

Dialectical Composing

Having been asked to write something for the topic *Perspectives for Contemporary Music in the Twenty-First Century*, I cannot help but be influenced by my composition and teaching activities in Germany for the past seven years where composition seminars are often good indicators for new critical perspectives. Yet I have been surprised that the composition classes of many, if not most, music schools in Germany have been comprised by a majority of non-German students, even non-European students. Could it be the case that critical perspectives on music composition in Germany are in essence ways in which the rich history of the German-Austrian musical tradition will be reflected by foreign voices? The filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub, when filming Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles* in 1986, defended his use of foreign actors where German was not their mother tongue by stating that because of Germany's recent history only through "foreign tongues" could the language of Hölderlin be heard and appreciated.¹ The poet Lyn Hejinian continues this idea in her essay *Barbarism*—a term originating from the Ancient Greek as foreigner or "someone not belonging to the dominant linguistic community"—by which she states that a "barbarian art" is one "intimately occupied with the strangeness of its native terrain."² And with such terrain, one can "become the advocate and topographer of border states"³ for the purpose of "reestablishing life on marginal territory, and making lines of contact between marginality and the domestic security which usually suppresses such knowledge."⁴ In music, such lines of contact suggest a dialectical exchange between "uprooted" categories of sensation such as rhythm, meter, consonance, melody, pathos—uprooted by "resisting every form of domestication" and "corroding the boundaries of the old, ruling

1 Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 204.

2 Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 326.

3 Brian Ferneyhough, "Barbarians at the Gates," Paper read at Goldsmiths College, London, 2002, p. 2, unpublished manuscript.

4 N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), p. 27.

idea of music.”⁵ In other words, as Lachenmann has pointed out, making the question “What is music?” a palpably reflective category for perception.⁶

My text addresses the nature of “dialectical composing,” a practice of mine that has been influenced by Adorno’s view of Schoenberg as a “dialectical composer” as well as Lachenmann’s “dialectical structuralism,”⁷ by which music composition’s focus is upon the “intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself.”⁸ Such a practice sets “beliefs and principles on line” and is “self-determining but nothing for its own sake merely; all under test of how things are.”⁹ As poet J.H. Prynne has remarked: “Nothing taken for granted, nothing merely forced, pressure of the composing will as varied by delicacy, because these energies are dialectical and not extruded from personality or point of view.”¹⁰ Such a methodology I see as a way of rejuvenating a late-Modernist poetics of musical composition where such traits as “irony” and “humor” are viewed as genuine markers for intrinsic anomaly and not simply an optional position for a work to occupy. Furthermore, I find that such an approach reestablishes the role of subjectivity, expression and the “lyric” in music that avoids such pitfalls as “personal voice,” “personality” and “self-expression” which too often shelter the composing subject from the natural, social and economic forces that conspire to define it. I see the line from Romanticism through Modernism as not irreparably broken but one in which expression can be mediated through lyric subjectivity in music subjected to a stringent formal rigor that makes the connections between extreme expressionistic abstraction and documentary “authenticity.” In this way, subjectivity can manifest itself in a musical work that engages with exteriority rather than retreating from it, a subjectivity that is inherently fractured, damaged, multi-perspective and problematized in order to negotiate the complexities of the surrounding world.

Example 1: Ming Tsao, *Mirandas Atemwende* (2014–15), mm. 956–959

Caliban’s position towards the end of my opera is mediated through a citation of Beethoven’s Opus 135 and “Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß” referring also to Straub-Huillet’s *Schwarze Sünde* (1988), a filming of Hölderlin’s *Der Tod des Empedokles* (third ver-

5 Helmut Lachenmann, “Philosophy of Composition Is There Such a Thing?,” in *Identity and Difference: Essays on Music, Language and Time*, Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute, trans. Wieland Hoban (Leuven: University of Leuven Press, 2004), p. 65.

6 Paul Steenhuisen, “Interview with Helmut Lachenmann—Toronto, 2003,” *Contemporary Music Review* 23, no. 3/4 (2004), p. 11.

7 Theodor W. Adorno, “The Dialectical Composer,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 203–207; Helmut Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” in *Contemporary Music Review* 12, Part 1 (1995), p. 100.

8 J. H. Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” in *Textual Practice* 24, no. 4 (2010), p. 596.

9 Ibid., p. 597.

10 Ibid.

$\text{♩} = 63$

(2+2+3)

956

Fl.

E. Hn.

Cl.

B. Cl.

Hn.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Perc. 1

Vibraphone

mister on, first
Turn mister on when the word "Tore" is spoken.

Perc. 2

Vibraphone

mister on, first
Turn mister on when the word "Tore" is spoken.

Perc. 3

Pno.

Cd.

Gtr.

Cal. 1

Cal. 2

enfeebled history: That we be born at long last into the image of love

"mit innigster Empfindung"

Vln. I

"Neue Welt! Aber wo ist er? Daß er beschwöre den lebendigen Geist!" (Hildebrandt)

"without mute"

Vln. II

"mit innigster Empfindung"

"without mute"

Vla.

"mit innigster Empfindung"

"without mute"

Vc.

"without mute"

D.B.

fpppp

Example 1

(all examples © by Edition Peters)

sion) where the choir (portrayed by Huillet), after the same Beethoven citation, speaks: “Neue Welt...Aber wo ist er? Daß er beschwöre den lebendigen Geist” (New world... but where is he? That he might adjure the living spirit) echoing Caliban’s final words from J.H. Prynne’s “The Wound, Day and Night” (1969).

Much of my compositional method actively engages with what Lachenmann refers to as the “tonal” and “structural” aspects of musical material, where the expressive potential of “damaged” historical materials is explored as genuine intrinsic anomalies in my music. In “Bedingungen des Materials” (Conditions of the Material), Lachenmann expands upon the tonal aspect of material by including the rhetorical aspects of music: tension and relaxation, gesture, consonance and dissonance, as well as the structural aspects of material, which in my case, refer not just to the acoustical aspects of sound but structuring processes (both as composition and de-composition of the materials) through serial and mathematical organizations and their formal implications.¹¹ Composing demands the unreserved commitment of the composer, “deep-down within the choices and judgments of dialectical composition” by which the pressures of syntax (analytical relationships), “aura” (associational memory) and the sensuality of sound move in such a way as to keep each a perpetually active parameter in order to prevent what Feldman called the “hardening of categories.”¹² What is important is that no single aspect of the material dominates but is always a dialectical revealing of a possible truth that can change over into something other. To proceed in such a manner, one must place oneself “under pressure of conscience to be fully active” within the area of compositional practice, to be “at maximum energy and indeed vigilance.”¹³ This is why Cage essentially refers to composition as “work,” the ethics of the composing process as a daily practice of intense engagement,¹⁴ with resonances from Cage’s “Black Mountain” colleague poet Charles Olson and his projective stance: “to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined.”¹⁵ Indeed, dialectical composition assumes that music composition is essentially about “energy”¹⁶ or “lines of force”—Ferneyhough’s idea that com-

11 Helmut Lachenmann, “Bedingungen des Materials,” in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1966–1995* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1996), p. 35.

12 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597; Morton Feldman, “Darmstadt Lecture, July 1984,” in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–1987*, ed. Chris Villars (London: Hyphen Press, 2006), p. 198.

13 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.

14 John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 34.

15 Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 240.

16 Charles Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1987), pp. 26–27.

in a most intense form of somatic communication.²¹ Such energy is heightened by noise as a result of specific instrumental actions and their material resistances as well as rhythmic and metric notations that require full concentration on the “acquisitions of the ear and the pressures of breath” (i.e., Feldman’s “tumbling of sorts” from the page to its execution).²² I never mix loudspeakers with live musicians—particularly prerecorded sounds—since such a mixing interferes with the music concrete situation. In such a context, I often find that no element retains its authenticity; sounds are mixed together in a way that violates the premise that reality is richer than our imaginations, and we impoverish our art otherwise.²³ An exception is Luigi Nono’s use of electronics in his later work in which stark lines are always drawn for the listener between the electronic and instrumental sounds, where meaning is generated by their montage rather than the a priori condition of abstracting sound from the music concrete situation and mixing it with live performers.²⁴ In my compositions, sound refuses to abstract itself from the material immediacy of perception thus placing experience as central to my music as a way of displacing any conceptual certainty. Abstraction of sound from the music concrete situation can occur but only through a complication of syntax by which energy is released through the internal pressures of a compositional language. In my music, this can include negotiations between phrasing and cadence, pattern and gesture, rhythm and meter, citation and noise, whereby sound’s *materiality* is made palpable through a dialectics between my compositional language and the resistances proper to the music concrete situation (i.e., the conditions under which a sound—or noise—is produced, what materials and energies are involved and what resistances are encountered). This way of abstracting sound is in marked contrast to a “reduction to sound”: the former occurs in a dialectical context that allows for sound’s materiality to be discovered in the compositional process whereas the latter remains an a priori confirmation of faith in one’s sonic materials.

Perhaps an analogy with poetry is useful when Prynne states that language “bends back to other and indeed opposite connections because it is a pluralized system, invested with contradictions which are themselves the diagram of its energetic over-determination.”²⁵ While music is aconceptual and a different sort of thing than language,²⁶ one can compose within musical structures a kind of “ener-

21 Ibid., 334.

22 Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Collected Prose*, p. 241; Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), p. 143.

23 Tag Gallagher, “Straub Anti-Straub,” *Senses of Cinema* 43 (2007), p. 3.

24 Helmut Lachenmann, “Touched by Nono,” *Contemporary Music Review* 18, Part 1 (1999), p. 27.

25 J. H. Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” in *The Gig* 7 (November, 2000), p. 44.

26 Theodor W. Adorno, “Music and Language: A Fragment,” in idem, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), p. 1.

getic over-determination” in which seemingly spontaneous relations emerge from extreme organizations that are potentially invested with the contradictions that lie at the heart of dialectical composing. As Adorno notes of Schönberg, the “contradiction between strictness and freedom is no longer transcended in the miracle of form. It becomes a force of production, the work does not turn the contradiction towards harmony, but conjures up its image, again and again, looking for duration in its cruelly ravaged traits.”²⁷ Indeed, the idea of contradiction is built into Lachenmann’s very notion of a *Strukturklang* where a strong material identity (with unpredictably rich, continually varying textural components and noise) is subjected to a grammatical syntax, often wrestling the material into tonal patterns of cadence, tension and relaxation, antecedent and consequent.²⁸ By *Strukturklang*, “what is meant is a way of thinking which cannot just be aimed at the creation, stipulation or drawing of attention to musical structures, but focuses on where such structures emerge, take shape and foster awareness of themselves as a result of the direct and indirect confrontation with existing structures in the material derived from all areas of experience and existence, all realities, including those outside the realm of music.”²⁹ This aspect of creating spontaneous “sparks”—a kind of compositional alchemy—between the energy of conception and the grain or rhythm of the material, in both its natural and historical sedimentations, *is* dialectical composing through which one can discover “new reflex slants and ducts and cross-links that open inherent potentials previously unworked.”³⁰ Indeed, dialectical composing places one’s compositional language under intense pressure of new work and new practices maintained through the integrity of the work-specific locus—Ferneyhough’s “work-internal assembly of forces”—in combination with an “explicitly material-oriented generative strategy.”³¹ Such practices critique a music compositional language that strives for a clear psychologized intension in the drama and musical ideas, i.e., composing as representation through “personal voice” and “self-expression.” Rather, these practices discover subjectivity through the materials themselves—what Ferneyhough refers to as the “dialectical historicization of the acting subject”³²—by bringing their energies together into a field of composition in which a disruption of representation can occur and thus become a strategy for overcoming dualistic structures of thought toward a more liberated listening perception.

27 Adorno, “The Dialectical Composer,” p. 205.

28 Lachenmann, “Bedingungen des Materials,” p. 17.

29 Helmut Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 12, Part 1 (1995), p. 100.

30 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.

31 Ferneyhough, “Barbarians at the Gates,” p. 7.

32 Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” in *Collected Writings*, p. 76.

Example 3: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax* (2007), mm. 174–78

Example 3: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax* (2007), mm. 174–78

A rewriting of Beethoven’s Opus 135 (1826) with a citation from the Grave movement “Muß es sein?,” that appears as a genuine intrinsic anomaly in the context of the composition.

The *fin de siècle* German-Austrian musical tradition—Nietzsche’s extreme manifestation of the sickness of Western modernity—and the early expressionism of Schönberg’s musical prose forms much of the basis for my own engagement with composition by which dialectical composing can keep open the wound of this music’s “cruelly ravaged traits” by intensifying features already inherent within (often transcribing historical excerpts with the greatest sense of rigor—Deleuze’s “straightening of the head”).³³ Indeed composition, as distinct from a Sound Art, is essentially inter-textual in nature: “every work of music is, to some degree, the erase and rewriting of any number of earlier compositions.”³⁴ I confront this idealist musical tradition as a foreigner, but one whose musicality has been wholly informed by it and where the phenomenon of tonality, in my view, was always approached dialectically in the sense of a “working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality and the obduracy of thought.”³⁵ One perceives such working encounter with contradiction in the way that compositional technique was never something to be mastered—an observation Brahms made

33 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 26.

34 Newton Armstrong, “Interview: Brian Ferneyhough—Newton Armstrong, March 1995,” p. 1, unpublished manuscript.

35 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.

when researching his “Collection of Octaves and Fifths.”³⁶ In my view, composers such as Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Schönberg and later Lachmann with his added third voice to Bach’s d-minor invention, initiated a lifelong study of counterpoint, and its consequence “polyphony,” as a means not to master a composition’s potential but to seek to understand it. Polyphony is a means to activate the energy inherent to relating multiple “lines of force,” each suggesting their own direction, so that new perceptual spaces can be opened for a listener. This idea of counterpoint as a way of harnessing energy is prevalent, for example, in the music of Bernd Alois Zimmermann—and his brilliant opera *Die Soldaten*—whose dialectical use of counterpoint is able to place radically distinct music into the same compositional space and allow their *leakage* to precipitate a “Kugelgestalt der Zeit” (spherical form of time) in which a multi-layered simultaneity, or “pluralism,”³⁷ presses upon a listener’s awareness. In Zimmermann’s music, the “textures and formalisms of multiplicity” are “tendencies to culminate and synergize, percolating by reticular connections and antagonisms across the channels of prescribed signification so as to challenge and displace the whole fabric of interpretation but not at all to extirpate it.”³⁸ Polyphony, as signifying textures and formalisms of multiplicity, resists conceptualization on the part of the listener and forces one to think dialectically by not filing sensations according to prior systems, which is a more genuine way of achieving freedom in the listening experience.

Canon a 3



Example 4: Ming Tsao, *Puzzle Canon a 3* (2011)

Example 5: Ming Tsao, *Mirandas Atemwende* (2014–15), mm. 624–28

A working out of the three-voice puzzle canon from Example 4 through Paul Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 105*—“Schön, gut und treu” so oft getrennt, geschieden/ In Einem will ich drei zusammenschmieden. Miranda’s text, whose words are forged together (zusammenschmieden) from fundamentally different categories (such as “Wortmond” or “Wundenspiegel”), create a metaphorical language that escapes Prospero’s garden of rational discourse.

The future of composition, I believe, does not lie in notions of “personal style” or “stylistic consistency,” an attitude that too often closes a work through its self-referentiality and quickly leads to “stylization,” often having the unwanted effect of reducing a music’s appreciation to taste and cosmetic choice. With my own music, I blend references to various kinds of existing music—mutually incompatible

36 Margaret Notley, *Lateness and Brahms: Music and Culture in the Twilight of Viennese Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 125.

37 Bernd Alois Zimmermann, *Intervall und Zeit* (Mainz: Edition Schott, 1974), p. 96.

38 Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” p. 44.

Stehen

624 $\text{♩} = 76$ "Schön, gut und treu / so oft getrennt, geschieden / in einem will ich drei zusammenschmieden" (Shakespeare/Colden)

Fl. *ff*

Ob.

Cl. *ff*

B. Cl.

Hr. *cup mute* *ff*

Tpt. *cup mute*

Tbn. *cup mute* *ff*

Perc. 1

Perc. 2

Perc. 3 *soft mallets* *ff*

Pno. *ff*

Cel.

Gtr. *tremolo on, medium*

Mir.

Vln. I *mute* *ff* *mute arco* *p* *ff*

Vln. II *ff*

Vla. *mute arco* *ff*

Vc. *mute arco* *ff*

D.B.

33779

Example 5

musically discursive modalities—that are integrated in such a way as to create genuine intrinsic anomalies by a dialectical montage of their stylistic differences, that can result in a multiplicity of fragmented discourses ranging from the musical to unmusical and noise.

36

The image displays a complex musical score for Example 6. It consists of multiple staves, including vocal lines at the top and piano accompaniment below. The notation is dense, featuring various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is organized into measures, with some measures containing multiple notes or rests. The overall layout is typical of a professional musical manuscript.

Example 6: Ming Tsao, *One-Way Street* (2006), mm. 169–78

An “erased” transcription of Stravinsky’s “Sacrificial Dance” from *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) that is placed in a montage with the mechanical sound of a prepared vibraphone motor.

My goal is indeed to embrace the “textures and formalisms of multiplicity” as shifted but recognizable aspects of the world in order to “challenge and displace the whole fabric of interpretation” in the absence of a “personal voice” or one sustained perspective. Complexity arises from *multiple* “perspectival causal energies” that occur in the “momentary successive or overlapping chaotic vortices of perturbation,”³⁹ an excess from which a core of meaning may or may not be recuperated by a listener. Complexity almost naturally accompanies a substantial sense of indeterminacy—in the sense that organization to an extreme degree yields a tendency towards the chaotic—and one must strive for that precarious mixture of what is constructed and what is by chance. Yet complexity, fundamentally, can only be achieved through a complication of syntax—“percolating by reticular connections and antagonisms”—and not an extirpation of it, which is why I find it peculiar that many works that fall under the umbrella of New Complexity offer

39 Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” in *Collected Writings*, p. 77.

♩ = 96

193

680 $\text{♩} = 96$

Fl. *ff* *ff* *ffp* *ff* *p* *f*

Ob. *ff* *ff* *ffp* *ff* *mp*

Cl. *ff* *mf* *p* *ffp* *ff* *p* *mf* *mp*

B. Cl. *ff* *mf* *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *f*

Hr. *ff* *f* *p* *ff* *mp*

Tpt. *ff* *p* *ff* *mp*

Tbn. *f* *p* *ff* *mp*

Perc. 1 *f* *ff* *f* *p*

Perc. 2 *f* *f* *f* *f* *p*

Perc. 3 *mf* *f* *ff* *f* *p* *f*

Pno. *ff* *f* *ff* *f* *p*

Cel. *ff*

Gtr. *ff* *mf* *f* *ff* *ff*

Vln. I *(ppp)* *p* *ff* *pizz.* *ff*

Vln. II *pizz.* *f* *ff* *ff* *pizz.* *f*

Vla. *pizz.* *f* *ff* *arco flaut.* *p* *ff* *pizz.* *f*

Vc. *(pp)* *f* *ff* *pizz.* *f* *arco* *f* *arco* *f*

D.B. *ff* *f* *f* *f* *f*

33779

Example 7

reduced modes of listening through undifferentiated textural states. An exception is the early work of Klaus K. Hübler whose music, like Ferneyhough's, emerges from the damaged expressive topoi of late Romanticism and early expressionism in order to expose the "wound" by deconstructing the very act of producing these expressive gestures on instruments.⁴⁰ Hübler's music requires a traditional performance practice in order for the performer to work against their habits of learned musical expression.

Example 7: Ming Tsao, *Mirandas Atemwende* (2014–15), mm. 680–85

Referencing the "Galopp" section from *Mouvement (– vor der Erstarrung)* by Helmut Lachenmann (1982) in order to mediate Caliban's position with respect to Prospero where the material of "noise" is brought into a compositional sound structure as a metaphor for "taming" or for "colonizing" through a compositional language.

Any current sense of formal rigor in composition should proceed from the utopian promises of the Darmstadt and New York schools from the 1950s and early 1960s with such important works as Barraqué's "Piano Sonata," Nono's "Il Canto Sospeso," Stockhausen's "Gruppen" and "Momente," Boulez' "Le Marteau sans Maître" and Cage's "Concert for Piano and Orchestra." Attempts to ignore such developments historically resulted in neo-Romantic reactions (such as Henze and Rihm) that made the "struggle of the fractured subject with itself superfluous through an "innocent drawing from the venerable reservoir of affect"⁴¹ and thus perpetrating an "ideology of the transparency to expression of the single gesture."⁴² Yet in the later 60s, as more composers left the paradise of the "tabula rasa" by including "pre-serial topoi, gestures, tonal relics and fragments in the widest sense, which had already proved their expressive qualities and as such had been 'socialized'," a larger sense of reactionary music developed which has continued to this very day.⁴³ Beginning with Kagel, the desire for provocation became adversarial and ultimately mediated by valuation, where such provocations could be "induced to form by use of apt detergent, e.g. "humor"...thereby further reducing value to fetish."⁴⁴ In addition to these provocations were the *Texturklang* pieces (Ligeti, Penderecki, Xenakis) that, as Lachenmann suggests, resulted in a kind of "passive listening" by which the serial experiments of the 50's were reduced to their sonic effects only, effects to be controlled through either traditional means or processes

40 Klaus K. Hübler, "Expanding String Technique," in *Polyphony & Complexity*, ed. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox, and Wolfram Schurig, trans. Frank Cox (*New Music and Aesthetics in the 21st Century*, vol. 1) (Hofheim: Wolke, 2002), pp. 233–234.

41 Helmut Lachenmann, "Open Letter to Hans Werner Henze," trans. Jeffrey Stadelman, *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no.2 (Summer, 1997), p. 191.

42 Ferneyhough, "Interview with Richard Toop," in *Collected Writings*, p. 282.

43 Lachenmann, "On Structuralism," p. 95

44 Prynne, "A Letter to Steve McCaffery," p. 46.

such as “stochastic composition.”⁴⁵ An exception includes Dieter Schnebel’s *Für Stimmen* (*missa est...*) and *Maulwerke*, important works that bring a performer’s (and by extension a listener’s) awareness to their own physiological processes as well as the social processes of music making.⁴⁶ From this climate of the later 60s in Germany emerged a “Critical Composition” (*Kritisches Komponieren*) with Matthias Spahlinger and Nicolaus A. Huber that perhaps has led to today’s interest in a conceptual music (*die Konzeptmusik*) from which I find the musical experience often to be “stillborn” and reduced either to sterile concepts or fetishized sound worlds (*Geräuschmusik*), “the extremes of faith in the material”⁴⁷ that represent a lyrical retreat into romanticized (and often narcissistic) spaces of “pure sound”—scrubbed clean from any aura of the past—that only further marginalizes music’s potential as an expressive force (as if the absence of a compositional syntax promotes a liberated listening). And much of the new conceptual music offers a full embrace of commercial culture in which concepts and “branding” are paramount for maximal exchange value and managing artistic (and financial) risk. Such directions, in my view, celebrate the reification of composition as entertainment either through what Ferneyhough calls “the objectified free play of values on the dance floor of symbolic exchange”⁴⁸ or Lachenmann’s critique of a “mannerist music” that never transcends the mere decoration,⁴⁹ both of which constitute a music that seems “every bit as restrictive in their ideological conformity as to satisfy the expectations of a predefined market”⁵⁰ (i.e., the German new music festival circuit). Indeed, “the notion of *fun* comes to displace *work* as what we are here for. Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture.”⁵¹

45 Lachenmann, “Open Letter to Hans Werner Henze,” p. 8; idem, “Klangtypen der Neuen Musik,” in *Music als existentielle Erfahrung*, p. 14; Iannis Xenakis, “The Origins of Stochastic Music,” *Tempo* 78 (Autumn, 1966), p. 11.

46 Brian Ferneyhough, “Shaping Sound,” in *Sound*, ed. Patricia Kruth and Henry Stobart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 164.

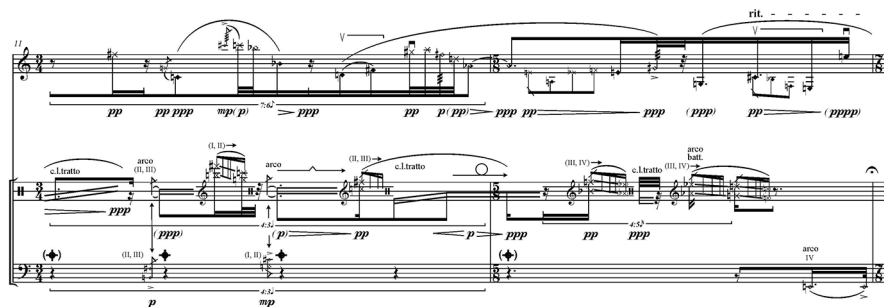
47 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, p. 304.

48 Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” p. 78.

49 Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” p. 96.

50 Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” p. 40.

51 Charles Olson, “Human Universe,” p. 159. Italics are my own.



Example 8: Ming Tsao, *Canon* (2001), mm. 13–14

The excerpt above is from a two-voice mensuration canon between clarinet (top staff) and cello (bottom staves) that begins with the indication *Quaerendo Invenietes* (“Seek and ye shall find”), a reference to Bach’s *Musikalisches Opfer* (1747). There is a dialectical “working out” between the strictness of the canonic rule and the ephemerality of the musical material.

I think that the role for serious composition today should instill a sense of wonderment in a listener, to step out of the everyday, not for any surreal fascination, but to instill *value*, our peculiar responsibility as Olson reminds us, and “caring-for” as expression of a profound feeling not as a psychological state but as revealing existential meaning and purpose.⁵² This profound feeling is perhaps the essence of a lyric subjectivity in music whereby beauty and sublimity are to be discovered through a composition’s limits pressed up under test of “how things are”, where the lyrical “voice” belongs to the musical materials in their concrete (and historical) context and not to a single consistent “speaker” or to a technological enframing of “sound”. This sense of the lyric begins with John Keat’s state of “negative capability” where one gives themselves over to the materials of experience and knowledge⁵³ or Olson’s “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the subject and his soul,”⁵⁴ coupled with the *necessity* for experimental action so that all sound materials can be given their own individual uniqueness and contexts for coming into relations.⁵⁵ My compositional orientation proceeds from the rhetorical materials of early expressionism (particularly, the second Viennese School), through the experiments of the Darmstadt and New York Schools into the music of Lachenmann and Ferneyhough (with strong influences from Zimmermann and Gerhard Grisey regarding how musical time is perceived). Both Lachenmann and Ferneyhough, in my view, attempt to reinstate the lyric in contemporary music through their respective notions of the *Strukturklang* and

52 Ibid., p. 160.

53 Charles Olson, *The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II*, ed. Joshua Hoeyneck (Tucson: Chax Press, 2010), p. 11.

54 Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” p. 247.

55 John Cage, *Silence*, pp. 74–75.

the *figure*. Lachenmann's *Strukturklang*—as well as Ferneyhough's "figure"—recuperates the rhetorical qualities from early expressionist music with a structural thinking from the post-war generation of serial composers in order to create an expressive language which for Lachenmann is always mediated by the *materiality* of sound and sound production. For Ferneyhough, an expressive language is generated through the *figural energies* of tracing what happens in the act of moving from one discrete musical gesture or sound complex to another, so that lines of force arise in the space between these objects—"not space as temporal lacuna, but at that moment of conceptual differentiation in which identity is born".⁵⁶ Unlike a traditional musical gesture that rarely leaves its descriptive context, the figure congeals and dissolves into a field of processes as pure energy.

Yet Lachenmann's use of noise, a necessary element of the *Strukturklang* for contributing to a textural richness, unpredictability and "musique concrète instrumentale" does not provide the necessary critical distance from his rhetorical materials which too often suggests a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable lyric that results in mere nostalgia for a musical expression that is somehow lost. Ferneyhough's use of rhythm and meter, key elements by way of which the "figure" is made palpable, can provide such critical distance by damaging the rhetorical materials Ferneyhough employs to obtain "new reflex slants and ducts and cross-links" for expressive potential. Ferneyhough's use of noise, or lack thereof however, does not provide the necessary condition of a "musique concrète instrumentale" to overcome such distance through the experience of listening, often placing his rhetorical materials into the realm of mere artifice and abstraction.

Lyric subjectivity in my music is made possible by synthesizing the idea of the *Strukturklang* with the "figure" into a musical language that is rooted in a noise-based aesthetics of the music concrete situation while using rhythm and meter to activate "a system of discontinuities and breaks which interrupt and contest the intrinsic cohesion and boundary profiles of its (the languages) domain, so that there is constant leakage inwards and outwards across the connection with the larger world order."⁵⁷ Such leakage—often perceived through a composition's "aura"—allows my music to discover beauty, violence and desire within a complex exterior world of sounds placed under formal pressures that are dialectically mediated through simulative invention and discursive reference.

Example 9: Ming Tsao, *Mirandas Atemwende* (2014–15), mm. 1–4

An experimental reworking of Arnold Schönberg's *Erwartung* to invoke a sense of expectation (*Erwartung*) for the possibilities of a radically new language, musical and poetic, away from Prospero's influence (and in Schönberg's case, from tonality). Miranda recites poems from Paul Celan's *Atemwende*, poems that question the very possibility of

56 Ferneyhough, "Il Tempo della Figura," p. 35.

57 J. H. Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work," in *Chicago Review* 55, no. 1 (2010), pp. 126–127.

Mirandas Atemwende

Erwartung

♩ = 76

Ming Tsao
2015

Flute

Oboe

Clarinet

Bass Clarinet

Horn in F

Trumpet

Trombone

Percussion 1

Percussion 2

Percussion 3

Piano

Celesta

Guitar

Miranda

Caliban 1

Caliban 2

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Double Bass

Litolff / Peters Litolff's Verlag

33779

© 2015 by Henry Litolff / Peters Litolff's Verlag EP 14123

Example 9

building a renewed poetic expression from the ashes of Prospero's language. In this new language, lyric subjectivity is placed within the musical sounds themselves rather than in the voice of the singer.

Christian Wolff has delineated the responsibility of the composer via compositional intention and the integrity of the final result as making "possible the freedom and dignity of the performers" by which music should "allow for concentration, precision in detail, and release, or collapse, virtuosity and doing things in the ordinary way".⁵⁸ The seriousness that my music attempts to achieve in respecting a classically trained performer's performance practice but at the same time becoming inventive with it by pressing against its boundaries, requires an intense concentration and effort from performers that opens the path to their dignity and freedom through Cage's sense of "disciplined actions" that, in my music, are interconnected through an overall feeling that performers have when their actions are contributing to a larger sense of musical communication. The ethics of composition as a means to instill *freedom and dignity* in the performer (and ultimately the listener) is the composer's responsibility, not freedom of relinquishing control in order to remove the "bad spell" of a composer's sustaining authority, which is "magical thinking at its most inflated."⁵⁹ Performers (and listeners) cannot free themselves with one bound from the economic and social orders within which they have negotiated their position during their development (which includes their classical musical training).⁶⁰ As Prynne reminds us with respect to poetry but applicable, in my view, to the conditions of musical communication: "the ludic syntax of a language system is mapped onto determinations and coercions by which invasion cast their weights and shadows parasitically into the playing-fields."⁶¹ Freedom from prescribed ways of listening *within* music (i.e., "normalized musical communication") can exist, I believe, through "the acceptance of irrational, locally-determined states which germinate, grow and dis-balance in the interstices of the dominant paradigm of reason, taking their nourishment from it, adapting and subverting its vocables to illicit purposes—purposes not directly responsible to the referential whole."⁶² In other words, the felt presence of Kristeva's "geno-song" that punctures, ruptures and disturbs the clear passage of normalized musical communication⁶³ that takes place "within an 'administered,' universally owned medium, in the form offered by tradition and public practice."⁶⁴

58 Christian Wolff, *Cues: Writings and Conversations* (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998), p. 86.

59 John Wilkinson, *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge, U.K.: Salt Publishing, 2007), p. 24.

60 Ibid., p. 25.

61 Prynne, "A Letter to Steve McCaffery," p. 41.

62 Ferneyhough, "Parellel Universes," p. 83.

63 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 181.

64 Lachenmann, "Philosophy of Composition Is There Such a Thing?," p. 57.

235
 236
 237
 238
 239
 240
 241
 242
 243
 244
 245
 246
 247
 248
 249
 250
 251
 252
 253
 254
 255
 256
 257
 258
 259
 260
 261
 262
 263
 264
 265
 266
 267
 268
 269
 270
 271
 272
 273
 274
 275
 276
 277
 278
 279
 280
 281
 282
 283
 284
 285
 286
 287
 288
 289
 290
 291
 292
 293
 294
 295
 296
 297
 298
 299
 300
 301
 302
 303
 304
 305
 306
 307
 308
 309
 310
 311
 312
 313
 314
 315
 316
 317
 318
 319
 320
 321
 322
 323
 324
 325
 326
 327
 328
 329
 330
 331
 332
 333
 334
 335
 336
 337
 338
 339
 340
 341
 342
 343
 344
 345
 346
 347
 348
 349
 350
 351
 352
 353
 354
 355
 356
 357
 358
 359
 360
 361
 362
 363
 364
 365
 366
 367
 368
 369
 370
 371
 372
 373
 374
 375
 376
 377
 378
 379
 380
 381
 382
 383
 384
 385
 386
 387
 388
 389
 390
 391
 392
 393
 394
 395
 396
 397
 398
 399
 400
 401
 402
 403
 404
 405
 406
 407
 408
 409
 410
 411
 412
 413
 414
 415
 416
 417
 418
 419
 420
 421
 422
 423
 424
 425
 426
 427
 428
 429
 430
 431
 432
 433
 434
 435
 436
 437
 438
 439
 440
 441
 442
 443
 444
 445
 446
 447
 448
 449
 450
 451
 452
 453
 454
 455
 456
 457
 458
 459
 460
 461
 462
 463
 464
 465
 466
 467
 468
 469
 470
 471
 472
 473
 474
 475
 476
 477
 478
 479
 480
 481
 482
 483
 484
 485
 486
 487
 488
 489
 490
 491
 492
 493
 494
 495
 496
 497
 498
 499
 500
 501
 502
 503
 504
 505
 506
 507
 508
 509
 510
 511
 512
 513
 514
 515
 516
 517
 518
 519
 520
 521
 522
 523
 524
 525
 526
 527
 528
 529
 530
 531
 532
 533
 534
 535
 536
 537
 538
 539
 540
 541
 542
 543
 544
 545
 546
 547
 548
 549
 550
 551
 552
 553
 554
 555
 556
 557
 558
 559
 560
 561
 562
 563
 564
 565
 566
 567
 568
 569
 570
 571
 572
 573
 574
 575
 576
 577
 578
 579
 580
 581
 582
 583
 584
 585
 586
 587
 588
 589
 590
 591
 592
 593
 594
 595
 596
 597
 598
 599
 600
 601
 602
 603
 604
 605
 606
 607
 608
 609
 610
 611
 612
 613
 614
 615
 616
 617
 618
 619
 620
 621
 622
 623
 624
 625
 626
 627
 628
 629
 630
 631
 632
 633
 634
 635
 636
 637
 638
 639
 640
 641
 642
 643
 644
 645
 646
 647
 648
 649
 650
 651
 652
 653
 654
 655
 656
 657
 658
 659
 660
 661
 662
 663
 664
 665
 666
 667
 668
 669
 670
 671
 672
 673
 674
 675
 676
 677
 678
 679
 680
 681
 682
 683
 684
 685
 686
 687
 688
 689
 690
 691
 692
 693
 694
 695
 696
 697
 698
 699
 700
 701
 702
 703
 704
 705
 706
 707
 708
 709
 710
 711
 712
 713
 714
 715
 716
 717
 718
 719
 720
 721
 722
 723
 724
 725
 726
 727
 728
 729
 730
 731
 732
 733
 734
 735
 736
 737
 738
 739
 740
 741
 742
 743
 744
 745
 746
 747
 748
 749
 750
 751
 752
 753
 754
 755
 756
 757
 758
 759
 760
 761
 762
 763
 764
 765
 766
 767
 768
 769
 770
 771
 772
 773
 774
 775
 776
 777
 778
 779
 780
 781
 782
 783
 784
 785
 786
 787
 788
 789
 790
 791
 792
 793
 794
 795
 796
 797
 798
 799
 800
 801
 802
 803
 804
 805
 806
 807
 808
 809
 810
 811
 812
 813
 814
 815
 816
 817
 818
 819
 820
 821
 822
 823
 824
 825
 826
 827
 828
 829
 830
 831
 832
 833
 834
 835
 836
 837
 838
 839
 840
 841
 842
 843
 844
 845
 846
 847
 848
 849
 850
 851
 852
 853
 854
 855
 856
 857
 858
 859
 860
 861
 862
 863
 864
 865
 866
 867
 868
 869
 870
 871
 872
 873
 874
 875
 876
 877
 878
 879
 880
 881
 882
 883
 884
 885
 886
 887
 888
 889
 890
 891
 892
 893
 894
 895
 896
 897
 898
 899
 900
 901
 902
 903
 904
 905
 906
 907
 908
 909
 910
 911
 912
 913
 914
 915
 916
 917
 918
 919
 920
 921
 922
 923
 924
 925
 926
 927
 928
 929
 930
 931
 932
 933
 934
 935
 936
 937
 938
 939
 940
 941
 942
 943
 944
 945
 946
 947
 948
 949
 950
 951
 952
 953
 954
 955
 956
 957
 958
 959
 960
 961
 962
 963
 964
 965
 966
 967
 968
 969
 970
 971
 972
 973
 974
 975
 976
 977
 978
 979
 980
 981
 982
 983
 984
 985
 986
 987
 988
 989
 990
 991
 992
 993
 994
 995
 996
 997
 998
 999
 1000

Example 10: Ming Tsao, *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions* (2004–05), mm. 235–43

The Adagio of Mozart's oboe quartet (K.V. 370, 1781) that is radically transcribed through the 7 x 7 lines of text of architect Daniel Liebeskind's *Virtual House* (1997). In the example above, the Mozart material is worked out according to the rule: "Toward a white opening whose extension cannot be controlled (because it is rooted in great weight)."

A dialectical composing is, perhaps, a way of engaging with Olson's "composition by field," which I believe is close to a *musique informelle*. Through a continuous process of dialectical energy exchange, the lyric as a subjective marker is continually reabsorbed into a stream of syntactical connections and transitions as it collides with whatever inhabits the spaces that are gradually opened up by the composition's formal movements. For an informal music, "order and disorder need to be brought into rich and unstable zones of conflict in which musical objects, arising through the energized intersection of provisional, sometimes self-destructing streams of coherent energy, are thrust to the very limits separating perceived order from unfocused chaos and, in being thus ejected, themselves provide new, momentarily cohering perspectives for the speculatively observing consciousness."⁶⁵ Ferneyhough's own ideas toward an informal music navigate between the poles of an "automatically-generated discourse" (music as generated by processes or those "shadows of objects in time")⁶⁶ and an "informal" way of "working freely but with

65 Brian Ferneyhough, "The Presence of Adorno," Paper read at the Foundation Royauumont, France, September 10 1994, p. 7, unpublished manuscript.

66 Ferneyhough, "Interview with James Boros," p. 435.

rigorous modes of order” (with musical objects that “enjoy a primal state already imbued with a certain internal differentiation or relational complexity” that can “enter into a dialogue with the composing consciousness, assigning values and articulating criteria of relevance themselves amenable to being treated as material for further manipulation”).⁶⁷ And this is where an informal music and dialectical composing find common ground: in an informal music, “whatever manifests itself ... as immediate, ultimate, as the fundamental given, will turn out, according to the insights of dialectical logic, to be already mediated” and dependent upon its opposite.⁶⁸

Example 11: Ming Tsao, *Serenade* (2012), mm. 137–43
 The excerpt above represents a dialectical confrontation with Schönberg’s *Serenade* (1920–23) and its leakage of scattered residue from early expressionist musical materials.

My engagement with the German-Austrian tradition through Hejinian’s sense of “barbarism” situates Lachenmann as the last great composer in this tradition since his rhetorical structures represent the final gasp in persuading a listener of the substance out of which they arise and within which they are anchored, suggesting that future attempts in this direction can only lapse into mere sentimentality. I think

67 Brian Ferneyhough, “Adorno Presentation,” Paper read at Goldsmiths College, London, February 21 1998, p. 2, unpublished manuscript.
 68 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 299. As an example, see my analysis of *Gran Torso* in Ming Tsao, “Helmut Lachenmann’s “Sound Types,” in *Perspectives of New Music* 52, no. 1 (Winter, 2014), pp. 217–238.

that further engagements with this tradition for composers born after 1945, should proceed along the lines of what Deleuze has referred to as a “minor music”⁶⁹ or, in my case, a “deterritorialized” music that originates in early expressionist music but is exaggerated and damaged in order to bring awareness to the forces of violence and tenderness that are at the heart of this music and to ensure that they are not forgotten through this music’s canonization.⁷⁰ I use rhythm and meter—what Stravinsky once referred to as the one parameter that can inflict violence upon the composition⁷¹—to wound these “scattered residue” which I transcribe from historical works. My sense of “aura” is not one of nostalgia but of waste by recuperating the rhetorical aspects of music through bits of residue from tradition through which a listener wades. Waste signifies excess and “rubbish stands as a rebuke and challenge to instrumental systems ... because rubbish is what is left when the operation of the system is complete and nothing should be left.”⁷² Rubbish, according to Kristeva, suggests that the expelled and used-up parts are in a constant process of dissolution and exchange with the world and thus resists its being “enframed” for use value by some manipulative power or as mere decoration within a commodifying culture.⁷³ My scarred transcriptions are not intended toward a surrealism or humor but rather, as poet Paul Celan would state, to engage with the materials of tradition in a “more sober, more factual ... greyer manner”⁷⁴ defining a lyrical continuity through interruption, noise and wreckage. My own compositions proceed from a damaged and degraded lexicon torn from once all-inclusive ideological enframings and now blended with noise into a kind of “figural *Strukturklang*” where rhythm and meter become aggressively irregular, placing intense pressure on the sounds in order to “open the wound” through a tortured syntax and compression of energy. The *Strukturklang* itself becomes a vortex into which multiple processes as carriers of musical energy channel an acute physicality between the performers and a dense materiality of sound through extreme polyphony that activates every part of the sonic process into strong question. These processes of gestural deformations can encompass the musical equivalent of enjambments, elisions, frequent stops or shifts of direction, and other threats to the continuity and integrity of the musical line that continually deflect and absorb the lyric as a genuine marker for subjectivity and musical expression in order to “keep open the wound, to keep

69 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 17.

70 “Deterritorializing” in the sense that “expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings.” *Ibid.*, p. 28.

71 Igor Stravinsky, *Conversations with Stravinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 24.

72 Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much*, p. 10.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

74 Pierre Joris, “Introduction,” in *Breathturn*, Paul Celan (Los Angeles: Green Integer 111, 2006), p. 18.

alive that simultaneous sense of the expelled as self and Other.”⁷⁵ Such “deteritorialization” of a musical language which must proceed along syntactical pressures (vis-à-vis Deleuze’s “cramped spaces”),⁷⁶ exposes the violence, rupture and tenderness of this musical tradition through the internal energy of the work as a high-energy construct in which discovery as a “liberated perception” can be made possible.⁷⁷ “Energy is invested in concrete musical objects to the extent that they are capable of rendering forces acting upon them visible,”⁷⁸ which is why energy, force and violence become key characteristics of a “barbarian” music. “The degree to which destructive tendencies are perceivable in the object...is a *wound* that opens a small window onto the things that really take place in the interior of a sound-object.”⁷⁹ But these syntactic pressures on musical objects are dialectical in the sense that their relations percolate, are never hypostatized, and always under the fragility of becoming something other. As Wolff has remarked, “By dialectical, I mean the interconnecting of differing features of the music which brings about the music’s life, and so its way of participating in representing, and being part of a commentary on individual and political history.”⁸⁰ It is in this sense that dialectical composing is “not cultural neutralism, but a critique of the past”⁸¹ and, in my practice, a way to reinvigorate waste as the leakage between damaged historical materials to discover a renewed level of materially sedimented meaning.

ABSTRACT: Der Aufsatz behandelt Tsao’s Ästhetik eines *dialektischen Komponierens*, das v.a. im Rekurs auf Lachenmann und Ferneyhough entwickelt wird. Dabei geht es, anhand zahlreicher eigener Musikbeispiele illustriert, um die kompositorische Wiederentdeckung von Subjektivität, musikalischem Ausdruck und der Kategorie des Lyrischen angesichts einer Diskreditierung, die diese Begriffe historisch erfuhren. Dialektisches Komponieren zeichnet sich primär durch musikalische Materialarbeit aus, wobei Vergangenheit und Gegenwart durch solche Praxis in neue musikalische Verhältnisse treten, die die Artikulation einer kulturell und politisch engagierten Position durch Komponieren ermöglichen.

75 Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much*, p. 131.

76 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 17.

77 Helmut Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” p. 100.

78 Ferneyhough, “Il Tempo della Figura,” in *Collected Writings*, p. 35.

79 Thomas Meyer, “The important thing is for the composer to recompose himself in the act of composition: an Interview with Brian Ferneyhough” 2007, unpublished manuscript.

80 Wolff, *Cues*, p. 184.

81 Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 305.