

THE LAST WAVE?
***SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE DEAD END OF MUSICAL PROGRESS AND HOW
WE CAN COME OUT OF IT AGAIN***

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He comes from a musical family, started his artistic career in childhood as a Wiener Sängerknaben member, to which he returned as conductor after having studied piano and musical pedagogy at the Vienna Music University. He has been professor of music and singing, accompanist, conductor and editor at ORF (the Austrian Broadcasting Company). In 1985 he was appointed professor of choral conducting at the Vienna Music University. His initially sporadic activity as a composer became permanent since 1994. His oeuvre includes a series of chamber and symphonic pieces, two operas, one melodrama, a mass, ballads, art songs (among which several vocal-instrumental cycles) as well as numerous choral works. A part of his choral pieces were recorded at the 3 ORF-CD studio. His activity as a conductor has been very rich, having founded several very active ensembles – the "Vienna vocalists", the "Youth Orchestra of Vienna" and the contemporary music ensemble i.m.p.u.l.s.e. The last of the three has taken part in several editions of the prestigious Wien Modern Festival and has recorded a series of contemporary pieces on CD. He was awarded the Erwin Ortner Award 2001, the State Award of the Republic of Austria in 2003, the Award of the Province of Lower Austria in 2007, the Music Prize of the City of Vienna in 2011.



ABSTRACT

Starting from the situation of music in Austria, I shall try to define what I think and what inspires me to compose the way I compose. Among the practitioners of music or those involved in music industry, and of course among the composers, there is in Vienna itself a melting pot of cultures, with very many different personalities and viewpoints. Music consists not only of tones, rhythms and sounds, but first of all of the relationship of tones, the bond of sounds, the combination of rhythms, the interaction of individual musical parameters to one another. In my writing, instead of musical "gestures", I make new room for "speaking", cantabile melodics, using a colorful palette of different scales, I try to give the triad new facets and set texts to music, interpreting them like Schubert or Wolf. I quite often use the same technique as the old master painters: although I have the whole picture in my head, I first paint the background, i. e. the accompaniment, the less important parts or layers of sound, so that they also receive a development with a logic of its own. Because composers today have every conceivable freedom to fulfill themselves in an individual manner. They can depict the world as ideal as we would all like it, or as bad as it is actually not, they can offer, to their heart's content, aesthetic constructs, "sound clouds" or emotional "ear worms".

Keywords: progress, New Music, audience, need for music, pluralism, social communication

1. Introduction

The rash rhythm of the changes in the contemporary world is invariably associated to the idea of progress as target and aim of human action, maybe of human existence itself, so that this theme has long been a central preoccupation for all fields of life. Art is no exception, presenting this problem with specific sensitivity and acuity.

In the following lines I undertake a few reflections on this topic, from the standpoint of a composer, as a purely personal point of view; starting from the situation of music in Austria I shall try to define what I think and what inspires me to compose the way I compose.

2. New Music in Vienna

Let us first consider the situation in Vienna, where I come from. There is here, in the field of historical music, an interesting and varied concert life that is surpassed by only a few other musical centers of the world. New Music, by which I understand such music that was written after 1945, appears in the grand concert life only occasionally, being offered primarily in its own series of concerts or festivals. The "Wien modern" festival, founded by Claudio Abbado many years ago, the excellent concerts with the chamber orchestra "Klangforum" which specializes in "New Music" and the exemplary opera productions of the Neue Oper Wien/New Opera Vienna have strongly improved the appraisal of contemporary music. One attends these operas and concerts, where three decades ago many places were still empty, out of interest, or at least in order to be "up to date". Judging by the rush to ancient music concerts or classical music concerts under famous conductors, or to operas starring grand names of the stage, or to vocal groups performing jazz music, such as the "Real Group" from Sweden, the numerical audience of the New Music and the enthusiasm for it but quite modest. I think that I am not far from the truth when I say: the typical music lover in Vienna listens to New Music rather reluctantly, but is at the same time very receptive towards modern literature and painting.

Among the practitioners of music or those involved in music industry, and of course among the composers, there is in Vienna itself a melting pot of cultures, with very many different personalities and viewpoints. In addition to time-honored representatives of the dodecaphonic composition (in the spirit of Josef Matthias Hauer as well), we find representatives of a "more beautiful" New Music such as Alexander Blechinger, minimalists, post-modernists, avant-garde artists like Olga Neuwirth, Beat Furrer, Bernhard Lang and Dieter Kaufmann, cross-overs such as Christian Muthspiel and also some well known names such as Ivan Eröd, Kurt Schwertsik and HK Gruber, who write tonally in the extended sense.

The most important trend since the postwar period is the fact that an initially strongly opposed Progressive Party, which pays homage to the New Music, gradually prevailed. Judging in terms of the economic potential of our small country, this direction fortunately receives high subventions. It has meanwhile won over media, music criticism and musicology. The representatives of the New Music are the ones who determine which new works may be performed at the festivals of modern music and in the great Viennese concert halls and which may not.

One can say that in Vienna, unlike in other music centers, and despite an ever more pervasive pluralistic conception, there is still a kind of establishment of contemporary music. And this, in an agreeable, fun-loving Austria, is still largely fixated on a rigidly-academic music in which there is little room for a smile.

If, however, you witnessed, as I did in my youth, how paper airplanes were thrown in the early 60s through the Vienna Mozart Hall, at the performance of John Cage's Piano Concerto, then you must also feel some approval for the brave champions of the New Music. They have honestly earned for themselves, through a long ordeal, the right to finally be decision-makers – with the limitation that the present representatives of contemporary music are already the next and the next but one generation, "the adapted" who cause no more scandals and are always remembered only with friendly applause.

Even before the New Music had reached its current status, a certain weariness regarding their works could already be sensed in Vienna. The first person to question the avant-garde was and is at the same time one of its most important representatives: Friedrich Cerha, the world's most famous Austrian composer of the day. In his 1980 article entitled "Is Modernism exhausted?"¹ he still considers serial procedures as "means of producing complex, fine textures", he describes the "joy caused by the unusual sound images brought forth by mass structures" as he himself used them in his renowned cluster-built "Spiegeln" [Mirrors], but then writes critically on:

"20 years have passed since. While epigonic products of the described directions are still haunting the concert halls under the label «avant-garde», creative natures have long been preoccupied with something else... Purist concentration is often followed by a strive for greater richness. To look for it elsewhere than in the areas neglected by the newer development, such as harmony, melodies and rhythm, is hardly possible. But this leads inevitably to the touch with tradition"².

¹ Friedrich Cerha, *Schriften: ein Netzwerk*, Lafite Publishing House, Vienna 2001.

² Ibidem.

Again 30 years have gone by since this diagnosis of the year 1980. The "neglected areas of harmony, melodic and rhythm" continue to remain neglected in Austria. Long-withered sound effects and numerical games continue to shape the image of our New Music, which has not brought anything really new for a long time and which, in view of the fact that the public is still not numerous, must once more draw the conclusion that advanced composers are supposedly never understood during their lifetime, or that in the present situation one must be satisfied with writing for a small but fine circle.

My personal journey began with serial music. As a teenager I attended the concerts of the "Reihe", I listened with interest to the productions of Boulez, Stockhausen and others, I studied the relevant publications, and – decided to stop composing. I also experienced the age of the clusters, and I am using cluster and alienation of instrumental sounds as a means to sketch collective compositions with my high school students and to gain their interest in New Music.

Whereas I was constantly irritated by the high degree of arbitrariness in serial compositions (also out of compassion for the performers who have to undertake a huge effort with such pieces), I was never bothered by the intentional polymorphism in the music of the Greek-Austrian composer Anestis Logothetis. Logothetis admits that he proceeds very freely with his graphical notation: you can read the scores from left to right, but also from top to bottom, or in other directions, you can perform the same piece with solo recorder or with a large orchestra, omit places or combine them with others of the master's pages. I have for many years cultivated with love and pleasure this provocative, highly independent mode of performance of the graphical music. And although I have not adopted Logothetis' form of graphical notation, although I loathe the "open" form preferred by Logothetis and I write mostly tonally, I have learned a lot from him. Most importantly: in music the character weighs heavier than the texture.

3. Personal Way

When I began composing again in 1994, I had been teaching conducting at the Vienna University of Music for many years, besides that I had supervised the subject "Didactics of New Music", I had premiered many contemporary compositions with my "Junges Orchester Wien" and written music textbooks, the examples of which come to a large extent from 20th century music. A century that put forth an incredible wealth of genial and highly interesting works before the prevalence among the many currents of modernity of that

mode of performance known as New Music which has, in my opinion, maneuvered us into a dead end out of which we have not come out to this day.

And that brings me to that anecdote, which has given my paper its title. It is supposed to have happened in Vienna at the end of the 19th century. If it is not true, then it is certainly well made up:

Johannes Brahms, Honorary Doctor of the University of Breslau, and Gustav Mahler walk in the park along the Vienna River. Brahms complains that the music is close to its end, all options are as good as exhausted. Then Mahler remains suddenly still, points to the river and asks provocatively: "The last wave, Doctor?"

What Brahms obviously meant during his walk with Mahler, was that music, especially the harmony, had in his time already reached such a complex level, that one had to wonder whether, given the human capacity of comprehension, it was reasonable to overbid it. Brahms himself, wrongly attacked as being regressive by Liszt, Wagner, Wolf and others, was particularly tormented by the question of progress.

Mahler's ironic answer can also be seen as the typical belief in progress of the ending 19th century: Mahler foresaw the future possibilities of late Romanticism and Modernism, and therefore made fun of the old Brahms.

4. Progress in music

Nevertheless, his reply contains a portion of wisdom. A river can not be prohibited to flow anymore than man can be prohibited to express himself artistically. The fundamental human need for music is so strong that it will always find means and ways to express itself.

Let us stay for a moment with the idea of progress, with the aspect of the evolution of the musical material in Western music. This development seems to be indeed following a linear route leading from the simple to the complex and precisely the best among the musicians have given this development its strongest impulse.

The melodic leads from the Gregorian chant with gradual movement to modern structures with large intervallic leaps, the harmony of the fifths in the organum, through triads, seventh and ninth chords towards chromatically altered structures, added dissonances, chord clusters and finally, with Schönberg, to the reassessment of the chord as a "color". In the timbral field of sound one goes from unaccompanied vocals and simple instruments to the unlimited possibilities of digital and electronic sounds. Only in the rhythmic system of the highly artificial *Ars Nova* breaks the continuous development for a short time, but since the

beginning of the 20th century it has been by far surpassed by the use of the drums, by jazz and pop, by rhythmic constructs or by the use of ametrical passages.

The progress in other disciplines has had a similar linear run in European history as well. However, in the 20th century, science and technology literally exploded. The fine arts and literature too, and they are still expanding: the former merely by the rise of photography and film, the latter through a rapidly changing world that supplies new materials. Only music seems to occupy a special position: except for the new sonic possibilities offered by electro-acoustics and digitization, everything was already there, at least in principle. Today's composer is therefore again in the situation (as Brahms was, only this time with far better justification) to ask the question whether one can find any more sounds, playing techniques, chords and rhythms that others have not used before. Whether not everything that one writes, even when, stylistically speaking, we are dealing with New Music (!), inevitably has a quotation's character. Whether the search for the new is still meaningful or a mere perpetuation of the music of the 70s and 80s.

You see, I'm showing solidarity with Brahms. But I am drawn to Mahler even more: the river will continue to flow! It can not run dry! Because music consists not only of tones, rhythms and sounds, but first of all of the relationship of tones, the bond of sounds, the combination of rhythms, the interaction of individual musical parameters to one another. An inexhaustible reservoir! – But the river of musical development has been divided into several branches since the beginning of modernity, so that today we must learn to understand styles not as a sequence of epochs, but rather as coexisting and intermingling phenomena. The following stylistic tendencies stand out at the moment from within this network:

5. Stylistic tendencies in the evolution of modern music

1) The **appreciation of the sonority**, now going on in the vocal-instrumental music scene as well as in the "digital" one. While the choral work number two thousand five hundred, in which at some point everyone is allowed to shout their lungs out, or the finally discovered 17th type of pizzicato, proudly described in the leading Austrian music magazine, the rattle on flute bodies and the pedal sounds of expensive grand pianos begin to bore, there is undoubtedly still much to discover in the field of electronics. – The danger of a music too rigorously targeting sonority is that instead of a mandatory construction that is coherent as a whole, one may get only sequences of sound fragments coherent by themselves, that the freedom of the performer's space of decoding is reduced or totally disabled and, above all:

that in this sound-art the understanding of "the spoken" and "the breath" in the music is lost. These are after all those skills, which we have been proudly calling "musicality" for centuries.

2) The **reduction of the means**, an idea that sounds agreeable and rational in the face of certain excesses of the New Music, especially since the emancipation of dissonance, that has been advertised for almost 100 years, has never taken place in practice. A fascinating thing I find in this approach is the parallelism to ecology, which recommends us a deliberate limitation in relation to environment and resources. – Intellectually, this emergency measure does not satisfy me entirely, even though I stay close to it in many pieces and especially when I write for lay choir, and I think that the so-called "conservative" Modernism allows for a continuation much more than the New Music. You can not turn back the wheel of time. This would have the character of a correction, not that of a vision. Only in combination with a very personal spiritual concept, as for example by Arvo Pärt, this "new simplicity" can work. In the American minimalism it actually celebrates triumphs.

3) The **cross-over**, the demolition of the contact phobias between classical and popular music. Some modern composers like Stravinsky, Weill, Gershwin or Bernstein vividly dealt with jazz at an early stage. It was not until the Second Viennese School that a thick dividing line was drawn between Modernism and jazz, because of a lack of expertise often with dubious arguments. Theodor Adorno expresses himself in a ruthless manner: "Give up your masculinity, let yourself be castrated, ape and announce the eunuch sound of jazz bands, then you will be rewarded with inclusion in a fraternity, which will share the mystery of impotence with you". – I find it worth considering whether jazz and pop, which "also deal with the existential problems of today's people, bring forth images of the world and visions of life", that in addition also opened a new vocal style, new instruments, a new relationship to improvisation, new production processes and new audience categories, deserve the title "new" much more than the academic and distant New Music³.

4) The **flight into provocation**. We all feel that the era of the transfiguring idealism passed away for good a long time ago, and confront ourselves in the contemporary art more thoroughly with political reality, mental illness, crime, racism and social injustice. If we apply the theorem "after Auschwitz, no poetry can be written", the same goes for music as well. He who still writes triad music after Auschwitz, "lies" in a certain way, such music is, judging by today's standards, too good to be true. – Tormenting music, elevated to the level of style

³ All quotes between inverted commas from: Matthias Petzold, *Verweigerte Begegnung* [Denied Encounter], *Kritik der neuen Musik*, 2008, www.petzold-jazz.de.

premise, lies all the same: it conceals the good. And while it paints the world black again and again, that which it wants to stigmatize gradually loses its horror, is in some ways actually "advertised". The danger of this direction, in my opinion, lies in the composer's dealing with the artistic "truth".

The most conclusive answer to the special situation of music history that has led us to an end point of the unfolding of the musical material in that exact moment of world history, in which one can speak for the first time of a global culture, seems to be **Pluralism**. It includes not only the four mentioned currents, but in principle all the international styles and trends the world has ever seen. Its aesthetics deals not only with innovation, but with individuality. Not the "new" but the "special", the "unique" and above all, the artistic freedom, stay at the center. We are late in music. In the visual arts and literature the total liberation from these stylistic constraints took place long ago.

6. Pluralism

Pluralism can also be viewed from the perspective of the market economy, proving the fact that it gives every music consumer the opportunity to hear music of their choice. Within this approach, that one may complain about as being "commercial" or welcome because of its tolerance, I try, with my music, to reach the group of "music lovers" and to win them back for today's music: that relatively large educated music audience which fills classical concert halls today and has a genuine interest in music, having been often disappointed by the New Music.

Compositionally interesting to me is therefore especially that which the New Music has denied us for many years. In my writing, instead of musical "gestures", I make new room for "speaking", cantabile melodics, using a colorful palette of different scales, I try to give the triad new facets and set texts to music, interpreting them like Schubert or Wolf. The fact that this conception leads me to the vicinity of epochs in which music was still "food for the soul", is for me rather satisfying than old-fashioned.

Being aware that I am a man with both feet in his time, I allow in my work similarities with historical music not only, bashfully, now and then, but get into creative contact with previously habitual areas of expression, that were frowned upon in the New Music: *grazioso*, *allegretto*, *scherzo*, *dolente*, *soave*, *maestoso* and *cantabile* are often character references in my works. I am interested above all in intermediate stages, where the music oscillates between multiple qualities of feeling, and the ironic "refraction".

I draw no limits to jazz and popular music. Both appear in my work sometimes and I process them with pleasure.

I build most of my compositions in such a teacher-like way that they lead from the simple to the complex, allowing the listeners, if they wish, to consciously participate in the formal development. I also like to use word repetitions and I love symmetries. The (usually strongly) varied strophic form is used in many of my vocal works as an outer shape of support, but the inner form interests me much more: how to create a musical piece in order for it to be psychologically comprehensible and convincing in the dramatic process.

I leave the realm of "structures" to others and work mostly with patterns that I imagine during the composition process as "acting persons". I quite often use the same technique as the old master painters: although I have the whole picture in my head, I first paint the background, i. e. the accompaniment, the less important parts or layers of sound, so that they also receive a development with a logic of its own. This is what particularly interests me. I want every voice and sound layer to keep their essence alongside with the other voices and layers of sound. For me, this is the image of an ideal society that works, even though the individual is free in it.

We are now in the fortunate position of having to fear no music theorist who forbids us to use parallel fifths or church leaders who forbid us to use the harp in church music. Therefore, I do not let myself intimidated by stubborn critics who nowadays continue to postulate the "New".

Our time has singers in every conceivable vocal style and performers who have reached an unprecedented level of virtuosity. I try not to encumber performing artists, who dedicate music their heart (and often sacrifice their health!), with unnecessary difficulties.

I extract my motivation for composing to a large extent from the fact that I imagine the people who play my music or listen to it, for example, the reactions of the choir singers at the rehearsal of one of my pieces, or my wife's face when she hears for the first time something written by me. Arnold Schönberg once said in a famous phrase that it was enough for him "to have expressed himself". That is, given the obsession with which a composer works, certainly true; for me however it is rather true that I write **for someone**.

7. Conclusions

Because composers today have every conceivable freedom to fulfill themselves in an individual manner. They can depict the world as ideal as we would all like it, or as bad as it is actually not, they can offer, to their heart's content, aesthetic constructs, "sound clouds" or

emotional "ear worms". But their main task is, in my opinion, a social-communicative one: to touch the listeners' inmost depths, to send them energy, not to rob it, to mediate "beauty" and positive feelings at least for brief moments. And after decades of asceticism with "interesting" music, finally to write music that one can also love.

(original title: „Die letzte Welle?”, translated from German by Alina Grațiana Pop)

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