

Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik | Band 22

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Composing today / Luft von diesem Planeten

Stefan Prins

I was about to descend the monumental staircase of the castle of the Fürst und Fürstin zu Fürstenberg in Donaueschingen, a place where time seemed to have arrived at a complete standstill, somewhere around the beginning of the previous century, when Sven Hartberger came up to me, gently put his hand on my shoulder and asked me what it meant to be a composer today? Just the night before, so he told me, while seeing my composition *Generation Kill* – a piece involving four musicians, four other musicians handling game controllers, four video projectors and live electronics – he suddenly wondered whether composing music was still the same as it was ten, twenty, fifty, or one hundred years ago. We briefly discussed this topic and in the end I agreed to write a text about it for the upcoming Klangforum yearbook.

My thoughts were already wandering off to the technology-driven world outside the sturdy castle walls, when I finally started to descend the candle-lit staircase. The small, time-worn statuettes of black servants, helpfully extending their right arm to receive the guests' champagne glasses every twenty steps or so on the way down, did however give me a slightly uneasy feeling.

Artists must express their own creative character in the technology of their era in order to find their own historical and individual level. (Lillian Schwartz)¹

In every epoch, artists have attempted to tell something about the world they live in, to understand their position in it, or even to transform it. Each time, they did so using the “new” technological artifacts of that moment, whether that was a piece of charcoal, a paintbrush, a photosensitive plate, a saxophone or a turntable. Often they were also inspired by the contemporaneous societal changes and philosophical concepts. One example: not long after the Nazis had developed the tape recorder for propaganda purposes, the machine became appropriated by innovative composers who, after the second World War systematically explored its creative potential. By that time, the war's aftermath had produced landslides in the aesthetic domain. The new technologies such as the tape recorder and the sine wave generator turned out

to be the ideal means for creating music that reflected these philosophical and aesthetic changes.

Also during the final quarter of the 20th century, many circles of composers developed a pronounced interest in state-of-the-art technologies and the related frames of mind. The electronic studios, which were founded all over the world from the early 1950s onward, had an important function in shaping music history. However, as far as the “new music” as presented in the concert halls during the past decades was concerned, most often it turned out to be music reveling in its acoustic, instrumental, symphonic past. A large part of the “new music” written today still does so, by the way, and is still presented in a similar fashion. Oddly enough it was rather in other musical styles (pop, rock, jazz, improvisation, noise) or fields (dance, theatre, visual arts, installation- and video arts) that experiments with the latest technologies ensued, publicly, on a large scale, and with passionate freedom and self-evidence. This involves an active attempt at connecting with the present-day world through contemporary means of expression. That a substantial part of the (featured) ‘new music’ does not take part in it, has in my opinion contributed to the sclerosis of the concert audience and the related steady decrease of audience participation. The difference with the audience numbers (young and old alike) of for instance many contemporary dance productions is revealing.

I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex. (Kurt Vonnegut: *A Man without a Country*)²

But at present, it seems as if that tendency is – slowly but steadily – turning around. The multi- and transmedial evolutions that have already fundamentally changed the fields of visual arts; theatre and dance are being taken up in a very natural way by the youngest generation of composers and transferred to a musical context. Today, that context is – thanks to postmodernism – far less confined by demands of style or mode of presentation. The frame of reference shared by many of these young and youngest generations of composers, the so-called digital natives, is no longer the violin or the piano, but the electric guitar and the laptop. (I was born exactly at the tipping point between this and the previous generation.) The main cultural points of reference are no longer only Ludwig van Beethoven, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Dante Alighieri, or Franz Kafka, but also – and without any distinction in terms of hierarchy – Beyoncé Knowles, Squarepusher, noise music, metal, hard rock, avant-pop, Quentin Tarantino, Banksy, Gangnam Style, anonymous youtube-videos, etcetera. Not in the library’s reading room, but on the Internet: that is where the digital natives shape their ideas and gather their material. In that respect, indeed, the world is fundamentally changed during the past ten years. Producing art (including composing) in that world is bound to somehow reflect that.

The exponential increase in processor speed combined with the quickly plummeting prices of computers, the introduction and proliferation of smart-

phones and other mobile devices – which soon will render the computer entirely superfluous – combined with the easy availability (at least in the Western world) of broadband technology has currently produced a new generation, which Beth Coleman in her book *Hello Avatar*³ has called the ‘networked generation’. This generation of digital natives no longer inhabits a world where reality and virtuality are two opposite poles on a two-dimensional axis. Instead, their world is one where reality has become a multi-dimensional, interconnected cloud (Deleuze’s Rhizome!), a “X-reality” (i.e. “cross-reality”) in which everyone’s identity consists of several avatars (your facebook, twitter, or flickr-accounts, youtube-channel, website or dating profile). Taken together, these join with your physical person into a complex personality-network, seamlessly linking each avatar with the next one. In this X-reality, revolutions are started with the help of social media, or families that have been isolated from the outside world, in a remote Afghan mountainside village can be wiped out with a simple push on a button in a virtual cockpit somewhere in the USA, activating small, deadly, remote controlled airplanes. In this new reality it has become possible to be in Australia and watch without noticeable delay live images from a security camera in some Finnish street; one can use free software to hold lengthy video-conversations with one’s loved ones on the other side of the ocean; or special reading glasses can project in real time information on the eyeglass about items you’re scanning with the built-in camera on the front side of the glasses. In every (non-apocalyptic) prediction about the state of the world a few decades from now, such networks occupy the most prominent place. According to sociologists, we are at the verge of a new era, a networked era, in which society is bound to change at least as thoroughly as during the first industrial revolution, two hundred years ago.

As an artist, I want to be firmly involved in this world, preferably standing knee-deep in its mud, reflecting and commenting on it, declaring it my love and revulsion, shaping my amazement and confusion, turning it inside out, exposing its mechanisms, questioning its certainties or adding weight to its uncertainties. In short: being involved in a personal, straightforward, critical and complex confrontation, in the most communicative way possible. Since nowadays, the societal changes that are brought about by these new technological developments are possibly even more far-reaching than they used to be, the role of the artist may well be still more important than ever before. The Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan wrote in *Understanding Media* in 1964, while theorising about the at that time most recent revolutions caused by radio and television:

As our proliferating technologies have created a whole series of new environments, men have become aware of the arts as ‘anti-environments’ or ‘counter-environments’ that provide us with the means of perceiving the environment itself. For, [...], men are never aware of the ground rules of their environmental systems or cultures. [...] Art as anti-environment becomes

more than ever a means of training perception and judgment. Art offered as a consumer commodity rather than as a means of training perception is as ludicrous and snobbish as always.⁴

Or even: The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.⁵

These words have turned out to be prophetic. More so: in this networked world they have only gained in importance. And how can one as an artist better create this anti-environment which offers society the means of perceiving the environment itself and questioning it, than by directly engaging with the artifacts of that particular environment, subverting them, turning them inside out, recontextualising them? “Komponieren heisst: ein Instrument bauen” (composing is: building an instrument), as Helmut Lachenmann wrote already thirty years ago.⁶ Today, this metaphorical instrument no longer merely consists of an orchestra, a piano, saxophone or tape recorder, but includes laptops, game-controllers, motion sensors, webcams, video-projectors, midi-keyboards, internet protocols, search algorithms ... This novel meta-instrument obeys a different kind of logic; it creates different fields of tension; it has different possibilities and different implications; it creates different material and asks new questions. It is urgently in need of other modes of presentation and requests other approaches by composers. It has no use for nostalgia, for candelabras and statuettes of black servants from bygone times, shielded from the outside world behind solid castle walls. On the contrary, it deeply longs for a renewed connection with the world in which it exists. Schönberg’s “Luft von anderem Planeten”, as fresh and necessary as it once used to be, has now been exhausted. It is time for Luft von *diesem* Planeten. While it still lasts.

1 <http://www.atariarchives.org/artist/sec31.php>, Accessed 10 April 2013.

2 New York 2005, p.17.

3 Cambridge, Mass., 2011.

4 Media Begrijpen (Kritische editie door Terrence Gordon), Marshall McLuhan, translation Samuel de Lange, Amsterdam, 2002, p.18–19.

5 *ibid*, p.40.

6 *Über das Komponieren*, 1986.