

# OBITUARY

## Bernard Heidsieck

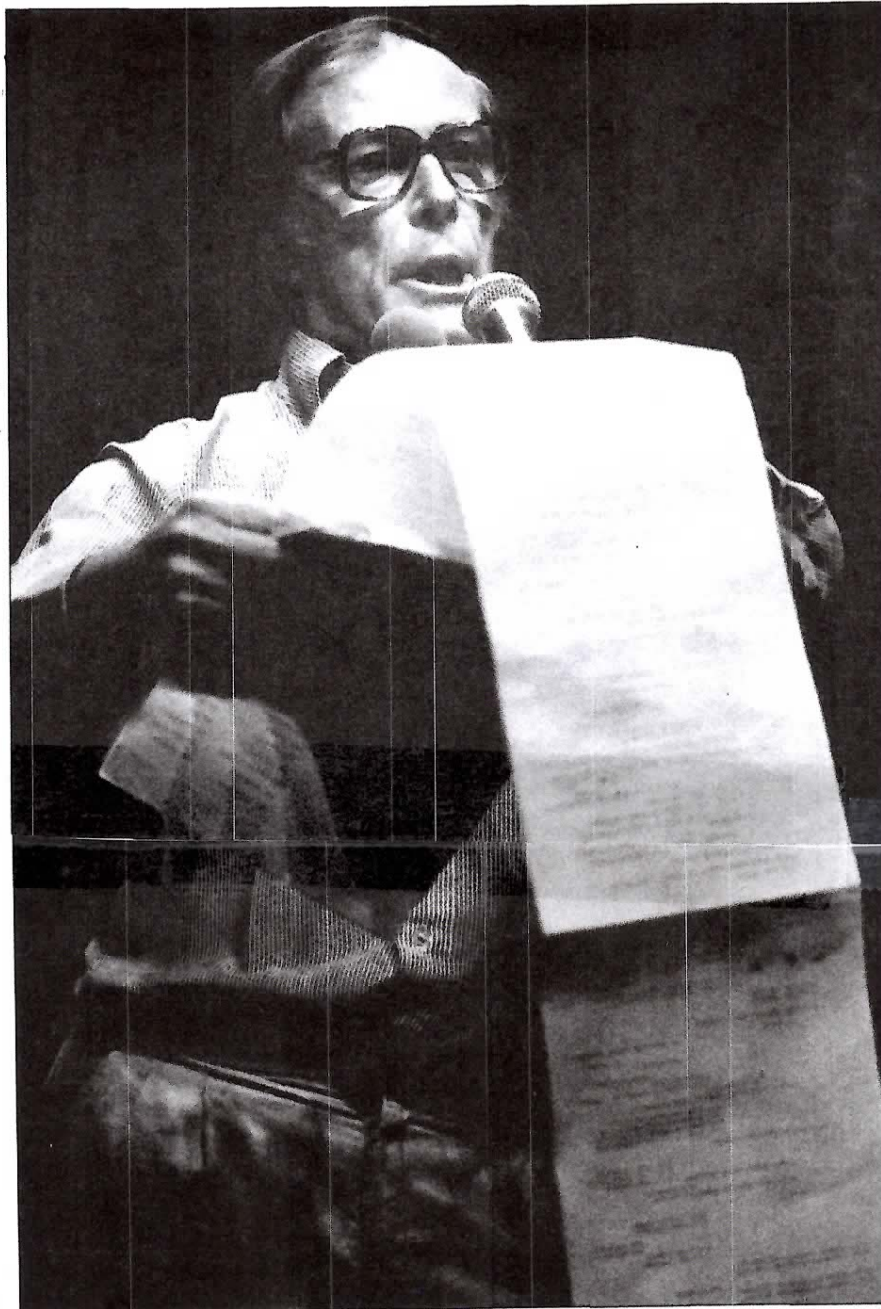
Banker, heir to the champagne fortune and avant-garde poet. By Adrian Dannatt

PUDIC  
PURE  
or  
ob  
scene  
gasm  
S'PIERCE  
VERSE  
tender  
SCUFFLE

**B**ernard Heidsieck always knew how to kick start a piece, and anyone lucky enough to witness one of his performances in some far-flung arts centre could attest to the flair and drama, the sheer loudness and excitement of his poetry. Heidsieck was also known for two other salient facts, indeed his name was rarely mentioned without the whispered addendum that he was a member of the famous French champagne family. He was also a long-time professional banker.

Although the latter seemed inherently improbable, Heidsieck was always impeccably dressed, with sober suit and polished shoes fit for any financier. His poetry was, however, so extreme, so far at the outer limits of any avant-garde, that many bankers might flee in horror only at its distant echo. As a collaborator, friend and patron of many of the most important experimental artists from Brion Gysin to Steve Reich, John Giorno and John Cage, Heidsieck was always as much of a visual practitioner and "performance artist" as a literary fixture. His role as a *provocateur créatif* seemed to be to push all boundaries until those who had previously angrily exclaimed "But that's not 'poetry!'" would now be forced to add, "And that's not 'art' either!" Or as he put it himself: "Why sound poetry? I have no idea! And in the end I don't care. That's just how it is! Why? Why refuse this new opening?"

*Poetry was completely behind the times and he was determined to get it up to speed*



Unlikely poet: Heidsieck supported or collaborated with Brion Gysin, Steve Reich, John Giorno and John

The Heidsieck family, its name universally synonymous with champagne, has naturally been long based in Reims, and there the poet grew up in provincial prosperity. Though he had been born in Paris in 1928, Heidsieck only returned there to study at the prestigious Institut des Sciences Politiques and in 1954 took a job with the Banque française du commerce extérieur where he became “directeur de service” and remained until his retirement.

But as a young man, already embarked on his banking career, Heidsieck had discovered, to his astonishment, the world of atonal and electronic music thanks to the renowned “Domaine musical” concerts organised by Pierre Boulez. Heidsieck realised that, by comparison, poetry was completely behind the times and was determined to get it up to speed, to make it as challenging and uncompromising as the new music. Heidsieck went on to collaborate with many composers, not least Iannis Xenakis, and was very aware of the relation of his work to the scores. “At the frontier of music, so, sometimes! Yes! Without doubt! But at the frontier only! At the frontier all the same!” Yet he was also at pains to point out that this poetry was “nothing to do with the *Sprechstimme* of Schoenberg” and was rather “sonic material constituted of the word or sound ‘said’, ‘spoken’ and not ‘sung’”.

Heidsieck could rightly and proudly claim to be the inventor of *poésie sonore* (sound poetry), however it is defined, and it has been called many things over the decades, not all of them complimentary. He dated this form to 1955, when he realised poetry needed to “leave the page and become active once again” and created his first audio-poem. Also known as lingual music, verbosonics, or *poésie concrète* (concrete poetry), Heidsieck was this movement’s most active promoter, helping set up the annual Swedish Radio Text Sound Festival as well as the Premier Festival International de Poésie Sonore in Paris in 1976. And while Sound Poetry might cynically be dismissed as just some dated fad of late-Modernism, in fact its performative imperative prefigured both rap and “slam”, and its emphasis on the interactive, mutable text, on sound and vision, anticipated YouTube and current digital aesthetics. Heidsieck, ceaselessly travelling the festival circuit, also regularly put out innumerable cassettes, records, CDs and DVDs of his performances, along with old fashioned printed books, collaborative art works and his own collages and drawings.

His long career, or anti-career, culminated in his receiving in 1991 Le Grand Prix National de Poésie, as well as a large retrospective exhibition (2011) at the Villa Arson in Nice and, perhaps most importantly, the publication last year of an

The pleasing paradox of Heidsieck’s conservative social milieu and revolutionary artistic activity was exemplified, soon after his death on 22 November, by a Requiem High Mass at the Parisian church of Saint-Louis-en-Île, in itself a suitably impressive address. This formal and very old-fashioned memorial was attended by everyone from the previous foreign minister, Roland Dumas, to the veteran “street artist” Jacques Villeglé, along with Heidsieck’s widow Françoise Janicot, their two daughters, and some very *grandes dames*. Or, as he might have summed it up himself:

WOUND

PEARL

POOOooooooooOSH

PEARLS

drip

dribble

trickle

drip

totter

topple