

# Darmstadt 2008: The Negation of Gesture and/or Vice Versa

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## I. On Superficial Orthodoxy

A critique of Darmstadt 2008 is by no means anything novel. This past summer, a series of on-line blogs have provided blow-by-blow chronicles of the events of the festival, accompanied by often-vitriolic attacks upon the programming, administration, and jury selection processes. Unfortunately, as is often the case with on-line communications, which tempt many to shed diplomacy and careful consideration, it is difficult to avoid the impression that many of the contributions convey more the frustration and sense of entitlement of the author than a meaningful evaluation of the festival itself.

It is not my intention to make a further contribution in this direction. Having attended the Ferienkurse since 2004, I have been continually astonished both by the plenitude of well-organized lectures, concerts, lessons, and other related activities, often occurring simultaneously or in close succession, and the relative absence of bureaucracy by which this has been achieved. A comparably autonomous,<sup>1</sup> multi-faceted, large-scale festival, featuring a (by and large) high caliber of performance would be inconceivable in most countries, including the United States.

As with any ambitious undertaking, Darmstadt has not been without its flaws, and I would not wish to simply gloss over crucial areas requiring improvement. Nor is it my objective to fully discredit the aforementioned bloggers—my opinions of several lectures and concert programs were similar in nature to theirs, and I had certainly experienced my own share of disappointments, be they performance-related or otherwise. However, it seems a futile exercise to identify the causes of the various festival shortcomings with structural/administrative oversights. Rather, it is the phenomena that have emerged from the Ferienkurse's framework which deserve greater attention. That is to say, rather than conceiving of the Darmstadt structure a procrustean constraint system whose role consists exclusively of moulding an agenda, I consider the festival as more of an intersection (or perhaps collision) of contrasting tendencies within the realm of (Western) contemporary music. As opposed to the suppressing (or merely ignoring) of all but a few well-represented composers, the forum/lecture and concert contexts of Darmstadt have functioned as a sort of "zoom lens" upon (or perhaps in more lurid terms, an "open wound," exposing) the various limitations, contradictions, and failures surrounding the work and ideas of many younger and somewhat more established composers present.

Unfortunately, the participants were in the main not interested in pursuing serious discussion of aesthetic problems. At a time in history in which, by most accounts, the act of composition is gradually becoming a dying art (or at least is undergoing a process of significant redefinition, institutional and otherwise), and the concert-hall-model of musical production seems eerily obsolete, the trivial focus upon composer-factions, which are often illusory, has dominated too much of the discourse in contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> While Tanglewood and Aspen are perhaps similar in scale and longer in duration, the contemporary music component is attached to an event featuring more conventional programming, open to the public.

music. Paradoxically, this highly competitive sphere, which continues to attract a great number of composers intent upon practicing an ostensibly dying art, bears a heightened risk of extinction, at least as a viable, institutionally-supported activity. Therefore, a measure of cooperation among avant-garde composers is of the essence-

But what could possibly be considered a universal concern among such a varied collection of festival participants? Here one encounters an even more pronounced paradox. As has been well documented in the recent and less recent past, the notion of having founded the festival upon a stringent aesthetic and methodological orthodoxy largely emerges from a "folkloric" version of the Ferienkurse's early history. Indeed, the widely accepted myth of a "Serialist hegemony" may be dispelled if one simply examines the aesthetic diversity evident during the 1950's, as reflected in the content of concert-programs dating from this period. And this within the limited cultural context of Western Europe, and (eventually) the UK and North America. In recent years, however, this mythology has been replaced by a real overriding dogma (despite the expanded cultural context), constituted by a superficial, rather than an ideological, aesthetic, or technical monism. Beneath the guise of aesthetic and "stylistic" pluralism has emerged a limited vocabulary of empty gestures, formally distributed across a given piece in an equally conventional, predictable manner (in most instances). Of course, the density of new works presented in Darmstadt often leads to a process of habituation, such that one no longer attends to the particular identifying features of a work during its unfolding, but rather maps its traits to a generic schema.

Unfortunately, such "new music schemata," when applied to the works presented, particularly during final studio concerts, have proven themselves to be robust predictive models. Not only does this codex of identifiable attributes itself contribute to a sense of homogeneity and tedium, but the attributes themselves—clichéd surfaces deriving from works written between ca. 1968-1988, falling under the vague rubrics of "critical music," "new complexity," or other historiographic generalizations of relevant movements of this period—give this common "musical language" a stale, obsolete quality.<sup>2</sup> Imagine, if in Darmstadt in 1968 the majority of pieces performed had been redolent of music from forty years prior, i.e., dating from 1928. A program of Milhaud, mid-period Stravinsky, and late Ravel imitations would not have been considered terribly innovative.

Such a hypothetical situation only underscores two fundamental perils facing the composer, performers, and public within the current climate. First, the accepted illusion of originality and of risk-taking, when it merely emulates the surfaces of historically circumscribed instances of originality, implicitly renders the work immune to criticism and scrutiny, or at the minimum certifies the work as having fulfilled a basic (perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> Otherwise formulated: the outstanding works written since 1945 have focused upon developing persuasive and self-consistent musical languages, articulating their own terms, boundaries, time-scales, etc., such that a "diagonal listening" (i.e., developing diverse connections between concept and surface in real time) is encouraged. Such a value has been more recently overshadowed by an unreflective "shopping-cart" approach to the organization of material-elements lacking in particularity, originality, or intrinsic relationships. (I am not referring the works employing quotations or genre-references, but rather to those employing the off-the-shelf avant-gardisms mentioned above.) Moreover, robust (outside-time) conceptualization has been replaced by the unfolding of predictable narratives merely mirroring the unfolding of the compositional process. Consequently, only a "horizontal" listening of such a corrupted musical language becomes feasible. Boredom inevitably ensues.

primitive) set of criteria—and therefore represents in fact the safest possible compositional approach. And it is exactly this notion of "criteria" in composing a "Darmstadt-compatible" work that renders the new-music schema no longer a *descriptive*, but a *normative* model. That is to say, the reception (primarily by other composers) of a piece that does not conform to the superficial "norm" established by an implied common consensus is considered "not serious," or "naïve," or simply "inappropriate for Darmstadt."<sup>3</sup> In practice, among the works that received the most vociferous objections were those that a) made use of unconventional ensembles/instruments/media b) employed materials not considered historically-rooted, tied to the art-music tradition, etc., and/or c) exceeded certain imposed limits (of duration, decibel level, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Hence, "orthodoxy" seems none too strong a term to apply.

On the production end, the consequences of defining the boundaries of an acceptable compositional praxis are grave enough. However, the passive reception that is often portrayed as "critical" signals an even greater threat to the continuation of an emphasis upon the experimental, the not-yet-institutionalized. When one is attuned only to immediate (and trivial) surface-characteristics, the mode of listening applied is more that of the subscriber attending a standard-repertoire concert series, or of a follower of a particular genre or pop band.<sup>5</sup> In short: one ultimately attends a concert hoping for "old wine" (the familiar, pseudo-avant-garde tropes) in "new bottles" (unfamiliar names, or recognized emerging, "rising star" composers)...much as occurs at a typical orchestral subscription-concert.

But what exactly engenders such a form of "regressive listening?" Although higher-level programming decisions certainly reflect an institutional repertoire-preference/legitimization, the dogma surrounding a dominant aesthetic/"contemporary music template" seems to have arisen independently of institutional pressures. Perhaps it is largely a function of the previously-mentioned factionalizing phenomenon, such that composers have been conditioned to accept only a limited palette of work-characteristics, even if only *suggestive* of an aesthetic preference (i.e., flipping the Lachenmann-switch, applying the proverbial new-complexity paint), rather than bearing a distinct identity. Whether such a tendency has been encouraged by pedagogues, or internally generated and propagated among students within a studio, it results in the behavior of a subscriber, groupie, or marginally-engaged member of a political constituency: merely declare one's allegiance (via borrowed, corrupted, and hollowed-out gestures), and give the remainder of the compositional process little or no consideration.

At the other extreme, of course, falls the "solipsistic" composer-model. Indeed, the ego-ridden, insular, "Romantic genius" ideal seems to inform the praxis of certain younger composers represented at Darmstadt. Such a self-definition flaunts resistance to

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<sup>3</sup> This is neither hyperbole nor speculation, but rather a transcription of comments overheard among audience-members during/after concerts at the 2008 Ferienkurse.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, many of the most significant works premiered at Darmstadt received negative responses. And certain pieces that met with public disapproval either bore few redeeming qualities as compositions, or were poorly performed.

<sup>5</sup> The latter of which may bear a direct correlation to audiences of a given ensemble, that are more concerned about hearing works that expose the virtuosity of the ensemble in an established manner, rather than a piece that permits the musicians to explore new territory, perhaps exposing their weaknesses in the process.

any criticism, perpetuating the naïve illusion that one's own work has transcended its influences.<sup>6</sup> But the compositions presented indeed confirm these sources of influence, without proposing any tangible new argument/perspective upon such influences.

On a somewhat deeper level, whether the composer defines him/herself as a disciple, as a member of a school, or as a Romantic of mythological proportions (around whom a cult of admirers may or may not form), one fundamental question has been largely ignored: *Who cares?* Why, and for whom, does one compose? With whom (or what) does one's work engage? What renders a piece *relevant* to the present time, besides perhaps a few obvious (but insignificant) identifying-marks, or the immediate context within which the composer is operating? Such inquiries are by no means new in the history of the avant-garde, but in the case of the Darmstadt new music scene appear in the main to have been evaded via endless in-fighting (which extends to generating rivalries that perhaps have little substance), the dogmatic recycling of self-enclosed musical vocabularies, both within works and throughout the discourse surrounding them,<sup>7</sup> and careerist agendas. While such tendencies have always hovered in the background, their current perverse dominance further jeopardizes the status of the composer within a greater societal context, or at least relegates composition ever more into the margins in relation to other artistic disciplines.

Can such a trend be reversed? Thus far, my perspective upon the compositional landscape at Darmstadt, has been largely pessimistic. However, I hope to illustrate in the next section that certain works have eschewed orthodoxy, and perhaps convey a sense that the domain of contemporary music is indeed pertinent to the external world. In discussing pieces/projects presented during the 2008 Ferienkurse that I consider to represent possible paths out of the current predicament, I seek to highlight the salient conceptual distinctions that have influenced compositional decisions within such works.

## II. Reviews

What follows are evaluations of three events occurring during Darmstadt 2008. This selection is by no means intended as a "best of Darmstadt" list—there are several noteworthy works and performances that have been intentionally excluded—but rather focuses on works that most clearly illustrate the issues outlined above.

### **Preisträgerkonzert II: Works of Papalexandri-Alexandri, Marco Momi, and Simon Steen-Andersen**

Upon first glance, the four ensemble pieces premiered on this concert, all composed by *Stipendienpreis* recipients, bear striking similarities, both in conception and means employed. All involve some mode of performance theatricality, unconventional instruments (or unusual approaches to a standard instrument), and/or tend towards some

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<sup>6</sup> The mystique/opacity surrounding the compositional praxis unfortunately leading one to suspect a lack of technical competence.

<sup>7</sup> An especially perverse phenomenon within the sphere of so-called "critical music"...which by definition, is meant to re-define its material in relation to changing external conditions, while preserving a set of core concepts. Instead, the reverse has occurred,

obvious extreme (of dynamic, of duration, of density, etc.). On closer examination, an essential distinction emerges, which may be formulated as "the negation of gesture" vs. "the gesture of negation." While the former component of this chiasm implies a strident avoidance of an inherited, conventional vocabulary as a mode of articulation, the latter exploits exactly this vocabulary, co-opted primarily from various phases of post-war *musica negativa*. As a result, works exhibiting this latter trait bear only a peripheral relationship with the notion of compositional "negativizing" (and, in fact, achieve no *actual* negation of habitual tendencies or expectations), whereas those falling into the former category actively confront and propose radical alternatives to such generic, historicized tendencies.

Of particular note were the works occupying the first and fourth positions on the program which, in contrasting manners, both succeeded in constructing an internally-organized and compelling universe of compositional assumptions and materials, without resorting to formal and figural stereotypes. While Greek composer Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri's piece *Yarn* seemed to consist primarily of the construction of a meta-instrument suspending a distinctive, rather peculiar state on an intimate scale, the discourse of Simon Steen-Andersen's *On and Off, To and Fro* revolved about establishing performance constraint-systems, feed-back loops employing "non-standard" instruments (megaphones, sirens, etc.). However, it should be emphasized that such elements were introduced not as mere gimmicks or sources of provocation, but rather to articulate a robust background conception. That is to say, an internal logic, and therefore a (strange) sense of coherence, ultimately emerged. If one compares the Steen-Andersen to the extended techniques and megaphone intrusion within Marco Momi's *ICONICA II*, a clear distinction may be observed. Although the latter was generally well-constructed and displayed decent *écriture* for the instruments, it relied upon a largely derivative gestural vocabulary, such that any "non-standard" elements would be construed as mannerist insertions, provided for the sake of contrast (at best) or distraction (at worst).

Despite the varying quality of the content within the program, this concert (in its entirety) constituted a sort of positive model for the concert-experience at Darmstadt. Even after twelve days festival activities, the performers approached the new works with heightened vigor and enthusiasm (not to mention the obvious musicality and technique). The reception of all pieces, however polarized the responses may have been, conveyed an intensity absent from previous and subsequent concerts. Such a composer-performer-public dynamic was somehow reminiscent of earlier times at Darmstadt, but exceedingly rare to find in 2008, unfortunately.

### **Dozentenkonzert III: Ferneyhough, Sánchez-Verdú, Pisati, and Anthin**

Among the concerts presented and curated by the staff performers, I found this to be perhaps the most successful altogether. Although highly contrasting in aesthetic, each of the first three works on the program operated within a relatively brief duration, was scored for only two instruments, and in no cases were generic surface formulae employed. In the span of ca. six minutes, each of the five guitar-duo "post-pieces" comprising Ferneyhough's *No time (at all)* projected a unique, crystallized identity/form and distinctive approach to constructing a (usually unstable and transient) relationship

between the guitars, tuned a quarter-tone apart.<sup>8</sup> Although derived from segments of *Les Froissements des Ailes de Gabriel*, the composer's guitar concerto (appearing as the second "scene" of *Shadowtime*), the five miniatures convincingly congealed into a fragile, autonomous, and concentrated (albeit fragmented) totality, bringing to the fore material that would be otherwise concealed within the concerto-context. Sánchez-Verdú's *Nada* (for guitar and cello) and Pisati's *Zone-Alp* (for guitar and bass flute) likewise illustrated compelling, innovative strategies for combining the guitar with another instrument.

The program concluded with Swedish composer Christopher Anthin's *Playmaster*, for guitar and analogue cassette recorder. Although utilizing ostensibly comedic, low-quality materials, the work is constructed according to serious premises. The unpromising nature of the initial juxtaposition of empty guitar meanderings and a quasi-expressionist film-music recorded component morphs into a failed "music-minus-one" scenario, in which the guitar plays slightly out of tune and behind the tempo of the increasingly trashy MIDI-generated Muzak-like tape part. Ultimately, the piece exists as multi-faceted commentary and self-critique, on the most obvious level via the emergence of the voice of the composer towards the end of the piece, providing a sort of "confession" of a compositional crisis preceding the completion of the present work. However, this intervention also points to the absurdity of the situation constructed, i.e., the asymmetry between the rather intimate nature of the work and the dominating an objective means of projection. Furthermore, a blatant critique of virtuosity in contemporary music was made manifest via the less-than-flattering role assigned to the performer (Magnus Andersson, in this case). Although perhaps "conceptual" in nature, the well-wrought structure and careful exploitation of the technological limitations were largely responsible for the success of the piece. Rather than merely presenting the cassette recorder for the sake of novelty, provocation, or nostalgia, the carrier/mechanism (i.e., ability to change sides of the tape) was utilized as a means of providing a satiric foreshadowing, while the compromised quality of the medium permitted a source-ambiguity (i.e., recorded ensemble vs. synthesizer patch) to emerge in the first section. Perhaps my interpretation of the work is somewhat inflated or presumptuous, but the compelling nature of the work's conceptual framework and design would be difficult to deny.

### ***Nachtklub mit Fenster* : Manos Tsongaris et al.**

For this summer's session, Manos Tsongaris proposed a post-concert installation-project, open to all the participants, both composers and performers. Each participant would compose a new work, no longer than five minutes in duration, which somehow dealt with light and sound. The works would be performed by fellow-participants in a space of the Darmstadt Kunsthalle, using a limited number of resources (a few microphones, laptops, theatre lighting equipment...). On a given evening, such pieces would be presented sporadically as micro-"concerts," as a sort of intervention in a period otherwise spent drinking and socializing.

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<sup>8</sup> With the exception of the second and fourth pieces, which are identical, but with the assignment of parts inverted, resulting in different intervallic relationships, due to the *scordatura* employed in the second guitar. There are a few more local examples of such inversions, reinforcing both the modularity of the material, and the tensions emerging from the tuning differences.

This project is mentioned not because a consistently high level of quality among the works was achieved (although several were highly inventive), but in order to address that which was accomplished artistically, and to a certain extent, politically, by the installation itself within the Ferienkurse context. On the most basic level, this was an inclusive gesture for the composers, enabling many who otherwise did not receive performances to experience a premiere during the festival. All that was required was the submission of a concept and the completion of the proposed work. By extension, new composer-performer collaborations were thus facilitated, without the necessity of making any prior arrangements.

Besides expanding the modes of festival-engagement for participants, these Nachtclub-events functioned as a sort of bridge between the concert- and installation-contexts. The museum setting, unpredictable start-times, and strictly limited durations resulted in a shedding of the usual concert-formalities. By the same token, the temporal restrictions elicited a highly concentrated mode of listening, in contrast to the typically neutral or impatient responses to sound-art exhibitions (especially when these occurred simultaneously with concerts). In short, *kurz und gut*.

Although rather detached from the nucleus of the festival, this project pointed to certain domains whose further exploration would vastly improve matters for Darmstadt participants as well as members of the public the near future. The importance of forming composer/performer collaborations, of exploring alternate venues/conditions for presenting works in an informed and substantive manner, and, perhaps, of encouraging brevity, is not to be underestimated.

However, such developments rarely occur independently of some form of discourse or stock-taking. Although numerous conferences, panel discussions, etc., transpired during the 2008 Ferienkurse, few arrived at the kernel of the problems facing contemporary music. An intensified, international dialogue on the current state of the avant-garde would be an essential component of subsequent sessions. If basic questions regarding the significance of compositional activity and its respective institutions to society (or at least to other art-forms) are avoided, and if the problematic nature of the relationships between musical concepts and their articulation in musical language(s) is not addressed, one can only expect a continued, self-perpetuating cycle of diminishing returns. In the coming years, it would be of interest to witness a return to the emphasis upon concept and experimentation that typified the first few decades at Darmstadt...and not simply the regurgitation of material associated with this era.