

Friedrich Hommel the Visionary

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The justification for the existence of the Darmstädter Ferienkurse rests in its exceptional status. It is at its best neither a festival nor an academy, neither an exhibition nor a competition, but rather a multi-cultural, international, poly-stylistic and poly-ideological arena of experiment. One could say: it can be so to speak the world writ small, compressed to the greatest possible intensity, a gathering of the best and the most significant. It derives sustenance from the fortitude with which its director realizes such a balancing act in the face of all obstacles.

Following upon the somewhat sluggish decade of the 1970s, the Ferienkurse, during the period after Friedrich Hommel accepted the directorship in 1981, experience a stroke of good fortune. Hommel was both capable of and willing to focus on long-term consequences: he had his eyes set on those who had something important to offer. He avoided the mainstream and set a course that was initially polarizing, but in the long term proved to be the best choice. Hommel achieved the seemingly impossible feat of supporting the avant-garde in a postmodern era, and at the same time supporting pluralism in a bastion of modernism. He was able to maintain this impossible balance because of his open nature: he believed in music, in the new, and therefore he believed in the protagonists who were involved with it. He had charisma that could win people over even when the money was scarce (and it was always scarce). He consciously played a subsidiary role, because in doing so he could set the tone: these Ferienkurse were important, even irreplaceable, and the progress of contemporary music depended—and decisively so—on them.

One wonders from which source Hommel derived this fortitude, this belief. The answer, I believe, rests in his generation, namely the anti-fascist ethos of the post-war generation. Hommel told me that his stepfather, a port commander in Barcelona, had allowed refugee ships to escape. Concrete experience with resistance was part of family life, and it left powerful impression: one knows how and why one fights. New music was for Hommel a crucial basis of a modern, democratic civil society; it was culturally necessary, and not merely a component of the current entertainment mentality. New music was for him a serious matter.

I am deeply grateful to him. After I first visited the Ferienkurse in 1986, I wrote a quite ambivalent article about them for a German newspaper. Two years later, in 1988, I stood on the list of the of composers invited to the Komponistenforum, without having applied for or requested this honor. I was humbled by this invitation, especially because owing to my young age (I was then only 25 years old). When I asked Hommel why he had invited me into this illustrious circle, he told me he had read the article I had written. Whoever was capable of critical thinking regarding the Ferienkurse belonged in the "Darmstadt-family"— thus, Hommel proved himself to be a fine dialectician!

I remained an instructor at the Ferienkurse until Hommel's retirement in 1994, and the impact of this experience was irreplaceable and enduring. Without him, I would not have become the composer I am today. I thank him and will forget neither his character nor his achievement.