

Music Composition Today

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Abstract: In this essay, composer Ming Tsao presents a critical overview of today's new music scene, with a special emphasis on the task of teaching music composition today and the culture of new music festivals. Tsao's main critique delves into the current tendency towards entertainment predominantly displayed in some German new music festivals, commonly advertised as experimental music. Alongside this critique, Tsao presents Steven Takasugi's musical theater work "Side Show" (2009-15) as an example of today's music composition that resists this emerging commercialism in concert music. In this text, Tsao makes reference to the writings and ideas of German composer Helmut Lachenmann, mainly on his concepts of Geräuschmusik, Kadenzklänge, Texturklänge, and the language-like aspects of music, as well as to the writings of poet J. H. Prynne [note by editor].

Keywords: new music festivals, contemporary music, language of music, teaching composition today, experimental music.

The composer Steven Takasugi remarked in his opening statement to the 2019 Berlin premiere of his musical theater work *Side Show* (2009 – 15) that the genre of new music today has succumbed to models of commercial entertainment. He was referring to what has become prevalent as spectacle in the German new music festivals through the influx of such disciplines as sound art, performance art, conceptual art, video art, etc. that have attempted to establish themselves as alternative views toward music composition. Such a plethora of views to redefine music composition, while long awaited in a field that has been slow to change, has also contributed to a flattening of more traditional approaches where once valued attributes such as “craft” have been reduced to a mere facility with instrumental color and knowledge of technology. With such a diversity of approaches, it is rare to hear works of substance emerge in the larger music festivals that justifiably are under pressure to make performances accessible to more diverse audiences and to move away from the stigma that new music is an elitist activity for listeners with specialized knowledge.

One can appreciate *Side Show* as a critique of an orientation that began with the instrumental music theater of Mauricio Kagel in the late 1960’s and continued through composers such as Matthias Spahlinger or Nicholas A. Huber and their students (what has now become *Die Konzeptmusik*). Yet, if there was genuine critique in Kagel’s early work against a post-war generation that gradually accepted a Liberal capitalist framework as the only viable path for an artist’s freedom of expression to be reconciled with a comfortable living (a critique developed in Kagel’s 1970 film *Ludwig van*), then works of more recent composers in a similar vein have fully embraced the implications of such an economic framework in order to promote careers under the guise of “experimental music” in which the desire to have “fun” and refusing the seriousness of the new music established directly after the war is seen as a viable critique of the pretensions of a modernist aesthetic. What began as critique with Kagel has now become a model for economic success that relies on branding – i.e., “the new (fill in the blank)” – and a tacit understanding that art should somehow “entertain” and poke fun at the canon of composed music that has, for good reason, been revealed as problematic. Takasugi’s *Side Show* is both a logical conclusion of such trends as well as a requiem for works that can possibly affect listeners in deeper ways to enrich the world with genuine substance as an antidote to the deluge of entertainment and “fake news” that seem intent on distracting one from engaging with the world more seriously. Indeed, *Side Show* implicates the new

music festival scene, particularly in Germany and Austria, as carnivalesque replete with barkers, fun houses and side shows that embrace a spectator form of entertainment where audiences remain passive, amused and fundamentally unmoved. The new music scene as exemplified through festivals, awards, prizes, etc., has become dominated by free-market apologists where one is trained to value freedom of choice in the play of vacuity by which a listener can determine their preferences, tastes, loyalties and all the bound emotional habits of an old humanism within which a listening consumer's choice maintains market saturation.

Furthermore *Side Show*, by emphasizing various clichés of new music – often with a “tongue in cheek” humor, supports the critique – first articulated by the composer Helmut Lachenmann – that new music from the 1960's onward established a reactionary position in which the utopian ideals of new music directly after the war (i.e., the “structuralist approach”) gradually turned toward the more comfortable modes of entertainment. It was not only the gradual influx of ideas imported from the Visual Arts into music composition to expand the notion of spectacle in performance but also the greater urge toward passive listening that was emphasized through letting “sound be sound” and the meditative experiences that such an approach can elicit: to remove the act of listening away from thinking and toward a phenomenology of somatic experiences, an academically respectable way of framing the desire of some composers for a more gratuitous listening. This reactionary and “anti-intellectual” aspect of a “reduced listening” – of listening to sound only as sound and not in regards to its broader network of cultural associations, what Lachenmann calls “aura” – is the implicit renunciation of listening as resistance toward status quo that was so important to composers after the war including Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen and Nono. The brilliance of *Side Show* is its Trojan horse quality that seems to act in accordance with current trends in new music yet in reality is a vicious attack against them. Lachenmann's critique of a “reduced listening” stems from his comments on the “texture music” of the 1960's (more generally referred to as *Texturklänge*), such as the music from this period by Lutosławski and Penderecki (the “Polish school”), Ligeti as well as some works by Xenakis, Holliger and Schnebel.¹ Such music often treats composition as blocks of sound texture that elicits a passive listening through the juxtaposition of sound objects rather than a more active listening developed through process-

¹ Helmut Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 12, Part 1, 1995: 95.

oriented materials whose internal relations are essential for its temporal unfolding, including more rhetorically (or “textually”) driven materials that bring music’s “language-like” aspects to the fore.² Such composition that relies on static blocks of sound textures whose relation to time is wholly arbitrary prevents the phenomenon of polyphony as structurally composed differences within the musical material from entering the listening experience and thus requires a meditative “reduced listening” to become engaged.

For Lachenmann, music composition is fundamentally about syntax, grammar – particularly how sound is brought to cadence – and the network of relations between individual sounds – i.e., “families of sounds” – that are dialectically mediated through sounds’ materiality (or the materiality of producing sound on instruments, a “musique concrète instrumentale”). It is precisely this constructive element of music composition, to place things into new relations and the attempt to grasp at the potentially speculative nature of sound that *Side Show* mourns the loss of (as exemplified in the often stuttering and stammering of the performers), a mourning for music composition as a serious critique for social change where something is at stake, and risk becomes more than a comfortable posture to claim, so that listeners can be moved in a genuine way and the perspective of their world view fundamentally redrawn. Listening requires work and effort that demands to be met with equal complexity in the musical experience to elicit such listening. Much of the critique implicit in *Side Show* is leveled at today’s *Geräuschmusik* or “noise music” whose materials are “noise” (often through extended techniques on classical instruments, found objects, self-made DIY instruments, various kinds of electronics, etc.) that are often married to the most conventional musical syntax that belies its apparent radicality. Indeed, one encounters in new music festivals the most extreme preparations on classical instruments to prevent any familiar sounds from occurring, which often gives the composer the illusion that the compositional work is done. The result is that these radically transformed instruments are performed in the most conventional ways, with banal gestures, phrasing and cadences. Much of this “noise music” that depends solely upon the materiality of sound becomes easy listening, since the materiality of sound is something accepted merely as given and not something to be worked through by composer or listener. The

² Ming Tsao, “Helmut Lachenmann’s ‘Sound Types,’” *Perspectives of New Music*, Volume 52, No. 1 (Winter 2014), 217 – 238.

danger is that composers often rely on these “foreign” materials to create enough of an illusion that something new is occurring without working through the implications of such materials in the realm of a compositional language that always lurks behind any desire toward musical expression. Cage once stated that music composition amounted to work, the daily practice of searching for sound through a dialectical interplay of one’s materials with respect to method (in Cage’s case, the contingencies afforded by chance procedures). Without positioning one’s materials in relation to one’s grammar (i.e., the ways in which materials are structured, juxtaposed, layered, developed, counterpointed and thus given expression), the assumption is to merely rely on the material’s “foreignness” as a means to create the illusion of something new. Dispelling these illusions as banal and superficial is the nail in the coffin that *Side Show* mercilessly hammers, that new music’s turn toward entertainment positions all listeners as free-market, consuming agents within a product field coded by market-access entitlements like education and leisure so that spontaneous acts of “choice” are contaminated by the cosmetic nature of the choice. As the poet J. H. Prynne notes, “the cosmetics of choice become the most dangerous elements: they destroy vigilance and all sense of an interconnected general good by seeming to provide a rewarding increase in benefits for those defined as deserving (earning) (acquiring) them.”³ Many of these composers fully accept an economic system of benefits and “opportunities” that in the end is just as problematic as the canon of classical music that they disparage.

In today’s context where new music is becoming supplanted by entertainment and commercialism, I find the values of difficulty and resistance more and more prescient. What does it mean for a listening experience to be “difficult”? I have learned that this is entirely different than a musical experience that is alienating which often leaves one bored, passive and unable to enact. Prynne describes difficulty in reading poetry as when “the language and structure of its presentation are unusually cross-linked or fragmented, or dense with ideas and response-patterns that challenge the reader’s powers of recognition.”⁴ I like to think that music too can be just as dense and able to challenge a listener’s power of recognition not through unusual sounds or sound textures but through a complication of music’s grammatical syntax by which energy can be released

³ J. H. Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” *The Gig* 7, (November 2000), 42.

⁴ J. H. Prynne, “Difficulties in the Translation of “Difficult” Poems,” *Cambridge Literary Review*, I/3 (Easter, 2010), 160.

through the internal pressures of a compositional language. Music composition today should be experimental. Not so much in the sense of experimenting with sounds, technology or alternative modes of presentation (such as multimedia works) that can often support an easy appreciation of the musical experience as much as a difficult one, but experimentation with music's "textual" qualities of phrasing and syntax, including its tonal patterns of cadence, tension and relaxation, rhythm and meter, and polyphonic textures. Although music is something other than language, its origins are with language's expressive elements that bear innumerable motivated echoes to language's syntax and structure. A truly radical musical language consists precisely of a de-hierarchization of musical syntactic structure so that listening becomes, under these transformed circumstances, a new experience. Experimentation can also occur in a composer's ability to invent new contexts for a variety of compositional languages and styles to coexist and come together. As Reeve and Kerridge suggest, exchanges between different modes of expression can provide a challenge to the humanist paradigm by imposing shifts of scale that immediately disrupt any sense of personal, unmediated perception.⁵ It is in these "shifts of scale" where I place the issue of "difficulty" in the listening experience: music composition today should strive for an active and alert listening that often challenges the listener's powers of recognition without breaking completely from them. The "speculative turn" in music composition is indeed not to excise music's resemblance to language, and by extension music's capacity for expression, but to decenter music's *humanized* expression from its privileged position for the possibility of a music independent of language, thought and intentions. Of all the arts, I think that music composition behaves most closely to poetry. Indeed, music compositions' origins stem from its relationship to spoken or sung text (as with early Greek or Chinese music, for example). But music compositions' reach extends not to what some would call "sound" – a term I often find to be problematic and reductive in meaning – but to mathematics (for example, rhythm, symmetry, proportion), as was recognized in the "musica speculativa" of the Middle Ages. The language of mathematics can reveal in music a more fundamental *ontology* where expression has the capacity to achieve a lyricism beyond subjectivity (i.e., as the desiring "I" with all of its bourgeois pretensions). Such a revelation can occur when

⁵ N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool, U.K.: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 10.

music's "textual" aspects are broken and damaged and there is leakage between the compositional work and the larger world order.

Music shares with poetry the essential parameters of rhythm and meter whereby internal pressures can be exerted upon material in order to disrupt a complaisant surface harmony and bring discrepant expressive materials together through the violence of montage and parataxis. Meter and rhythm have the potential to break music's "textual" aspects by becoming aggressively irregular in order to produce a tortured syntax and a compression of energy. By placing intense pressure on the sounds, music's sensual qualities are experienced through its materiality. Such musical expression has a quality of contingency, or what Cage would refer to as "anarchic harmony", where sound is freed from human intentionality and reaches into the artlessness of nature. The effect of such contingency in the musical expression is a "noise-bearing" aesthetics where noise makes palpable the materiality of sound production and remains resistant to music's expressive qualities. Questions of noise and interference bring to a listener's attention the conditions under which a sound—or noise—is physically produced, what materials and energies are involved and what resistances are encountered. Lachenmann reminds us that the "beautiful" in music is only such when accompanied by a fair amount of initial resistance in the listener. An ecological approach for music composition can be constituted through a feedback loop that continually registers between the physical characteristics of sound (its materiality, spectrum and noise), music's language-like aspects (Lachenmann's *Kadenzklänge* derived from aspects of tonality such as gesture, phrasing and cadence), music's aura (as stratified layers of historical and cultural associations), and music's compositional structuring through various kinds of processes – primarily serial and mathematical – that can work into and against music's language-like aspects.⁶

My own musical compositions constitute a materialist music whose sound world lies outside of consciousness rather than a sound world fully endowed with consciousness, with the hopes of placing the listener in a space where one is required to rethink their personhood within a larger domain of life. Noise and the violence enacted upon my music through rhythm and meter produce a music whose very integrity is damaged and violated, signaling the opposition and resistance that certain lyrical procedures meet or defy. This opposition and resistance can open our listening to a

⁶ Similar to what Lachenmann proposes in his essay "On Structuralism" (Lachenmann, "On Structuralism," 98).

different sense of musical expression, an expression that comprises sounds before they are fully recruited into the action of human agency. It is with a materialist music that “difficulty” in listening finds its counterpart in resistance on the part of the listener. Resistance reaffirms the ontological priority of the outside world, its conflicting and dynamic materiality that exceeds both conceptual thought and technological control. “Difficulty” in listening is tied to music’s potential for complexity that can exceed human agency as if to reaffirm how things are through an inventiveness of materials under pressure of extreme willingness to forgo the usual habits of listening. Difficulty demands engagement and can renew music in a period where a detached, aesthetic judgment or a consumerist, passive listening has marginalized relevance. To accept Nono’s challenge of reawakening one senses – sensual, physical and intellectual – in order to participate in something much larger than ourselves is *the* key challenge for a 21st century music.

As a teacher of music composition in Germany, “how things are” forms a material, cultural and historical basis from which I try to promote a student’s speculative imagination to invent new possibilities for the listening experience. It is this sense of a speculative realism that students can work through the substance of music composition, which includes the material, cultural and historical conditions of composition, and can thereby gain a critical sense of how subjective expression is implicitly encoded into the music we compose. Music composition must stand for something more relevant than the “fun and games” of new music festivals that *Side Show* is so eager to critique, as well as something more meaningful than explorations in “sound” as the merely decorative in a commodifying culture. To teach music composition today must be more than giving students the freedom to explore sound, notation, and technology, and more than a context for developing a “personal voice” or “style”. Such an idea of “freedom” is tantamount to that of the new music festivals: a false sense of choice that de-historicizes and de-contextualizes music composition in order to weaken the material resistances of a compositional work toward commodification. A musical work, without discovering and developing a network of relations through being embedded within history, culture, and geology (as material substance) can much more easily enter the marketplace of commodity exchange and acquire an entertainment value in the listening experience. In the current political context where questions around the necessity of music composition are raised whenever funding of the arts becomes problematic, we must therefore ask more from music composition as an artistic practice. In a formal education, this means

establishing music composition as a forum for generating knowledge that can act upon the speculative connections between musicology, music theory, ethnomusicology and other artistic and academic disciplines (that can range from poetry, literature, film and the Visual Arts to politics, history, biology and mathematics). To be a composer these days requires knowledge from many diverse disciplines coupled with the ability to form musical connections between these areas of knowledge in more associative and intuitive ways. I often emphasize the research process that can integrate collaborations between composers and performers as well as artists or academics from other disciplines as part of the compositional process so that discussions and sharing knowledge forms a basis from which we can learn from one another and discover important connections. It is essential that composers create more meaningful networks of social relations that move away from competition and distrust as promoted through festivals, prizes, and the production of musical works as commodities, values that are often emphasized by career models of success in the world of new music. To become a truly radical composer means also refusing the economics of “success” in this institutionalized context for new music. *Side Show* took six years exclusively to compose and requires a very specialized and committed group of performers to execute. Compositional works that require this degree of time and attention begin to pave the way for such a future.

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