

MUSICAL EVENTS

BLUNT INSTRUMENTS

Young European composers go to extremes in Donaueschingen.

BY ALEX ROSS

*Stefan Prins's "Generation Kill" was an explosive synthesis of live and electronic sound.*

In 1921, when Prince Max Egon zu Fürstenberg agreed to finance a festival of contemporary music in the German town of Donaueschingen, he might not have guessed that the series would still be going strong nearly a century later, much less that it would be playing host to onstage provocations involving young composers smashing instruments and pretending to smear themselves with excrement. So it went at the 2012 edition of the Donaueschingen Music Days. Over a weekend in mid-October, this Black Forest tourist hub witnessed a stimulating and stupefying onslaught of activity: six concerts, twenty-one world premières, an evening of avant-garde improvisation (featuring the venerable English ensemble AMM), and sound-art installations around town. Some ten thousand people

attended, advertising their opinions in the form of applause, bravos, boos, and shouted insults. "*Langweilig!*"—"Boring!"—was heard more than once. The audience skewed young; T-shirts and hoodies outnumbered dress shirts and suits. It was a music festival in the mode of an art fair, with a crowd avid for adventure and scandal.

The mood at Donaueschingen this year was especially charged on account of looming budget cutbacks at Southwest German Radio (SWR), which has run the festival since 1950. SWR operates not one but two orchestras, the SWR Symphony Orchestra Baden-Baden and Freiburg and the Stuttgart Radio Symphony; in September, an advisory board voted to fuse them by 2016. The decision has drawn furious opposition: at stake, it

seems, is not just the fate of the ensembles but the future of Germany's lavish system of cultural funding, whose premises have been questioned amid economic turmoil. The community of contemporary music has perhaps the most to lose from a potential shrinking of state support. Much of twentieth-century music history unfolded at Donaueschingen—the list of local premières includes Schoenberg's *Serenade*, Weill's "*Mahagonny Songspiel*," Xenakis's "*Metastasis*," and Ligeti's "*Atmosphères*"—and it is almost impossible to imagine such an enterprise subsisting on private funds.

Hence the remarkable gesture made at the opening concert by the thirty-two-year-old German composer Johannes Kreidler. After an announcer introduced the program, Kreidler, who looks a bit like Johnny Rotten, walked onstage, grabbed a violin and a cello from members of the SWR Symphony, and took hold of the announcer's microphone. Kreidler then noisily strapped the instruments together, until they formed the shape of a cross. When he described his creation as an inartistic "*fusion*," the audience cheered. He then set about destroying the instruments (cheap models, it was later revealed), perhaps in homage to Nam June Paik's 1962 performance-art piece "*One for Violin Solo*"—a ritual smashing that predated similar efforts by Pete Townshend and Jimi Hendrix. A more restrained, but no less potent, protest occurred at the final concert. After François-Xavier Roth, the music director of the SWR Symphony, asked the audience to consider what kind of Germany it wanted, there were multilingual shouts of "For music! For culture!" and an immense ovation for the orchestra itself.

Donaueschingen has never been without its critics. In the twenties, the left-wing composer Hanns Eisler dismissed festivals of its kind as "*orgies of inbreeding*," devoid of social relevance. In the fifties and sixties, Donaueschingen often projected an arid intellectuality. Anyone intent on mocking the 2012 incarnation would have found plenty of juicy targets: works in which violinists scratched away and percussionists clattered around, to no pressing purpose. Then again, nobody could have sent up the proceedings more pointedly than Trond Reinholdsen, one of the featured composers, whose

"Musik," for narrator and ensemble, contained crazed parodies of recent compositional trends and theories, not to mention a nonsensical ditty about Donaueschingen's director, Armin Köhler. "Musik" was essentially performance art, with Reinholdtsen, as the narrator, losing his mind amid the profusion of stylistic possibilities and the confusion of cultural politics. Toward the end, he stuck his hand down his pants and covered himself in brown goo. There was an enthusiastic ovation.

Such prankish attacks on a stale avant-garde are themselves rather stale; back in 1960, Mauricio Kagel's conceptual piece "Sur Scène" lampooned theoretical gibberish, and included a toilet joke to boot. Reinholdtsen also went on too long—a habit shared by more than a few Donaueschingen composers, who tended to exhaust the possibilities of their material four or five minutes before their works were done. (Dismayingly, the composers were almost all men; only one woman, Malin Bång, was selected for the main concert series.) Klaus Lang's wordless vocal scene, "the ugly horse," was initially bewitching in its blurred tonality but fell victim to a taxingly prolonged epilogue. Franck Bedrossian's "Itself," a riot of orchestral color, thrashed around in search of an ending. By contrast, Beat Furrer, one of only four composers over the age of fifty, gave a lesson in clarity and economy in his elegantly frenzied ensemble piece "linea d'orizzonte."

Of course, young artists are undisciplined by nature. Self-indulgence aside, the Donaueschingen posse proved admirably open to the outside world: the younger ones were particularly eager to sample textures and technologies derived from pop music, though anything resembling a tune or a steady beat was in short supply. Bernhard Gander, a Mohawk-wearing, comic-book-reading, hip-hop-listening Austrian, offered "hukl," a pummelling tone poem inspired by the Incredible Hulk. Klaus Schedl's "Selbsthenker II" evoked black-metal music, with contrabass electronic tones that did strange things to my abdominal region. And Marko Nikodijević's "ketamin/schwarz"—capital letters are evidently out of fashion—was intended to suggest the effects of the tranquilizer ketamine, with trancelike drones underpinning hazy echoes of Mongolian folk song. The piece came to an abrupt end, perhaps describing what

might happen if you took a lot of ketamine in Ulan Bator.

Nothing made a deeper impression than "Generation Kill," an explosive synthesis of live and electronic sound by the thirty-three-year-old Belgian composer Stefan Prins. In a program note, Prins reported that he had been pondering intersections of technology and global conflict: American soldiers in Iraq revving themselves up with video games, Arab Spring insurgents communicating via Facebook, drones operated by remote control. Rather than pasting such portentous themes onto the surface of a work, Prins found a way to embody them organically. Four members of the Nadar Ensemble, playing violin, cello, electric guitar, and percussion, were positioned behind transparent screens; facing them were four performers with PlayStation video-game controllers. These devices allowed for the recording, replay, and manipulation not only of sounds but also of images: the players had to compete with superimposed, sometimes sped-up video projections of what they had been doing moments before.

The result was mind-bending, and not in a druggy, blissed-out way. As the composer intended, it was disturbingly difficult to tell what was real and what was virtual. The musicians were caught in temporal loops, as if Philip K. Dick had written a novel about chamber music. Instrumental timbres were distorted in the direction of glitchy noise, in the manner of much recent European music, but the extension of playing techniques achieved a kind of visceral precision. The cellist executed several abrasive cadenzas with a crushed beer can stuck between the strings, and the violinist applied aluminum foil to the bridge of her instrument. There was a desert harshness to the sound, in keeping with the Middle Eastern focus. Twice, Prins halted all musical activity to make that focus clear: we heard crackling radio voices discussing "collateral damage," and saw inhabitants of a nameless town running from a Predator drone.

This display of spastic near-genius was, to my puzzlement, one of the works that drew a cry of "Boring!" I wanted to ask the protester what would have held his interest. Music for amplified lobby toilets? A piece in which an orchestra gets drunk on Fürstenberg beer and trashes everything in sight? Next year, perhaps. ♦



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