

Helmut Lachenmann: Short Portrait with Self-Portrait

Clemens Gadenstätter (translated by Wieland Hoban)

This article is a personal tribute to Helmut Lachenmann, a man who has greatly influenced my work as a composer. It is, however, also an attempt to respond to some of his basic principles and how I have learned from them.

Keywords: Homage; Listening

How do I begin a tribute? Or, how should I act in the face of the honorable task of writing an homage, a eulogy, or whatever one might choose to call it for Helmut Lachenmann? Question one, the simpler one: Should I comply with a social ritual and, thus, do precisely what the works of the one being honored here in fact try as rigorously as possible to reject? To attempt to reject it as rigorously as is possible while pursuing a social activity within this society. And where, at least according to my interpretation of these works, this free delivery of a paradox or double bond of artistic activity (maintaining one's distance from the collective within the collective) is reflected upon within this activity itself. This sometimes occurs with anger, sometimes with resignation, sometimes with the focus of attempted objectivity, i.e. itself in a multitude of variants.

Or—and this is the more complex question—question two: Should I attempt to find a way that seeks to redefine this ritual by first identifying it as such, establishing its old function, and then, approached from a different level, creating the possibility of a different form, and thus a different statement? Is this negotiation with the collective already too much of a concession to it? Does the attempt become a complete tautology? The act of thinking about the possibilities of changing the ritual is then already bound up in its forms, furthermore adhering to the (by now equally) social ritual of reflecting upon matters in order subsequently to leave them untouched with a clear conscience. Or (as just read in Luc Boltanski) the regime of mobility takes over: we keep moving incessantly and wildly, everything must be new to be relevant. At the same time, however, this constant motion conceals the standstill: we are reduced to a flickering, and the faster we move, the smaller our

movements are; and the more slowly we move, the greater the danger of that unbearable standstill. Lachenmann's compositional practice also confronts this paradox and double bond, or at least this is my interpretation of a piece like *Mouvement* (– *vor der Erstarrung*).

The concepts of musical scores interfere with matters of everyday life: in order to fulfill the tasks that life sets up for me (and I certainly count my profession among these), I turn to concepts that I have analyzed in *Reigen seliger Geister*. Practical, this art.

Important announcement: all of these lines honor the one being honored and also those who have collaborated in making these same lines possible.

I thus see myself faced with the dilemma that any critique of or protest against the social structures currently relevant is absorbed in such a manner that both serve far more to strengthen than to overturn the system. The gesture—also that of dissenting reflection—has been changed into a part of the empty spectacle, which is no more than a paint spot of the system, but which is to be criticized here.

The resulting follow-up question would then be: Is it possible to regard systems as conditions for the possibility of their own transformation? That is to say: not dropping the hot potato, nor stepping on it, squashing it (or letting off other gestures of might against the defenseless little thing—which would be neo-German and indeed a way of desisting in order to create new power, as already denounced by Luther). Rather: first sensualizing it as something edible, tastable, smellable, experiencable, conceiving of the act of undoing and creating unity (between the potato and myself) at once as an act of representation, much as this one is here is attempting with feeble means; as an activity that condenses the things we experience into experiences and then synthetically processes these to form others, which are then open to interpretation once more, and can perhaps enable further experiences. Perhaps that is also a Lachenmann approach intervening helpfully in life.

Warning: Every interpretation adds something foreign to what it interprets. Every portrait contains elements of a self-portrait. Interpretation adds something foreign to my view of myself. The portrait alters the self-portrait.

So I am merely attempting to register observations, to observe the act of observing. I must thus set myself the task of observing myself in terms of my own position on Helmut Lachenmann and the task of paying homage. And observation is a principle of compositional work. Certainly not only Helmut's, but I feel that he has definitely taken it to the point where it has become an aesthetic; I would almost say an ethical trait. The ethics of aesthetics is a conglomerate that I would subsume within Helmut's definition of beauty: beauty is consent with the highest possible, self-defined ethics.

Observation, this pledge to both the documentary and the voyeuristic: here one can discern, in my eyes, a layer of such music's mode of effect, a layer of its emotionality; observing sounds as they come into being, in paradoxical combination with the obvious artificiality of these sounds—somewhere between disinterested observation and intentional action, the emphatic energy is liberated that becomes the aural outer skin of this music. All of this—and then combined with an almost child-

like joy at the activity itself—is transported and reawakened during listening; in search of a free material that is able subsequently to turn over even collectively loaded lumps of material to a liberated mode of listening? Or perhaps not. Is the material that has been found and opened to observation not itself influenced by its homologies or its enormous distance to known layers of material and thus charged with sense and meaning – and also aura, hence pre-molded in all of its phenomenal layers? This mold can then no longer be removed; no overwriting can erase it, as even this contains these layers as its precondition. Things can thus never revolve around sheer presence—or if they do, then only a presence that incorporates into this notion all levels of collective connotation and their corresponding modes of interpretation.

And beyond this: is not the searching gesture already equally loaded, almost as an emotional topos, extending all the way to film kitsch? The grisly result: the searchers are already multiply entangled in the collective ritual, whatever they may bring to light. What would then be a revolutionary outcome? One that allows the collective to become just that, precisely because it does not feel under threat?

The gesture of observing/searching is human, anthropoid. The traces left by such observation inscribe themselves as an act of observation. The observed and the observer here form the only thing accessible to us. We know ourselves only as (more or less conscious) observers and also know that we change through it. And Helmut Lachenmann has always taken responsibility for the changes he has brought into the world.

And, incidentally, whether the information transmitted by these observations is correct or not is exclusively a question of their compositional treatment. And the point/listening point from which they are organized as sounds, from which they organize themselves as sounds, then shows how self-made ethics congeals into aesthetics. It is not simply a question of right or wrong, but rather: Is there anybody there (even a sound becomes someone if I treat it accordingly), or only data? And I find it beautiful when data become personalized, rather than—as so often occurs—persons being reduced to data.

I suppose that the time has come, once and for all, to speak of the person, the personal. The value judgments regarding observation—in his work, his music—are made by Helmut Lachenmann. And he relieves them from an evaluation between good and bad, black and white, either-or dualities. Beauty rather becomes the impossibility of dual structures. Beauty is the enabling of differentiation. This strikes me as probably the most beautiful gesture that producers of art can make towards their recipients. Ethics is so near in this that morality must go down the drain. It is precisely for this that the person is needed. This gesture cannot be carried out with theories, ideologies, systems, systems of systems, scientific insight, pure epistemological research (as great and useful as this all may be, but not when it is a safety net, an anchor, a hiding-place. I only like the taste of these things as destabilizers, little disruptions of my structure, as suggestions for remodeling). It is then a personal matter to be able, and willing, to accept (adopt) properties that arise in the process of observation (and treatment). I always have Marcel Duchamp at the ready as an

analogy: all his life he sought to go against his own taste (presumably finding it boring), because he knew that he was imprisoned by it in a prepersonal structure, of which only a small part corresponded to his own person (as he wished to see himself). Changing one's taste—'even a young dog enjoys jumping over its own shadow'¹

- ① (Lisa Spalt)—I cannot think how else I can get hold of myself as a person, if not in the moment of change, of dissolution. Here I recognize Helmut Lachenmann's handwriting; or at least the part that lends the scores their purpose, which constitutes their fundamental possibility and peculiarity.

Warning: the style is blurred by the person's acts of differentiation.

And of course this business of the person is not so simple. And naturally there is little that is more complex than this area. But yes, everything that I am saying about it here is rubbish, because it is much too superficial and imprecise. Surely all would agree that the definition of the subject requires a more thorough examination. One cannot even allow this short portrait to attempt to get hold of the person, and certainly not in a descriptive, i.e. simplifying, manner. So I shall simply attempt it through this double observation—see my subtitle—via a diversion with an unclear outcome. And again I am resorting to a technique that Lachenmann's music taught me. Practical, this art.

Complexity—multiply signified and signifying details in one great polyvalent context: this is what this music has. Complexity arises through a differentiation of what we perceive and through corresponding forms of compositional organization.

Differentiating also means criticizing. All of this also takes place during listening and is then classified, described, circumscribed. In a further step, the complex relationship between the collective, the composer and the listener, between composition and listening, is also examined verbally/reflexively, in the knowledge that the complexity takes on a different form, that simplifications may occur that would be unacceptable in the compositional context.

But none of this is complicated. I would like—if you please—to attach importance to this, in fact the greatest importance. Things get complicated when the relationship between polyvalence/ambiguity and a clear, comprehensible statement does not tend toward a paradox, but rather toward the amorphous end of the spectrum. And 'simple' would then presumably be the opposite of 'complex' and thus no more stimulating than the complicated. But it is precisely this stimulation that makes such complexity exciting.

Complexity is...: when interpretations are constantly negating themselves, redefining themselves, when our mode of listening is constantly reinterpreting itself, when the 'antennae' (I have borrowed this term from Helmut, so it is his copyright, unless he has taken it with him somewhere on his travels) are constantly forced to adjust themselves; when everything is clear, but not recountable; when memory is invoked, but never served; when it is never possible to reconcile the memory of listening with the listening itself; when chaos and order together react to a third element that is crystal clear within medial perception (unclear/indescribable/incommunicable, in a meta-medial perception).

There is an apparent contradiction in Lachenmann's conservative treatment of material that has often been found in his works. I do not intend to refute the claim here that he uses non-traditional material in a completely traditional manner. But, is this really possible? Do the treatment of material and the material itself not form a fabric within the network of sounds—one that creates a unity and perhaps drifts apart, but where neither of the two elements can ever be considered on its own? The contextual formations, the forms of organization, they are then material, on a different level. That reminds me: Lachenmann is not tired of the question of material, but rather keeps it in mind, he once assured me. Through the treatment of the material, one layer becomes clear in the mode of thinking and living, that is to say in the person writing this music.

Now it starts getting tricky, when the terms 'old'/'new' peek in. One *avant-garde's* call for the new (or some similar formulation) led to many advances, after all. But it also gave rise to a replication of gestures that was diametrically opposed to the demand in question, in particular, of course, whenever art was examined in relation to social processes, or took shape in a particular manner as a reaction to them (though not only for these reasons). There is thus, to put it harshly, an *avant-garde* whose production (at an external formal level) can certainly be new or revolutionary, but which is reactionary in its structure and thus its semantics. And New Music already bears the word in its name, even if it will gradually become established that we too are only making music, or if we take up Cage's suggestion simply to give the child a different name (this by no means solves the problem, but it is an amusing and somehow liberating approach).

I wonder if, in the best case, the *avant-garde* gesture was perhaps a reaction to a reactionary environment, to that sort of upbringing, etc. So, in fact, the gesture confirms how awful that lifeworld must have been (and unfortunately still is in parts) if the only revolutionary escape seems to be a reaction that fights for peace with weapons and all this in two generations of artists (if not more). What a blessing—once again—to be born so late. The system of art then supported such mechanisms for itself, as all these revolutions came about within the capitalist system, with capital, for capital. People consented to staging the new, a show for reproducing the respectively new, precisely so that everything would stay as it was (or get worse again, from my perspective). The revolutions were set off within an institutional framework that was designed by and for them and was representative of the system, reactionary, and which thus never suited those works that did not see 'new' as the fashionable quality of the emperor's new clothes, but instead raised the question of what the conditions for wearing any clothes are in the first place, or for being emperor ... works that gave little thought to whether the material was new or old. Works that sought to be specific in their approach to the organization of the perceptible, works that sought to achieve specific aims. A special way of listening, a special way of sounding. Such works did not employ emphasis as a rhetorical device, to mean something that meant nothing to them. (This is of course a generalized charge and can only be clarified with reference to each particular piece and person, but I would

like to approach the question as to why so many would-be revolutionaries at some point become part of the reactionary establishment, thus only seemingly presenting themselves as turned around. According to this view, this would merely be a logical continuation: simply to use those structures, trends, which bring one further—that would be the really lousy insinuation.)

Lachenmann is not part of the establishment—because he has no interest in it, I assume. Nor was he ever a revolutionary. Both his material and his mechanisms of gradation already existed (but not the way he did it). Perhaps he enjoyed being stylized, as occurred at times, and perhaps he even assisted at times (in moments of weakness, when one simply must get affection out of everything—and that too is only human), though I have never known him to swing this gestural bludgeon. And that, I must admit, is something for which I give him credit—as someone who, with his history, seemed predestined to do so.

He is certainly no dinosaur in this respect—more like an endangered species, like all those who belong to the species *Homo differentialis*. To adopt a confrontational stance for this cause is a pardonable sin—the pieces occupy their own stances, which elude description.

Negation and Lachenmann: a mere catchphrase blathering that can never be accurate. See his own statements. Rejection is not what *Gran Torso* is about, but rather taking on a particular identity that grows out of reflecting upon conditions. And this identity is also trend-resistant, because it is simply too complexly wrought. Even if a wave of fashion briefly came into contact with these works, what is central to them alone is the treatment of a specific sound material and its order, simply out of their author's existential desire to create something *zum Hören* (for listening; and here the capital letter in the German is not a dictate of the spelling system, but rather a built-in exclamation mark).²

To observe myself observing something foreign to me growing out of what I am doing—as a reformulation of a statement made by Paul Valéry, which I recall without knowing where exactly it originated, trimmed to match what I read into Helmut's music (and attempt in my own; thus in the sense of the short portrait with self-portrait). Then reacting to it in the play of observing, finding... Bringing into play what has been found, then, not simply letting it happen (perhaps the fundamental difference to Cage?), of course, with the risk that what is found will be reworked into something whose identity is unclear. Composing without a safety net, in the exact sense of the phrase.

Or, following these introductory reflections:

Would it not be better for me to write Helmut Lachenmann a letter, to tell him that I consider him a magnificent composer, and—as I normally do—speak to him every few months on the telephone about projects of a compositional nature, and about this, that and the other? Or, I thought, should I maybe only write a text for which my former teacher has supplied the occasion—unintentionally on his part, of course—and thus reflect on one or two things that have perhaps been set in motion for me through the works and their way of thinking?

The questions became statements, just as, in the compositional process, the composing person's questions become statements for the listening person. But unlike these lines, those questions posed in the compositional process are still contained within its formal, material-related mode of proposition, and this as—perhaps emotions? A bold claim in the face of my constant search for the thing customarily known as emotion or feeling, both in musical and in generally human terms. And I would even go a step further: perhaps the level on which music like the *Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied* concerns us is the emphatic level, where it is communicated to us that somebody is formulating questions through his precise statements. And that Helmut Lachenmann is admitting (how unmanly!) that he cannot make any statements that are not packed full of questions and that the issue here is to reveal a conception of the world that genuinely treats all people equally by tracking down even the most subtle of differences and taking them seriously. At least I, for one, feel unable to make any cast-iron statements and so I also read the texts—and not only Lachenmann's—as the paradoxical phenomena of human life: a position is never at rest, or in Zen phrasing: 'beauty springs from harmony' (Shunryu Suzuki)—that is to say out of it, flowing forth from it.³

On a personal note, I was enthralled when I heard new Lachenmann pieces after the opera, in particular *Serynade* and the third quartet, *Grido*, not because they are wonderful pieces (I expected no less), but rather because these works are courageous in the self-questioning that Lachenmann practices in them. It seems that formulating one's own practice as an act of compositional questioning takes priority over the necessity for *music* to come out of it. I greatly admire this. What I admire even more is the fact that music does indeed come out of it.

Notes

- [1] The German expression 'über den eigenen Schatten springen' ('to jump over one's own shadow') means to overcome one's own desires or limitations.
- [2] German nouns (and verbal nouns) all begin with a capital letter, in this case *zum Hören* ('for listening').
- [3] For a more precise treatment, see Lisa Spalt's contribution to our joint book *Tag Day* and elsewhere. ②

GCMR

Manuscript No.	230309
Author	
Editor	
Master	
Publisher	

Contemporary Music Review
Typeset by Elite Typesetting for



www.elitetypesetting.com

QUERIES: to be answered by AUTHOR

AUTHOR: The following queries have arisen during the editing of your manuscript. Please answer the queries by marking the requisite corrections at the appropriate positions in the text.

QUERY NO.	QUERY DETAILS	QUERY ANSWERED
1	What is the significance of the Lisa Spalt citation? Please provide full details	
2	Note 3. Please give full publication details of the book mentioned here, and add to a References section at the end of the paper	