**The Paradoxes of Art and Life: an interview w/ Clemens Gadenstätter**

Clemens Gadenstätter (c) Aktion Freie Kunst

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*After studying the art of composition with such contemporary music icons as Helmut Lachenmann (\*1935) and Erich Urbanner (\*1936), CLEMENS GADENSTÄTTER (\*1966) is extremely interested in the semiotics of music. This leads to a growing desire to create true contemporary music, and not its simulacrum. Ona Jarmalaviciute talks to the composer about the roots of his creativity and the desire to create a musical experience without labels.*

**The Paradoxes of Art and Life**

**I have heard that via the means of contextualization and semiotics you seek to create unique sound experiences with new symbolic meanings. Is that true?**

**Clemens Gadenstätter**: In my work I am looking for novelty through a sense of specificness in the content. And I also strive to create such musical experiences that have no “labels”. Such aesthetic experiences cannot be described in words, they don’t have their own definition and terminology. As soon as I can find the word for this experience, I immediately give it a label, and along with it, more additional contextual information load. After all, it wouldn’t be an *experience* at all – with a term comes an intellectual understanding of what it is and then certain pre-formed attitudes about it too.

We learn that uniqueness is the source of all the truly existential experiences. If we rely on this idea, then in my creations, I do indeed seek uniqueness. And all my compositional solutions lead me to such an existential experience. I would like to mention the thought of Helmut Lachenmann (b. 1935) from his book “Music as Existential Experience” (Musik als die existenzielle Erfahrung – O.J.). Here he states that uniqueness is the source of all the truly existential experiences.

**“I usually make lists. I write down all of my thoughts […]”**

**You mentioned that you are inspired by many different things that make you think about and look for contextual and semantic meanings. How do you transform these abstract ideas into material music?**

**Clemens Gadenstätter:** I suppose something is making me nervous, and this is the right topic for creating musical material – that is, material related to sound, instruments, or other parameters. Then there is a long process of searching for information about this object and the contexts associated with it. The formulation of new material in this case begins in the information and research phase of my work. In this phase, I usually make lists. I write down all of my thoughts, and then I can identify how these phenomena interrelate. Lists grow longer and then I automatically come up with ideas on how to contextualize all of these features within historical and semantic aspects, or perceptive and mimetic aspetcs – to name just four of the levels of contextualisation. Of course, all the layers of contextualization are intertwined, but I have to separate them – only then can I perceive them as individual layers to be worked on. Then a large amount of sonoric material can be obtained. For me, the musical material doesn’t mean a particular note or sound, but the sound as put into context with other sounds. Therefore, the context is a means of creating bridges between sounds. This is a complicated procedure because there are many ways to interpret sound. I build bridges that connect this sound with other sounds.

In my opinion, the most important thing when writing a new composition or materializing a new idea is to have it change my mind about the world and me. I don’t want to be the same all the time before I start writing a piece. It is possible this is true for other professions too. For bakers. Maybe not everyone, but the baked bread itself can fundamentally change the baker – his attitude to bread and eating may change, and maybe later he starts thinking about the entire global system; how to feed the whole world, etc. Change is probably one of the most important things in the life of a developer.

**“The goal for me as a composer is probably to move or travel”**

**Every composer has to survive transformations. How does your journey towards self-knowledge look?**

**Clemens Gadenstätter:** Well, it is important to realize that every new thing you learn about yourself hides something new, another secret, another unresolved problem. So self-knowledge is an endless process. In my case, it lies in the decisions to work with material that I don’t necessarily like and I don’t feel confident with. Maybe I do not have such a creative experience, or in some place the material is not suitable for me and poses a lot of trouble. Again, all of this causes me a creative anxiety. It is only at this stage that I learn something new or find out what the most important thing is – people shouldn’t avoid unpleasant experiences. This is the evolution of every human being. And I try to learn to love those sounds by the music I can create by contextualising them in specific ways. Perhaps, while working, I will discover new qualities in these sounds or release some of the features that are deeply hidden in this sound. And then this music will become mine, and this sound will start to appeal to me.

Since some sounds are used too often and have too much semantic information associated with them, we simply no longer hear them. We just react to them. Like that car sound or thr siren of a police car. Or quotations from well-known compositions. I don’t know if anyone is really “listening” to Mozart. We most often hear and react, but don’t listen in the deeper sense of the word. And so the sound features pass right through the ears. Their new discovery and to hear the specific sense and content they open for us, is a central part of musical evolution. But, of course, there is no purpose in this journey. The goal for me as a composer is probably to move or travel – to not stop percieving, thinking, reflecting your world and always to be sceptical and working. And of course, to carefully observe the direction you move in. The direction must match your ethic and thus also your sense of aesthetic. I have to develop sensors for all the implications of all the things I do, create, work on, etc. And I have to react on them if implications go in a direction I won’t stand for. And I think this process will never end during my lifetime.

**“We have to be part of a society and thus we have to react properly.”**

**What are your thoughts on the Contemporary music scene?**

**Clemens Gadenstätter:** In fact, this is a very difficult subject. In my opinion, quite a lot of *un*contemporary music is being created nowadays. It’s a simulation of ‘contemporariness’ in music, or an attempt to copy what is perceived and dubbed as contemporary music in society, and thus can never be “contemporary” in the true sense of the word, because a collective can never label something happening only now as “Contemporary”.

We often see and feel the simulation of contemporariness in arts, politics, sciences, etc., while on the other hand, art production can be a phenomenon dictated by the general flow of society. We are developing more and more musical ‘simulations’ as society produces more and more simulations generally. Simulations of music are not to be heard or listened to but to make us react in a way as defined by the social tendencies of our society, to buy something, or to fall in a certain predefined mood. We are manipulated by these simulations. They do not target our perception but our social insticts, we have to be part of a society and thus we have to react properly.

It seems that this production of simulacra is driven by the social system – not because someone needs it, but simply because of the act of production itself is needed for this social system to function. This is obviously related to capitalist values. These musical and other kind of products have no inherent value – we all know it well and we clearly feel it. But one way or another, it is important for us to believe in the system we are in. This is a vital but cruel thing. I personally don’t know how to get out of this situation. So far, I see no other way to live my life and talk about these problems in my music, with my students, friends, to listeners, to you. I’m trying not to be imprisoned in the system, but am I trying hard enough? But at least there is some kind of internal disbelief system in me – and also in society – that we have to strengthen as well as we can. We shouldn’t let our desires be manipulated, and by doing so, limit our own opportunities in all senses: thinking, feeling, experiencing.

Swimming in a river with a current – yes, it’s easy. It looks like the water is carrying you but you are being driven in a speed and direction you can never interfere with. But you could feel both the water and yourself much better if you tried to swim against the stream. Because you need so much strength and endurance, even just to stay in one place. Well, so far these are just empty thoughts. I don’t see any solution in this situation that would fundamentally change the overall picture. But the artistic simulacra and simulacra in all fields is a huge cultural, even more, an existantial human problem we face today. A very dangerous situation arises when art, as a language of possible experiences and emotions, unites with the economy. We have to look at this fact and realize that this situation is real, it is part of our daily lives, and as an artist, to react on this reality through my art.

**Thank you for the conversation!**

By Ona Jarmalavičiūtė