

Elfe Vallaster-Dona

German-American Poetry Review

Bach, dreifach.

By Peter Beicken. Wuppertal: Nordpark, 2001. 12 pages. Limited edition of 100 copies. EUR 5.70.

Oden auf Oboen.

By Peter Beicken. University Park, MD: pub, 2002. 24 pages. Limited edition of 25 copies.

A Bluebonnet Trail of Verses.

By Lisa Kahn. Photography by Anna Rodewald. Austin, TX: Sunbelt Eakin, 2002. 23 pages. \$13.95.

Aus dem Herzen gesprochen.

By Catherine Filippi Grosskopf. Chicago, IL: Eigenverlag der Verfasserin, 2000. 52 pages.

All Christmas.

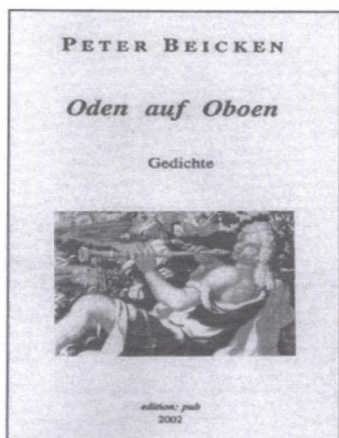
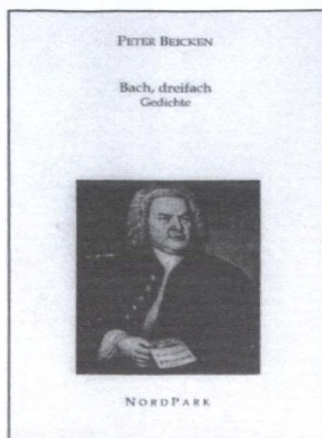
By Ingeborg Carsten-Miller. Silver Spring, MD: Carmill, 2001. 40 pages.

These five new poetry editions remind us that German-American poetry is not passé, but is as vibrant as ever. Artistic ingenuity abounds and some of the poems are presented bilingually, translated by the author from the original German, allowing even readers with minor knowledge of German to appreciate its music and rhythm without having to know the syntactical complexity of the language.

Peter Beicken, a well-known literary critic and professor of German at the University of Maryland, who was born in 1943 in Wuppertal, has published two small volumes of poetry that both have music as their theme: *Bach, dreifach* (2001) which was first published in *Monatshefte* (Winter 2000) and *Oden auf Oboen* (2002). Both volumes, though small in the number of poems included (3 poems in *Bach, dreifach* and 11 poems in *Oden auf Oboen*) require the reader to spend much time with reading them. Partly because both volumes contain black-and-white illustrations

of portraits, manuscripts, geographical locations (Thomaskirche and Thomasschule in Leipzig, where Bach lived and worked), segments of famous art works depicting musical instruments, the reader of Peter Beicken's poems is both intrigued and puzzled by the accompanying pictures. The first hundred copies of *Bach, dreifach* and all twenty-five copies of *Oden auf Oboen* are signed by the author.

One poem in *Bach, dreifach*¹ serves as a characteristic example of the puzzling effect. The poem "Bach I" is paired up with a partial view of Johannes Vermeer's *Viola da Gamba player* (the actual title of the picture is "Lady Seated at the Virginals"). The reference of the picture to the poem seems obvious since it mentions the sound of a viola da gamba ("Im Radio eine Gambe, zart, tief, tänzerisch / mit dem obligaten Plim Plim des Cembalos / im Andante.") The reader is intrigued because the first three lines of the poem seem to refer to something else: "Der Flieder flammt hier nicht. / Eine ganz gewöhnliche Dürre / seit Wochen schon." Could the poet have combined the two meanings of the Italian word "viola" which refers to a stringed musical instrument similar to a cello, but can also mean purple or violet? What one can conclude is that both readers, the visually attuned and the reader who best responds to sound, are satisfied with this poem. The alliterations that start the poem with "Flieder flammt," are picked up at the end of the poem in the "Plim Plim des Cembalos." Pairing the German musical genius Johann Sebastian Bach with Dutch painter Vermeer who frequently used musical themes in his works of art was well done. The other two poems simply entitled *Bach II* and *Bach III* refer specifically to Bach's "Messe in H-Moll," which we learn was never performed during Bach's lifetime, and to the "Weihnachtsoratorium."



Peter Beicken's latest volume of German poems, *Oden auf Oboe* (2002), offers more variations on the same theme of music and contains various illustrations of oboes and earlier version of Greek woodwind instruments, and flutes. The special, limited edition of twenty-five copies is signed by the author and is handsomely bound with a color cover and back. All eleven poems reflect a universal experience. They speak of a never-ending love and admiration, but not of a person but of an instrument and its sound. Beicken's lyrics are filled with a number of musical references: "Sphärenmusik./ Der O-Ton im Raum" (7), "sanfte Lautschmeichelei" (9), "So bläst du mir

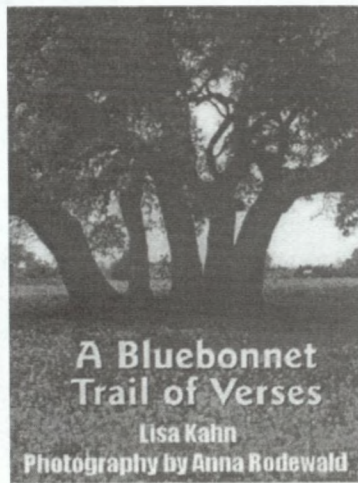
die Zungensprache" (9), "die langen Segelflüge einer Melodie" (11), "Lauschen, Hören, Zauber" (17). The superb combination of rhythm and the choice of passionate words to describe an instrument is best exemplified in:

Komm,
blas mir was,
nein, keinen Marsch,
kein militärisch-zackiges Ohrenstück,
blas mir die Seele voll
mit Lippenkünsten,
Fingerfertigkeiten,
Atemakrobatik,
mit Herztönen
Engelszungen,
Himmelsklängen.
Solo Oboe d'amore. (16)

The Oboe d'amore (literally: the oboe of love) is defined by Webster as an "alto oboe, now obsolete," meaning that the sound is gentler and its lower and more mellow tones are darker and fuller than the common oboe. Faithful to its title *Ode to Oboes*, this poem is truly a poem of praise and glorification, but the rigid structure of the classical ode is replaced with a much freer form which fits the subject matter of music better culminating in the unique last line: "Solo Oboe d'amore."

Although Peter Beicken's two volumes of poetry have nothing to do with the German-American experience, he has chosen music as his unifying theme and has created some visually pleasing and intellectually stimulating poems that have universal appeal on both sides of the Atlantic.

Lisa Kahn, a prominent author who lives in Texas but still writes in German, has published yet another volume of poetry entitled *A Bluebonnet Trail of Verse* (2002). Lisa Kahn has long made a name for herself as a literary scholar, editor and co-editor of anthologies and author of sixteen volumes of poetry and two collections of fairy tales (the latest, *Kälbchen-Geschichten*, was reviewed in the *SGAS Yearbook* in 1997). Although retired from her active teaching position at the Texas Southern University, she is actively participating in poetry readings, lectures and conferences to promote German-American literature and its visibility. In honor of her activity in this field, she recently received the *SGAS Outstanding Achievement Award* for her contributions to German-American literature (2001).



With her latest volume of poetry, *A Bluebonnet Trail of Verse*, Lisa Kahn once again uses her Texas landscape as inspiration for her poems. Many lovers of flowers know that a Bluebonnet refers to a purple-bluish flower of the Lupin family and it stands for "imagination" (www.bluebonnetvillage.com); fewer might know that the Bluebonnet is the state flower of Texas. Lisa Kahn's fondness of the color purple is displayed in the lilac pages on which we find her poems surrounded by wildflowers printed in colors and on high-quality paper. The colorful pictures of wildflowers that adorn each page of the book were provided by Anna Rodewald Kahn who previously supplied pictures to Lisa Kahn's *Uthas Geheimnisse* (1982). Visually pleasing, *A Bluebonnet Trail of Verses*, aptly chooses the state flower of Texas where some varieties are found growing naturally only in Texas, Lisa Kahn's home since shortly after coming to America as a Fulbright student. Hubert Heinen, Emeritus Professor of German at the University of Texas, summarized the impact of those bi-lingual poems in the back of the book: "With these lapidary poems, in both German and English, meditations on and conversations with the Texas wildflowers strikingly represented, she and photographer delight both eye and ear and guide us to reflect on our own about the world around us (n.p.)."

It is significant to mention that Lisa Kahn is inspired by the flowers of her home of many years in Texas to write poetry. A strong sense of place, landscape and observations how we as people behave in such a world is predominant. The German reader is transported into a foreign world with "scorpion / fire ant / copperheads" (5) and "cowboy settlers" (9) "our Texan / spring meadows" (11), "this region of extended / zenith heat" (12), "Comanches / who smoked their peace pipe here" (15), "Here / jungle confronts you" (20), but usually in the last few lines the poetic voice is heard and leads our focus away from the pure nature observation. Her choices of words specific to flowers are impressive and some poems manage to engage our sense of hearing - "it seems to me / the tree is starting a / little song" (12), "the entire field sings / and rings in my ears!" (13) - smell and sometimes even taste ("Yet cows bulls and calves / would find you tasty too!" (1), "it seems to me you offer / nectar" (3).

A common thread going through some of those Texas wild-flower poems, however, is the reference to German poets (Goethe), German fairy tales (Goldmarie in Frau Holle), German and Dutch painters (Emil Nolde, van Gogh), the native inhabitants (Comanches), Greek mythology (Sisyphos, Daphne) and German immigrants ("Siedler aus der alten Heimat / angelockt um ihr eigenes / ihr 'goldenes' Land zu besitzen," Otto von Meusebach). Interesting for people, familiar with German-American immigration, is the German Baron Otto von Meusebach, who is specifically mentioned in the poem "Indianische Pinselblume." After settling in Texas, he never returned to Germany and even managed to make peace with the Comanches. By weaving these references to her German home and European tradition into the Texan landscape, the poems are elevated to a new level.

The German-English edition allows even readers who are not so fluent in German to enjoy these poems. All of the poems are presented bilingually, translated from the original German or vice versa, sometimes literally translated, sometimes freely. For readers equally versed in English and German, a comparison of the German original

to the English self-translations by the author, adds an additional dimension and often a surprising element. The two texts complete and sometimes complement each other. Interestingly enough sometimes only the combination of the German and its English alternate version seems to make some poems more complete. This was probably not intended by the author. Her bilingual poems reveal her as being equally at home in the English and German language – something that not many immigrant writers have achieved.

Lisa Kahn created the type of book one likes to return to, a thought which is also expressed by Friedericke Mayröcker who was quoted on the bookcover: “Ich habe immer wieder Lisa Kahns schöne Gedichte gelesen. Ich nehme sie auch mit aufs Land, um sie wieder – und wiederzulesen.” Kahn offered the reader an additional layer of meaning and nuances by adding the self-translations, which enriched the original German by employing a different rhythm, metaphor and syntactical structure. The only thing lacking in this volume, to truly offer a multi-sensory experience, is the opportunity to hear the actual voice of the author reading her poems in German. There is always the hope that some of these poems will be made available on the Internet in form of soundfiles.



As with Kahn's poetry, **Catherine Filippi Grosskopf's** volume of poetry entitled *Aus dem Herzen gesprochen* (2000) takes nature and 'America, the new homeland' as one of her major themes. Both volumes, Kahn's and Grosskopf's, were dedicated to their grandchildren, and contain reflections on nature and every day life in particular. Grosskopf has already published *Ähren des Lebens* (1993) followed by *Im Auf und Ab der Jahre* (1997) four years later for which she received an honorary letter of the "Landmannschaft der Banater Schwaben" in Germany.

As implied in the title, *Aus dem Herzen gesprochen*, Grosskopf's poems are personal and she has chosen her words carefully and wisely speaking with a heartfelt and soft-spoken voice. As Grosskopf points out in the introduction to the book, "... the purpose of this book is to preserve and promote the German language, here in the USA and wherever it is spoken" (v). Of the fifty-one poems of the collection, only very few references are made to the German language directly. One example of such a reference is in the poem "Das deutsche Wort": "Alles was ich bin und habe, / ist mein trautes, deutsches Wort" (2) referring to her native German. Her dedication to preserve the German language is exemplified by writing in German. Two poems are included at the end of the volume that are written by Vanessa and Natasha Grosskopf.

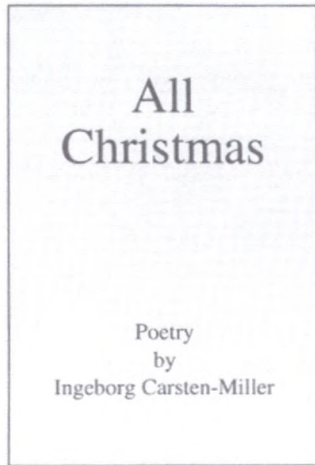
Only the last six poems are in English and the poets' voices are so intensely personal that one has to turn to the biographical notes at the back of the book after one has

read each poem. Catherine Filippi Grosskopf was born in 1930 in Kleinbetschkerek, Romania Banat, and immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1951. She belongs to the group of German-American writers that started their creative writing relatively late in life such as Dolores Hornbach Whelan, Hans Eichner, Kaye Voigt Abikhalel. Two of the English poems at the end of *Aus dem Herzen gesprochen* were written by her eleven and eight-year-old granddaughters. Grosskopf's poems speak of freedom, immigration, losses (of people and places), memories, loneliness, old age, laughter, and hope. And although these poems are quite diverse in subject matter, they all speak to our experiences at different stages in our lives. The central sense that emerges from the whole is that Grosskopf wanted to create an awareness of herself and her German heritage by writing in German, traditional, formal, confessional and inspirational poems.

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller, a native of Pomerania and presently living in Maryland, published *All Christmas* (2001), twenty-nine poems around her reflections on Christmas and Advent. This is her fifth publication of poetry that started in 1994 with *Northern Lights*. One of her poems, "Mourning the Fraternity Brother Who Did Not Leave the 95th Floor," was recently exhibited at the Executive Office Building of Montgomery County, Maryland.

Twenty-two poems are written in English, three poems ("Christmas 2000," "In front of the Christmas Tree," "And Tomorrow All is Gone") are provided in English and German, and one tale is translated from the Brothers Grimm ("The Star Dollars"). The plain red cover of the booklet and its title make it abundantly clear what the main topic is. Christmas as seen through the eyes of a child seems most authentic ("A Million Wishes," "Children's Christmas," "Advent Morning," "In front of the Christmas Tree," "Christmas is For Children") while the commercial Christmas ("the tinsel / of materialism, / blatant commercialism / wrapped in holiness!") with all its hectic preparations for shopping ("...the budget trip / to the store") distract us from the real meaning. The first poem sets the tone: "Long / ago / a light / lit / darkness / smiled / and / the world / became / rich" (5). The standard light imagery (candles, light, dark) is employed throughout the collection with a few surprising twists, when light refers to a child's smile in "Your smile / lights / my day!" (8).

The German-American experience of a German-language author in America is not a theme, but a few poems, even when written in English, give away the author's German background. In "Tell me, what you think of Christmas!" we hear of "church bells / in a cold winter night" (18) and in another poem references are made to the real candles on a Christmas tree ("Soon / the candles / will glow on / the Christmas tree" 20) and the Grimm Brothers' "Die Sterntaler" is a most familiar Christmas fairy tale



for German children. Sterntaler was interestingly enough not translated as Star-Money but "The Star Dollars" (23-25). One of the concluding poems uses the familiar "Ho! Ho!" of the American Santa Claus to remind us of Christmas and the American traditions of "hang up your Christmas light / Let colors sparkle / in the night" and "Fill stockings to the top" (35). German or American Christmas, the positive message is clear: "a child was born / many a year ago / to save the world - / remember - / for you & me. / Be grateful!" (32).

You won't be sorry if you add any of the five collections of poetry to your library. If you are interested in music, choose one of the limited editions of Beicken's poetry; flower lovers will enjoy Lisa Kahn's richly-bound and colorful new poetry collection; for a wonderful assortment of poems that express universal themes personally, Catherine Filippi Grosskopf's poems will delight you and Ingeborg Carsten-Miller's reflections on Christmas offer some exciting contributions and memorable words.

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Notes

¹*Bach, dreifach* (3 CDs, German, English; ADERA-Nr. 82005, ISBN 3-931149-11-0; 20,40 Euro) is also the title of 3 audio CDs featuring Austrian pianist Rudi Spring. As we learn from the pianist's introduction, he refers with this title to Johann Sebastian Bach and his two sons, Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, who were both artists and composers at the same time as their father lived.

