

The 2008 Darmstadt International Summer Course From a Participant's Perspective

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Taking part in Darmstadt in the right way is difficult; taking part in the wrong way is almost impossible. This year, there were once again a large number of participants at the Darmstadt International Summer Courses. One reason for this may have been the fact that there has been talk of making the course triennial rather than biennial in the future—or laying it to rest once and for all, as some pessimists claimed. This would be disastrous for New Music, for the students who are interested and involved in New Music, and interested in developing it further, and also for composers of the older generation, even if there no longer seems to be a direct connection between them and the Darmstadt Courses. The international course has certainly had the reputation of being one of the most important forums for contemporary music since, as the stylized historiography tells us, the greats of New Music racked their own brains and beat each other's over the existential questions of music. The festival still lives off this reputation today, and does indeed offer participants a number of things: at least one concert with excellent performers daily, an all-day program with lectures by international guests, as well as classes and individual lessons with the members of the performance and composition faculties—and all of this for a period of two weeks, to provide the barest of the statistical information.

There is too much to do in Darmstadt, whether one participates as a performer or a composer, but this overload ideally leads to a selection that offers the best possible daily program—even if it quickly becomes apparent that some events are universally attractive and there will inevitably be cases of overcrowding. Even in Darmstadt, there are signs of hierarchy and genius cult, if one still dares to dig up that Romantic word. One example of this could be observed near the beginning, when Brian Ferneyhough presented two blank sheets for individual lessons and a noticeably physical struggle for the few places on the list broke out among the almost two hundred composers. It seems that even in such a marginal, anti-hierarchically disposed field as that of New Music, people's minds cannot break free of great names, elitist thinking, and the dominance of what has already established itself. On the other hand, one must concede that a student should "naturally" be interested in learning from the great figures of history, that the *gradus ad Parnassum* still lead via the appropriate connections, and that people take part in this course in order to meet composers whom they cannot consult all the time. It is nonetheless regrettable that the cult of personality is still so strong and sometimes overrules content, whereas some composers already attempted to show in the 1960s that learning can also take place in a non-hierarchical, multi-faceted manner. And it is particularly regrettable when this mentality extends to the compositions themselves; I shall return to this later on.

Even without a place on Ferneyhough's list, composers certainly had enough to do: the lectures alone made such demands on them that many developed a certain reluctance to go to the daily concert(s) at all. This is surely one of the greatest problems with such intensive events as the summer course: that one cannot take any time or leisure through selection to experience things one is not yet familiar with. Little wonder, then, if the lecture by Wolfgang Rihm has higher attendance than the Young Composers Forum,

and the concert by the Arditti Quartet is better attended than that of the equally accomplished but less famous faculty members.

The Young Composers Forum is another double-edged sword: an excellent addition to the course, but problematic in its realization. It offers composers a very good opportunity to speak before an interested specialist audience about one of their own works and face potential criticism. The value of this forum extends beyond the ubiquitous hope of success: it is important for composers to learn how to present one's works—both to legitimate and defend them. This is certainly almost the only way to win some attention or fulfill the wish of having one's works performed. Verbal expression, which cannot be offered by the music itself, has traditionally been an important aspect in Darmstadt. Even those composers who claim that their music speaks for itself, that it requires no explanation, that it even goes directly from their heart to that of the listeners, at least have to *state* this in Darmstadt if anyone is to realize that this is the case. With such a wide range of ideas in circulation, one should avoid applying any preformed criteria—even one's own—if one is to do justice to a work.

In this forum, even the faculty composers offer support with critical questions, so one can genuinely attempt to argue at the highest level. As it goes without saying that almost every participant wants to present one of his/her own works to the public, the time allotted to each must be carefully rationed. In the twenty minutes with which one is left (which is still a reasonable amount when there are so many composers), the main task is to formulate one's statements concisely and to make an individual impression; this is naturally very difficult, if one has a great deal to say about one's own work. The listeners in particular are already under great strain owing to the short time slots allotted to composers and to the surplus of events and can hardly do justice to what they hear. And thus begins the hunt for exciting events and unforgettable moments; these must be found fairly soon, however, otherwise the outcome is a shutdown of the ears, which cannot perceive the noise if constantly surrounded by it. This problem was intensified (presumably for everyone) at the end of the course in the studio concerts, where the participants spent three days failing to do justice to pieces—a particular ordeal for the jury too, of course. As the selection of candidates for the Kranichstein Music Prize and scholarship awards showed, the pieces that did best were ones that made their point concisely, were short and pithy, had a language of their own and—to view it from a more negative angle—tended to be effect-oriented, loud and virtuosic. Which are not necessarily bad criteria if one does not wish to hear imitations of existing music, or wishes to avoid the experience of following a long buildup of tension in a piece only to find at the end that what was promised has not been delivered—and this not even deliberately. Nonetheless, the danger is that one will look all too quickly for familiar elements, ideas that can be quickly conveyed and that are ideally also amusing (the somatic reaction is particularly strong in such a situation, as an archaic rhythmic figure or a moment of sublimity is immediately perceived, whether with approval or disgust, as the highlight of a concert).

The situation seemed to be similar in the individual composition lessons: the brevity of each session permitted little more than receiving the blessing or curse of the teacher after a presentation of the work on CD and a few explanatory remarks. The teachers had no choice with so many students, however (making it especially impressive the degree to which Marco Stroppa was able to find his way into the pieces so quickly

and raise critical points from within, so to speak). Nonetheless, many participants felt at the end that they had taken a great deal home with them, not least through the experience of following the presentations of others and thus being able to listen to further comments from the teachers. This was undoubtedly a work-intensive time for both teachers and students, who hopefully also grew a little closer together. Such an outcome is preferable to one in which young composers simply squeeze as much information as possible from their seniors instead of participating in a lively exchange between generations.

Things were rather different for the instrumental faculty and students. Certainly time was scarce, especially at the end, but there was sufficient daily instruction for almost all instrumentalists. In fact, the opportunity for performers to sit in on other teachers' lessons was hardly taken advantage of, as there was no shortage of work in their own studios. Performers who go to Darmstadt are in an advantageous, but also difficult, situation; the same is true for the composers, but for opposite reasons. Performers do not have to face a battle over instruction slots, the assertion of their position in the courses, or the constant need to justify their own work and existence. The instrumentalist is king, for the composer is the one who brings his/her pieces as a supplicant. Many composers soon had the feeling they were in the midst of a stock market. The struggle for the few available performances, which were still fairly substantial in number, and to gain hold of the few available performers, was palpable and very difficult for some composers. But this, it seems, is exactly what one has to learn. The performers could thus choose almost freely how many and which pieces they would play. As it was initially unclear what would happen later in the course, however, some performers agreed to play too many pieces, only to discover afterwards that there were still plenty of pieces to take care of. The available time in the course is ultimately very short for some more difficult pieces, and the industrious practice that was thus necessary often prevented the musicians from attending the many stimulating lectures and concerts. Here, too, it became apparent that participating composers have more time to pursue their intellectual and artistic development and remain in constant discourse, while performers are limited in their ability to participate in what the festival has to offer, as their free time is greatly limited by the intensive practice schedule. In my view, instrumentalists should know exactly what they want when they go to Darmstadt and not be influenced by the ubiquitous, albeit ultimately harmless hopes of winning a prize; otherwise they quickly end up spending their time in the practice room, choosing virtuoso pieces and tagging along with those whom they hope will bring them success.

The instrumental instruction is offered by stimulating teachers endeavoring at the highest level to do justice to contemporary works through reflection, musicality and the development of appropriate techniques. It is the ideal place for performers seeking further training in the field of contemporary music, whether they are just becoming interested or are already so deeply involved that their primary concern is to find other musicians and connections. In addition to the other European courses such as the Impuls workshop of the Klangforum Wien in Graz, the ensemble recherche Akademie, the Ensemble Modern workshop at the Klangspuren festival in Schwaz, the Lucerne Festival Orchestra course with teachers from Ensemble Intercontemporain and others, the course in Darmstadt offers the chance to spend two weeks together with composers. Only this extended duration can enable the development of that splendid relentlessness which can tell

performers whether they truly want to dedicate themselves professionally to a very time-consuming line of work.

Some conservatives profess not to like contemporary music because there is so much bad music compared to earlier times. This is only true if one overlooks the fact that a mere fraction of older music has survived, and that substantially more innovation is expected of New Music than is familiar from traditional music. This phenomenon is quite amazing: the skeptics demand a higher standard of something they do not like than of the things they enjoy anyway.

As a performer of New Music, one soon realizes that one will in fact have to play many pieces that are uninteresting, mere repetitions, poorly crafted, devoid of ideas, not thoroughly thought through (in technical terms and otherwise), and the like. Many of these works will never be played again, many are simply not to one's personal taste, and some are only troublesome because they are difficult to play, because one has not mastered them, or because they take a completely new approach that one perhaps does not yet understand, that is still unfamiliar ("New Music is never beautiful from the start"—though there is certainly evidence to the contrary). This is the work one has to *want* to do, but which can also have the advantage of putting one in a position to influence decisions about what pieces are worth hearing and playing. Thus one's own judgement has developed and the musical discourse gives something back to the musician.

To give a brief idea of the atmosphere in Darmstadt, I feel that the general mood was very relaxed and friendly, especially in comparison to traditional master classes. The participants mostly played at a very high level, and were interested in the musical substance, not simply in virtuoso exhibitions (even if some studio concerts did give the impression that the main goal was that of displaying one's virtuosity, or in some cases of gaining the favor of established composers who were present by playing their works. But we shall leave this with the positive statement that the composition faculty were given a special emphasis during the course, and that the musicians naturally wanted to work with those composers and find out what they thought of their interpretations).

The danger of performing too many pieces and consequently missing out on everything else can easily be counteracted. However, perhaps this "Darmstadt overload" phenomenon also has its attractions, showing participants their own boundaries and consequently influencing their career choices. This overload phenomenon has also attained a certain cult status, as one can tell from the accounts of former participants; it seems to go without saying that one simply has to get through it and will be happy when one is finished. This may seem a fairly heroic attitude; however, one must also consider that that aim of achieving a well-balanced mixture of lessons, lectures, and concerts might be an unrealistic idea given a positive surplus of opportunities that characterizes Darmstadt. It is barely possible to do Darmstadt the right way—but even more impossible to do it the wrong way.

As well as a marketplace for material matters and craft, Darmstadt is undoubtedly also one for making acquaintances, exchanging ideas, and establishing connections. Many course participants realized this, which is why they all continued to pounce on the traditionally bad food with good will, aiming at least to pursue social contact at those lecture-free mealtimes.

To experience the surplus to its full extent, one must not miss the three days of studio concerts. In spite of the obstacles, there was still no shortage of composers who managed to find a place for their works in the concerts, and they usually shared programs with a rich selection of pieces from the solo repertoire. The feeling of excess set in very soon, such that every piece had to seize the listener's attention within the first ten seconds or fall prey to a sort of dutiful non-listening. Insofar as one can still judge effectively in such a situation, a certain uniformity was quickly perceived among the pieces. Naturally, a composer will want to make an impression with a solid piece, but this should not mean that there are no longer any experiments or that the pieces are only concerned with demonstrating the composer's craft, instead of confronting the problems of a new generation. Can one still follow the virtuosic intellectual, artistic, and technical approach of Ferneyhough? Is it enough simply to continue the style of Sciarrino? What does it mean to engage with the (intellectual, artistic, and technical) material progress achieved by Lachenmann? Would a new negation or individual continuation and elaboration of the idea of emancipating what was previously forbidden not advance compositional thinking more than simply aestheticizing what was once revolutionary and ugly?

These questions are joined by a much older and more existential one if one subjects oneself to three days of New Music: does the music being produced today exude any aura, is it in a position to express anything and draw society's or humanity's attention to problems or help gain new insights? One might consider that in the course of the last hundred years, those materials that were provocative while still viewed as vital innovations have meanwhile become no more than trivial clichés. Hence one could almost be forgiven for thinking that one or two concert blocks consisted purely of works by Debussy.

It is no novel notion that music has always been an outsider among the arts, and it is equally clear that modern music was in a more difficult situation after the rejection of its tonal system than the visual arts were after discarding representational approaches. This is precisely why music should be concerned with making the most of its strengths (temporality in art, the aggressive and unhindered penetration of the listener's ear) in order to express at least something, whatever the composer might choose. It is still unfathomable that a new generation is only concerned with stringing sounds and chords together so perfectly and cleanly that we are now faced once again with an aesthetic of beauty defined in terms of technique and notions of perfection. So it was all the more pleasing that Simon Steen-Andersen won the Kranichstein Music Prize alongside Marco Momi, as he is a composer who is exploring a genuinely new field by attempting, among other things, to create music from the movement that produces it in the first place. Marco Momi certainly made a contribution to beauty in New Music with a highly differentiated and well-crafted piece, but also expanded this area by counterbalancing subtle, carefully chosen sounds with cruder ones.

The performers' studios presented a considerable amount of high-quality work, some of which was comparable to that presented in the faculty performers' concerts. This high standard of performance was, however, often applied to pieces that relied on virtuosity and rapidly led to boredom. Of course any musician wants to show what he/she can do; this seems to be no different in the realm of New Music than in the mainstream music industry. It would be desirable, however, to find a way for performers and composers to reach a new form of virtuosity through cooperation: a music that

amazes through its content and its newness, a music in which the performer convinces the audience through active involvement, personal expression or direct collaboration rather than by spitting out notes at high speed. The Olympics, after all, came a mere month later.

One piece that made a lasting impression was the solo work *le corps à corps* by Georges Aperghis, in which the percussionist Dennis Sullivan delivered an extremely virtuosic performance, but one that was purely a means to an end. He managed to present a very distinctive music-theatrical experience that had nothing to do with virtuosity for its own sake, but seemed more concerned with probing the limits of the Western ideal of perfection.

One can generally say, in fact, that the critical engagement with the notion of interpretative perfection, the traditional ensemble situation, and the fallibility of the musicians on the part of composers could lead to a very stimulating form of collaboration between composers and performers, as well as new sonic results. Every participant in Darmstadt ultimately wants to deal not with a perfect yet intellectually and artistically trivial music machine, but rather with a modern instrumental apparatus—i.e., one that is interesting and capable of making choices—that should also influence the theoretical discourse among composers. Such perspectives on the future are naturally utopian, even for a place like Darmstadt.

What matters most is to participate in making New Music develop internally and take on a greater presence externally. At the very least, Darmstadt 2008 was of considerable importance for this inner progress, and its effects on the individual participants were undoubtedly enormous. Even if it is difficult to imagine a perfect Darmstadt experience, it is equally difficult to imagine one that did not present something of worth.

Translated by Wieland Hoban