

**»Thoreau's Nightmare«**  
for one pianist on two pianos (2003)

»I live in the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured a little alloy of bell metal. Often, in the repose of my mid-day, there reaches my ears a confused tintinnabulum from without. It is the noise of my contemporaries.«

This passage, taken from Henry Thoreau's *Walden*, serves as a motto to the music. Commissioned by the WDR Cologne, »Thoreau's Nightmare« was written in early March 2003 at the height of tensions between the United States and Europe over the pending war in Iraq.

A commentary on these most troubling times and an anticipation of the catastrophe that was almost certain to follow, the piece is also a tribute to the nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalist who had envisioned a peaceful and caring American nation as well as a society in tune with nature.

The contrasting episodes of original musical material, interwoven with quotations from Charles Ives' Thoreau and some popular political melodies, follow no logical path but wander rather aimlessly from moment to moment, much like scenes in a dream. The two pianos (one of them prepared) are set in a 90° angle to one another, thereby suggesting the corner space within which the inner dialogue takes place. The compositional elements (some chosen randomly) span from the trivial and cliché to the complex. They stand unfiltered side-by-side

and appear, as it were, like »remnants of the day«, thereby creating a mixture of disparate contemporary styles (»the noise of my contemporaries«), which a more consciously controlled compositional process would have either censored or suppressed.

Shortly after completing the score, when I had found my title, I asked a friend what might be associated with »Thoreau's Nightmare«. The immediate answer was: »The Bush Administration.« And more recently someone commented: »Thoreau's Nightmare? We're living it!«

*Stefan Litwin (2010)*