



Humanwissenschaftliche Fakultät

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Ultraschall Berlin

Festival für neue Musik, 2014

Suggested citation referring to the original publication:

Tempo 68 (2014) 269, pp. 76–78

DOI <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004029821400014X>

ISSN (print) 0040-2982

ISSN (online) 1478-2286

Postprint archived at the Institutional Repository of the Potsdam University in:

Postprints der Universität Potsdam

Humanwissenschaftliche Reihe ; 534

ISSN 1866-8364

<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus4-415117>

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-41511>

Ultraschall Berlin, Festival für neue Musik, 2014

Ultraschall, jointly presented by Deutschlandradio Kultur and Kulturradio vom RBB (Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg), and this

year officially renamed Ultraschall Berlin, has been a fixture of the city's concert life since 1999. Festival directors Rainer Pöllmann (Deutschlandradio Kultur) and Andreas Göbel (replacing Margarete Zander for Kulturradio vom RBB) chose to emphasise the two major broadcasters' partnership this year with what they called a 'duo idea' running through the festival's programme. Illustrating this theme, orchestral concerts (a pair) opened and closed the festival, the project New Forum Jeune Création paired each of three ensembles with two young composers, and performing duos included GranSchumacher Piano Duo, Claudia Barainsky and Axel Bauni in a concert for voice and piano, and a concert of string duos by members of Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin (who were however not appearing as representatives of this ensemble) with the featured composer/zither player Leopold Hurt, to name but a few. Additionally, a so-called epilogue after the festival's official ending was paired with something that one might have called a prologue, seemingly tacked on as an afterthought: an evening of Klangkunst, electro-acoustic music and performance entitled 'Art's Birthday' presented works by Hanna Hartman, Jana Winderen and Nicolas Bernier at the hub of Berlin's club culture, Berghain. Though internationally known in the techno scene for drugs, dancing and dark rooms, Berghain has also long been used as a venue for contemporary and experimental music concerts. The otherwise conservative choices of venue (Radialsystem V, Haus des Rundfunks, and HAU (Hebbel am Ufer) Theatres) and programme – Ultraschall sees itself more as a repertoire-establishing festival, with an emphasis not on premieres but on second and third performances alongside 'masterpieces' of contemporary and modern music – made this first concert appear a half-hearted jumping on the 'new contexts' bandwagon. And, alongside the repeated, excited announcements of the festival now having its own website (yes in 2014!), there was something of the sense of embarrassment one feels as a teenager bumping into one's parents at a night club.

The first of three orchestral concerts and the official opening of the festival began with the unfortunate announcement that Heinz Holliger had had to cancel for personal reasons. Wolfgang Lischke replaced Holliger at the podium and, all things considered, managed admirably to tackle the challenging programme. Still, one was left imagining how the concert might have sounded had Holliger been present. Elliot Carter's *Clarinet Concerto*, a work filled

with exciting and dynamic contrasts as the soloist is paired with various sub-groupings of the small orchestra, was rather flat, clean and dull. The sterile precision and clichéd pathos of soloist Jörg Widmann (whose own miniature 5 *Bruchstücke* for clarinet and piano opened the programme) did little to help matters. Similarly, the subtleties required of a performance of Klaus Huber's *Tenebrae* seemed somewhat out of reach to the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and major questions remained as to the balance between soloists and orchestra in Holliger's own *Janus* for violin, viola and orchestra. It was unclear whether and to what extent the soloists were swallowed up by the orchestra intentionally, as a matter of narrative, or simply a result of the performance, lack of adequate preparation, or even acoustics.

In any case, the opening concert's programme was representative of the festival's position of advocating 'business as usual' in contemporary music, and the able but little-more-than-that performances were reflected in the all-too-familiar apathetic faces of an audience of colleagues, peers, composition students and a generally ageing subscription public. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of contemporary music's audience but, regardless of how one feels about the current state of affairs, for better or worse, Ultraschall's approach is certainly not aiming to make any significant changes on this front.

Lothar Zagrosek and the DSO offered far more engaging performances in the pre-epilogue closing concert. There was no change in the party line, however, so Lachenmann's *Schreiben*, notably a highlight of the festival as representative of both 'another Lachenmann piece' and something like the highest possible level of what establishment New Music in Germany does and can do, was clearly positioned as such. Placed alongside works by Nicola Sani (*Al fole vollo*), Hanspeter Kyburz (*Touche*), and the premiere of the newly discovered *Kamakala* by Giacinto Scelsi, *Schreiben* was set apart by more than just the orchestra's obviously deeper level of commitment and preparation. The Scelsi was presented as being of historical significance, as the only known orchestral work from the period separating his earlier, pre-crisis work and his 'mature' *Quattro Pezzi...* (1959). Though interesting (if not fascinating) as an historical document to those of us interested in Scelsi's compositional development, it was perhaps little more than that.

All of this is not to say that the status quo is entirely bad, or that the festival didn't also

offer music of great interest. There were some notably excellent performances and a few discoveries to be made. Concerts by Cologne's young Ensemble Garage, double-bass virtuoso Edicson Ruiz, and the above-mentioned string duo concert all satisfied every basic appreciation of excellent musicianship, far beyond any decisions of programming. The same could be said of the Boulanger Trio's contribution, which concluded with Bernd Alois Zimmermann's remarkable *Présence* for speaker, a role taken on here by the imposing Matti Klemm, and piano trio. Alongside pieces like *intercomunicazione*, this little-known and stunning work is a reminder of what a strangely fascinating mind the world so briefly had in Zimmermann. The opportunity to hear a performance of a piece like this is certainly the best of what an approach aiming to present lesser-known works of the literature has to offer.

The project New Forum Jeune Création made its first of three planned stops with six premieres at Ultraschall Berlin (followed by Antwerp and Lyon). By and large, the fruits of this composition-competition-turned-collaboration between young composers and three of contemporary music's leading ensembles – Ensemble Mosaik, ChampdAction, and Ensemble Orchestral Contemporain – were simply what one might expect. There was one big surprise however: Hikari Kiyama's unapologetic *Kojiki*. Though the piece may well have been as naïve as it seemed, it was perhaps the closest thing to a convincing argument for the potential artistic value of the postmodern, dance-music-influenced, 'shopping mall' approach that I have yet encountered in the New Music instrumental ensemble context; and I write this as someone who was previously certain that such an argument couldn't be made. Maybe it shouldn't have been surprising that Belgian ensemble ChampdAction was able to pull off this silly frenzy as they did, but their fantastic performance managed the hardest of sells. Something so generally contemptible was cast in such a light as to open a door to a new perspective.

One of the most eye-opening events of the festival was the concert by Norwegian Ensemble asamisimasa. A view, however brief, of the usually so far removed Norwegian – and by extension Scandinavian – New Music scene in Germany was extremely refreshing, particularly in light of the rest of the festival's programme,

and asamisimasa's level of engagement was palpable. Fongaard's *Galaxy op. 46* for three pre-recorded, microtonal electric guitars was on the one hand representative of any number of 1960s clichés, while at the same time transcending these to create a magical, visceral universe often so alarmingly absent. Thanks to contributions by Ultraschall's partner the Berliner Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD (also responsible for an enabling a portrait concert of guest Swedish composer Malin Bång, with the Curious Chamber Players), guest and regular asamisimasa collaborator Øyvind Torvund's *Plastic Wave* for solo piano and quartet was able to receive its German premiere. Not only striking in its juxtaposition of virtuoso soloist and understated ensemble play, its seeming lack of familiar dogma seemed to be everything that the festival was otherwise missing. Sadly, the concert was prematurely interrupted due to technical difficulties and Berlin's audiences will have to wait for the German premiere of Trond Reinholdsten's *Inferno*.

Johannes Kalitzke and the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin gave commanding performances in the orchestral epilogue at the Haus des Rundfunks. Mathias Spahlinger, Lachenmann's successor at the Freiburger Musikhochschule and a likely heir to the throne as his generation's 'critical genius', received a similar pedestal treatment to the Altmeister. Spahlinger's *und als wir*, for 54 solo string players, and the equally rarely performed *morendo*, were presented alongside concerto-like works by Leopold Hurt (who himself assumed the role of zither soloist in his *Seuring / Schalter*) and Manuel Hidalgo (*Gran Nada* with accordionist Christine Paté). Sitting between the string players, who were placed within the audience at four points during *und als wir*, the experiential discrepancy between recording and live performance was abundantly clear. What once seemed ordinary revealed itself to be sublime. Finally, concluding the festival with the erased gestures of *morendo* was – credit where credit is due – brilliant. Still, in the current climate of austerity, snuffing out the metaphorical candle in this way on a festival that seems so willfully unwilling to engage critically with its and New Music's *modus operandi* ultimately had something of the tragic, if not macabre.

Andrew Noble