantly shifting filters for the sound produced by the percussion. Put into a digital shredder and broken down into their component parts, the sounds are reassembled and played back in real-time by the keyboards, allowing for sound textures unachievable by acoustic instruments alone.

Heiniger explains why the piece is called *Tonband* (“recording tape”): “During the experimental phase, we were both fascinated by how the resultant sounds seemed like a panorama of the electroacoustic music produced on tape in the 1950s and 60s. The title has to do with the fun of playing with these classic tape-machine sounds in a different genre.”

There is an interesting contrast in the pairing of *Feld* and *Tonband*, each highlighting an aspect of Poppe's technique—*Feld*, grounded in our acoustic world of 88-note pianos, and *Tonband*, launching into a digital world of infinite possibilities—examined and twisted by Poppe's compositional process to create music that is purposefully wrong, and really just weird.

—ARGEO ASCANI, CURATOR OF MUSIC

DENTED NATURE ON ENNO POPPE'S SONIC LANGUAGE

The start is simple, clear and transparent. Enno Poppe's works often begin with a single building brick. Starting from one distinct motivic cell—"short/long" or "high/low", for example—the works grow and proliferate like a plant that gains shape and complexity bit by bit. "I have been looking at mathematical models that describe simulations of how plants grow," Poppe explains. "How do things branch out? How does a new shoot come about?" For example, the theme of his piano variations is just one bar long, and consists of two intervals: seconds. What follows are 840 variations in which Poppe twists this motive in every conceivable way—in terms of interval structure, direction, durations and pitches. The same applies to the four-note "up-and-down" motive that begins *Holz*, and gradually fan out to form a veritable thicket of sounds.

Poppe, born in 1969 in Hemer (in Saarland), often works with the L-branching familiar from biology, in the sense that he spreads, splits, stretches and compresses motives. In that respect, he engages with sound with the critical detachment of a scientific observer. In his hands, the material breeds, grows and proliferates like a living, dynamic biological culture. There's a particular kind of calculation underlying the working-out of motives: numerical relationships play a significant role in Poppe's scores. He believes in mathematical or scientifically orientated logics that give music consistency. But he is wary of those presumptions about consistency that all too often lead to mere musical tautologies. Looking at the form of a tree, one sees that in nature there are forces at work which the symmetry and regularity of mathematical logics can only formulate in general terms. Accordingly, Poppe enriches the physiognomy of the musical shapes with irregularities. And it is the deviations, mistakes and contradictions within the system, that is, its alleged pathologies, that endow the otherwise rigid organism with its liveliness and particularity. Whatever his reservations about systems, Poppe also finds sheer spontaneity suspect. So as not to become, on the one hand, "one's own slave," dominated by systematic logic, nor subject to arbitrary factors on the other, Poppe is concerned to "act subversively against my own prescriptions, without damaging the posited rules – an interplay of technique and freedom." For him, it's "not a matter of control, but of magnifying one's own world."

Poppe's works not only deal with the growth of organic materials, but also with their basic nature. This aspect is of central significance to the cycle *Holz – Knochen – Öl* (Wood – Bone – Oil) composed between 1999 and 2004. The

titles address what is consistent in the works: the pliable stability of the fibrous voice-leading in *Holz*, the hard "martellatissimo" and dry "secco" in *Knochen*, and the sticky but energetic stream of interflowing lines in *Öl*. "Titles," says Poppe, "open up associative spaces for the listener." He is certainly not the programmatic, illustrative kind of composer. But for all the rationality with which he drafts and develops music shapes, one shouldn't forget that there are also poetic considerations at the base of these works. The wild, "almost extravagant" (Poppe's phrase) ensemble piece *Scherben* (Shards) confronts the listener with a piling up of fragmentary materials. *Rad* (Wheel) for two synthesizers thrives on circling figures and motives, the rattling of sonic machinery. And in his music theatre work *Interzone*, based on texts by Marcel Beyer (inspired in turn by William S. Burroughs), he evokes the futuristic sound-world of science fiction scenarios, delineating the insectoid existence central to the narration through whirring groups of notes.

Along with these kinds of poetic ideas, and models derived from natural sciences, one thing that marks Poppe's work is a critical historical awareness. Time after time, he takes up concepts that were hastily discarded in a spirit of revolution, and ponders their contemporary relevance. In *Öl* he revises and rehabilitates the concept of melody. Can one write a work based on melodic, linear material without submitting to the rhetorical gravity of melodic logic? One can, if one subsumes the leading voice within a context of timbre, harmony and contrary motion. Can one imagine a work that imitates the cyclic circling of lieder, but doesn't become rigidly schematic? In his quintet *Gelöschte Lieder* Poppe solves this problem by having two levels of material constantly interpenetrating, creating constant ambivalence in relation to the sections' formal functions. Even an idea which is central to Poppe's concept of sound, namely the technique of sum- and difference-tones, refers back to the electroacoustic technique of ring-modulation, is now regarded as "historic": by adding and subtracting two frequencies he gets new, non-tempered intervals that give his music its palely luminous coloration, intervals that shimmer, but don't clash. "Perhaps one could describe my chords as distorted spectral chords," Poppe summarises, "or as dented nature."

For all this, Poppe has never renounced dramatic, even magical moments. The blurred cantilena that sometimes comes to the surface in the *Gelöschte Lieder*, the sombre morendo with which *Öl* fades away, or the narrow tenth-tone piano clusters at the end of *Rad*, as if the music had suffered an electric shock—these are moments where both sensuality and emphatic expression assert their rights.

ENNO POPPE

Enno Poppe was born in 1969, in Hemer, Germany. He studied conducting and composition at the Hochschule der Künste Berlin with Friedrich Goldmann and Gösta Neuwirth, among others. Additionally, he studied sound synthesis and algorithmic composition at the Technische Universität Berlin and at the ZKM Karlsruhe. Respected as both a composer and conductor, he regularly performs with Klangforum Wien, Ensemble musikFabrik and Ensemble Resonanz. Since 1998 he has led the Berlin-based ensemble mosaik and has presented his orchestral, chamber, and operatic works throughout Europe.

WOLFGANG HEINIGER

Wolfgang Heiniger studied percussion, electro-acoustic music, and composition in Basel, Switzerland and Stanford, CA. His teachers included composer Thomas Kessler. Between 1995 and 2003 he was Director of Audio Design Studies at the City of Basel Music Academy. Since 2003 he has been professor of intermediate composition at the Hanns Eisler Academy of Music, Berlin. He is a founder of several electronic-music ensembles (Basel Electric Art Messengers and European PowerBook Orchestra) and curator of several festivals (Echt!-Zeit, Festival Rümelingen). His compositions, which often involve dramatic and interactive elements including sensor systems and electro-acoustic instruments, are regularly performed by ensembles such as musikFabrik (North Rhine-Westphalia), ensemble mosaik (Berlin), and Ensemble Phoenix (Basel). Heiniger also acts as a sound director and performer of electronic music in productions in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.



PHOTO BY BOBBY FISHER

YARN/WIRE

Yarn/Wire is a New York-based percussion and piano quartet (Ian Antonio and Russell Greenberg, percussion / Laura Barger and Ning Yu, pianos). Noted for its “spellbinding virtuosity” (*TimeOut NY*) and “mesmerizing” performances (*The New York Times*), the ensemble is admired for the energy and precision it brings to performances of today’s most adventurous music. Founded in 2005, Yarn/Wire is dedicated to expanding the repertoire written for its instrumentation, through commissions and collaborative initiatives that aim to build a new and lasting body of work. Influenced by its members’ experiences with classical music, avant-garde theatre, and rock music, the ensemble champions a varied and probing repertoire. In 2016, the ensemble won first prize in the open category as part of the inaugural M-Prize competition at the University of Michigan. More recently, it has been honored by Stony Brook University as one of its “40 under 40” alumni who are leaders in their field. Yarn/Wire has commissioned many American and international composers including Raphaël Cendo, Zosha Di Castri, Peter Evans, Michael Gordon, George Lewis, Alex Mincek, Thomas Meadowcroft, Misato Mochizuki, Tristan Murail, Sam Pluta, Kate Soper, and Øyvind Torvund. The group has given the United States premieres of works by Enno Poppe, Stefano Gervasoni, and Georg Friedrich Haas, among others. As well, the ensemble enjoys collaborations with genre-bending artists such as Tristan Perich, David Bithell, Sufjan Stevens, and Pete Swanson. Yarn/Wire has recorded for the WERGO, Distributed Objects, Populist, and Carrier record labels in addition to maintaining their own imprint. Yarn/Wire appears internationally at prominent festivals and venues including the Lincoln Center Festival, BAM, New York’s Miller Theatre, River-to-River Festival, La MaMa Theatre, Festival of New American Music, London’s Barbican Centre, the Edinburgh International Festival, Shanghai Symphony Orchestra Hall, and Hong Kong New Music Ensemble’s Modern Academy. Their ongoing series, Yarn/Wire/Currents, serves as an incubator for new experimental music at ISSUE Project Room in Brooklyn, NY. Through these and other activities, including educational residencies and other outreach programs, Yarn/Wire works to promote new music in the United States. For more information, please visit: yarnwire.org.

TELEPATHIC IMPROVISATION

A FILM BY PAULINE BOUDRY / RENATE LORENZ



EMPAC
THURSDAY
SEP 28
7:00 PM

This EMPAC produced film uses a 1974 score by the late Rensselaer professor Pauline Oliveros, that encourages the audience to telepathically communicate with both the film's performers and the non human elements on stage.

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