

Peter Ablinger -- the talking piano & composition as a tool for observation

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Peter Ablinger is a composer and musician who lives in Austria. His work involves innovative approaches to the piano, including the use of noise and field recordings in his compositions. Recently I interviewed Ablinger about his early influences, his series with the Speaking Piano, and his other projects.

How did you first get interested in the arts?

Ablinger: Well, it wouldn't be exactly right to say that I would come from an artistic family. but my parents liked and supported music on a basic level. They went to light operas, liked Austrian folk music and marching bands. My mother had a notable voice when she was singing in the church choir, and we had a piano which my two sisters and my brothers have been learning. I just the youngest of the bunch!

Who are some of your influences?

Ablinger: I was 19 and used to be a piano player in jazz and rock bands -- we're talking about the late 70's -- when I first heard Cecil Taylor in a concert nearby Graz/Austria. This changed my life. It was the first time that I heard anything like New Music -- I didn't even know that somebody like Schoenberg existed -- as an Austrian music student, imagine! But in general, by far the most influential thing in my life allways was the visual arts, much more than others music... (before I studied music I have been studying graphic arts.) ...and things that are no art at all, to observe things arround me, the every day life. But to mention at least one composer: Alvin Lucier is the one I feel very close too in some respects.

What is one memory you have that transformed your approach to the art that you make?

Ablinger: I remember a walk through the cornfields, somewhen in the 80's, when I suddenly became aware of the different color of noise of two different kinds of corn whispering in the wind. This was the grounding for many many pieces I did

later on. And at the same time this was a basis for not furthermore relying on music history only.

What do you like so much about composing music?

Ablinger: More and more, composition is becoming a tool for observation to me. Observing the surroundings and especially observing perception, to learn how it functions, what it does with us. How perception constitutes us.

You have many innovative projects that relate to connections between music and other art forms. What do you like about exploring those connections?

Ablinger: For me this is not even a question of like or dislike. I cannot help it. Whenever I think about a piece of art, somewhere in my brain a counterpoint voice is simultaneously reflecting about what this piece of art would mean to music. This is the source (the secret!) of a mayor part of my thinking.

I really like "Klänge auf Papier." How did you come up with the idea for that?

Ablinger: Here we got the closeness to Alvin Lucier! Klänge auf Papier translates into English as Sounds on Paper, a work by Alvin! But beyond the title the piece has a different story. It is part of my investigation of what happens when we are hearing. This investigations have taught me that we dont just perceive what happens outside us, but we have to construct (imagine) what we are hearing. Klänge auf Papier consists of sheets of paper with different objects upon them whose sound we may imagine. A traditional score is in a way also "sounds on paper" except that the sounds can be read (constructed) only by trained musicians. My Klänge auf Papier is a score that can be read by everybody. You see the score and imagine the music.

"Drei Minuten für Orchester" ("Three Minutes for Orchestra") sounds fantastic. Would you describe one aspect of your creative process with that? There are dramatic shifts from full ensemble sounds, silence, solo moments with piano, with the legato tempo, and then ambient street sounds.

Ablinger: Drei Minuten für Orchester has three layers -- ambient street sounds, the orchestra part with is a parallel analysis of the frequencies of the actual street sounds, and the additional piano part which is just an ascending scale. Drei Minuten für Orchester is the third part within Altar. The first part involves so called "listening columns" in public space where one could take a headphone and listen to what right now can be heard in the actual situation. And the second

part is an electronic piece with live cello. All three pieces are presenting the same three situations in different media; therefore the piece is also about different possibilities of artistic representation.

I really like how "Hanna Schygulla" sounds. Who's singing with the piano in that composition? Is that Hanna Schygulla singing, or someone else?

Ablinger: Shure, its Hanna! I recorded her myself in a restaurant nearby Munich. I think it was 2002.

I liked Plus Minus's performance of your composition "Instrumente und Rauschen (Instruments and Noise)." The playing and silences are quite dramatic and specific with their intervals. Would you describe your creative process for that composition?

Ablinger: Instrumente und Rauschen one would translate as "instruments and noise." But noise is not exactly the same as Rauschen. Rauschen signifies only the static kinds of noise, like the sound of the ocean, a waterfall, an (analogue) TV without antenna... Quite a large part of my work is examining Rauschen in its various appearances. The individual case of "Instrumente und Rauschen" (subtitle: "24 Short Pieces") holds also a relationship to certain drawing series of Cy Twombly. Once I described my piece this way: A series of drawings in time where the background, the paper is the main element (- the static noise), while the disappearing figures on this paper (- the instruments) are taken back to the state of illusion.

How did you get involved with the Speaking Piano project? How many pieces are in the Speaking Piano series?

Ablinger: So far there are eight pieces in that series. No. 1 was my own voice, No. 2 is a speech by Fidel Castro, No. 3 is based on the voices of my parents praying the rosary, No. 5 is called "A Letter from Schoenberg," and so on. The Speaking Piano (this is not an official title) is part of the "Quadraturen"-Series which transfers any "phonograph" (recorded sounds from speech, field recordings and TV soundtracks) into music. The series can be seen as an attempt towards a kind of phonorealism, and its questioning goes back to my times as a graphic arts student - and shure, is another evidence of my relationships to visual arts, as the initial question just was: What could the concept of photorealism mean in music? The series, as well as the methods I am using in that series, are still developing.

Have any unexpected things happened during one of your performances?

Ablinger: In October 2010, my string quartet Wachstum und Massenmord (Growth and Mass Murder) performed in Donaueschingen. The audience was clapping so much in the middle of the concert that we had to stop performing the piece.

What other projects have you been working on?

Ablinger: Currently I've been intending to compose as less as possible -- to take a time off, to just reflect and think. But that hasn't really been the case, since I composed about ten new pieces recently, and have been working on many new compositions.

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Dan Godston teaches and lives in Chicago. His writings have appeared in Chase Park, After Hours, BlazeVOX, Versal, Beard of Bees, Horse Less Review, Moria, Apparatus Magazine, EOAGH, Requited Journal, Sentinel Poetry, and other print publications and online journals.