

## **Miller Theatre Program Notes**

### **Composer Portraits – Helmut Lachenmann: 75th Birthday Celebration**

#### **Thursday, April 1, 2010 at 8:00PM**

*“What I want is always the same: a music whose cognizance is not a question of some privileged intellectual training but just of compositional clarity and consistency, a music at once the expression and the aesthetic shape of a curiosity willing to reflect on everything, but also so placed as to unmask any progressive illusion—art as freedom effected in a time of unfreedom.”* —Helmut Lachenmann, 1971

In a composing career of over half a century, Lachenmann has pursued his ideals with heartening determination. He has, in particular, cherished sounds that were marginal and overlooked, sounds with a lot of noise in them, sounds that in earlier music would have been regarded as extraneous or accidental, and he has brought to those sounds an extraordinary care for precise utterance and placing, made them the vectors of a dynamism as sure as that of Brahms. His achievement is at once aesthetic and moral. He honors the neglected, holds out an image of music—of life—released from prejudice and hierarchy.

#### **Pression (1969-1970) for cello**

Lachenmann's 1968 moment was a reach beyond models of musical practice that were not only outworn but also compromised, in that they had been absorbed by bourgeois culture. The task for composers was to reclaim their materials: to discover new and unsuspected beauty in what, by traditional canons, would be regarded as malformed and inadmissible. What he was after was “beauty not only through refusing the customary but also through unmasking the conditions of what counts for beauty, such as the suppression of the fundamental physical prerequisites and energies, of the fundamental efforts—if you will, of the concealed labor.” The means by which sounds are combined and connected would have to be rethought, not taken over from procedures developed in another age for other purposes, and the rethinking would engage the performer—necessarily a virtuoso—in the process. *Pression* is typical of Lachenmann's work of this period in its concentration on irregular techniques, and thereby on the physical mechanism by which the sounds are produced. The score is a program for action, requiring new kinds of notation. At the start of the piece, for example, the directions indicate how the bow is to be held in the right fist while the left hand's fingers produce whispering glissandos of quasi-harmonics; the effect is of quiet respiration or the gentlest breeze, in a pianissimo to which the piece often returns.

It is characteristic of the composer that the situation is dialectical, and on several levels. Though the music is produced under pressure (in French, *pression*)—figuratively in the tension any performance is likely to have on account of the unfamiliar techniques, and literally in that it is the pressure of bow and fingers that produces the sound—it is predominantly delicate. A venerable instrument is found to have quite unexpected resources. Things that would be slips under other circumstances are now striven for, and rendered as objects of beauty. Lachenmann's reference to such pieces as “instrumental *musique concrète*” evokes how this is a music of whole sounds, not of sounds as instances of pitch, duration, and so on, but he has also remarked that the listening experience becomes concrete because “one hears under what conditions, with what materials, with what energies, and against what (mechanical) resistances each sound or noise is produced.”

As to form, *Pression* reproduces the process of discovery by which it was made: a performance possibility is explored, as at the opening, until it leads into, is invaded by or summons another, all showing an invigorating sonic imagination and sense of drama. Lachenmann's search was always not only for new sounds but also for new forms, sound and form emerging together in the creative process, interacting, the sounds for the most part propulsive and energizing, heard as individual (this is not timbre-melody) and yet form-building. Any sound, in Lachenmann's view, comes with formal properties, arising partly from the tradition in which it is being composed, performed, and experienced, and partly from its physical nature. Among the types Lachenmann distinguishes is the “cadence sound”: a loud pizzicato from which an upward rustle escapes. An example duly appears at the end of this 10-minute piece.

#### **Wiegenmusik (1963) for piano**

The four-minute *Wiegenmusik* (Cradle Music) was written in the year Lachenmann and his wife had their first child, but it also rocks us back—shakes us, as well—to former musical times, whose splinters and

shadows (resonances are crucial here) appear within a new discourse. The composer wrote this note for the first performance, which he gave himself at Darmstadt in 1964:

“*Cradle Music* (not “Cradle Song”) is determined by a structure of multifariously branching arpeggio figures, often stretched far apart, often drawn tightly together. After the compressions of the opening, it comes closer and closer toward a state of complete rest: “sleeping child,” almost psychogramatically modified.”

### **Ein Kinderspiel (1980) for piano**

Children's music? Lachenmann heads this suite of miniatures—*Ein Kinderspiel* (Child's Play), dedicated to his son David—with something Adorno wrote to Walter Benjamin about working on a children's opera: “it is much more about pointing toward a childlike model than of conjuring up childhood.” These pieces were composed so that young pianists could play them, but the music does not underplay what the world of a child might encompass. Simplicity is found not by forgetting but by moving to the edges—the edges, not least, of the keyboard, for much of the activity takes place in the extreme treble with resonances in the extreme bass, where the keys of the bottom octave of the piano are often silently depressed, so releasing the corresponding strings to reverberate. Qualities typical of Lachenmann's music—intensity, exquisite noise, astonishing innovation—are present here as much as in his other works.

Hansel and Gretel, we may remember, leave a trail of breadcrumbs through the woods. The “icy moonlight” depends on quick, intermittent pedal effects, “Akiko” (the name of the dedicatee's younger sister, seven years old at the time) on the use of the sostenuto pedal to capture—or not—the notes of tunes skipping by. In “Filter Swing” the pianist's fingers determine which notes to hold on to.

### **String Quartet No. 2 “Reigen seliger Geister” (1989)**

There will be people in this audience who remember the extraordinary performance of Lachenmann's first string quartet, *Gran Torso* (1970-1971), given when he was last here, nine years ago. That piece testified to the palpable excitement—and wariness—he felt in traveling along the routes of “instrumental *musique concrète*” into the hallowed land of the string quartet. Nearly 20 years later, he was a different composer, ready to admit more normal sounds, as well as more evident connections with the rhythms, shapes, and harmonies of other music—even with the titles, in the case of *Reigen seliger Geister*, which is named for the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” in Gluck's Orpheus opera. But in his attitude of exploring and testing, he was the same.

Much of his second quartet is whisper-thin, opening toward the ice-and-ozone sound world of his opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (The Little Match Girl), which he was soon to begin. As in the opera, too, one may often get the impression that the music is not so much speaking as listening, that it is reporting on and responding to events somewhere beyond: crucial events, with which this is our only—and therefore invaluable—contact. There is, in other words, a curiously tangible transcendence.

The composer has written as follows of the piece, which plays continuously for a little under half an hour:

*Reigen seliger Geister*—perception play: tones ‘grasped out of the air,’ ‘air’ grasped out of the tones. Following the adventure in my first string quartet *Gran Torso* with extraterritorial ways of playing the instrument—now long since developed by others in touristic fashion—here the reappropriation of interval constellations (‘text’) as ‘facade,’ as ‘pretext,’ so that their realization will enable the natural acoustic edges of the produced tones—their timbral articulation, their muting, how they fade, how the vibrating strings are stopped (for example, also altering the noise component by sliding the bow between the bridge and the fingerboard)—to create, through the ‘dead’ tone-structure, a reborn object of experience.

Thus, action fields determined by playing techniques are staged, transformed, shifted, abandoned, combined. The *pianissimo* as space for a manifold *fortissimo possibile* of the suppressed in-between values: figures that a sliding bowstroke makes vanish or arise within toneless murmuring, the pizzicato-mixture that, despite its fugitive fading, can still be prematurely damped in part, ‘filtered.’

### **“... zwei Gefühle ...”: Musik mit Leonardo for ensemble with narration (1991-1992)**

The title— “...zwei Gefühle...” (“...two feelings...”)—comes from the text by Leonardo da Vinci that threads through the piece, a curiously objective-personal memorandum on volcanos and on the “two feelings” to be experienced at the mouth of a large cave: fear of the darkness and desire to see what lies hidden. Lachenmann’s own memorandum on the composition (which lasts about 22 minutes) takes us further into the work and what it owes to Nono, his teacher, who had died in 1990; this commentary refers to “two narrators,” though the composer has often, as tonight, combined their roles:

A large part of the work was written in the empty house of Luigi Nono on Sardinia. Beyond question, the memory of him resonated in how I approached the piece at that time.

My work started out from the experience that “structurally” directed hearing—i.e., observant perception of what is immediately sounding and of the relationships working within it—is bound up with inner images and feelings that in no way distract from this process of observation but, rather, are indissolubly tied to it and even lend it a particular characteristic intensity.

This is the strange situation we encounter in deciphering a message concerning us, that two aspects of the task—the (possibly laborious) recognizing and drawing together of the signs on the one hand and the power manifest in the message on the other— are tightly intertwined, to the extent of implying one another and forming together a closed experience-complex.

The two narrators of the Leonardo text in “... zwei Gefühle ...” are quasi-complementary halves of the consciousness of an imaginary Wanderer and of a quietly astonished Reader. These themselves function as it were unconsciously, like the two hands working together of someone with weak vision, who gropes at the text as if it were a precious inscription, and in doing so seizes on its linguistic particles one at a time and joins them by a fallible effort of memory, an effort that is concentrated and literal, “disintegrated” but at the same time “concerned” in both senses of the word, since what semantically develops, is even conjured up, is a restless search “as if made in ignorance” through which the blind groper recognizes himself.

Whatever may sound is understood as twofold: it is material derived and transformed from the phonetic in many ways, and at the same time it is the debris of the traditional stock of affective gestures, newly considered as the sonic connection of acoustic fields that are variously articulated from within, like various volcanoes that heat up or cool down. Mediterranean sound-landscape in inhospitable heights; a “pastoral” written in thinking over what linked me to the composer of *Hay que caminar* [Nono’s last work].

Lachenmann recorded *Wiegenmusik* and *Ein Kinderspiel* in the mid-1990s for a Montaigne CD that also offered *Pression*, in a performance by Lucas Fels; but the album is out of print and hard to find. However, a video recording of the composer playing *Wiegenmusik* for Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles, in 2008, is viewable on YouTube. For *Pression* there are several alternatives. The Arditti Quartet, who gave the first performance of *Reigen seliger Geister*, and to whom the score is dedicated, recorded it in the 1990s for Montaigne and more recently for a collection of the three Lachenmann quartets on Kairos. The Klangforum Wien recording of “...zwei Gefühle...”, also on Kairos, has Lachenmann’s voice, though the Ensemble Modern version on ECM is no less wonderful. A third recording (Kairos again) includes the whole work as part of *The Little Match Girl*; this sequence is abbreviated in the revised version of the opera (ECM).