

# "Like the Clear Blue Sky"

## Peter Ablinger's 33-127

by Evan Johnson

Scale, noise, scale; scale, noise, scale. Peter Ablinger's *33-127* for electric guitar and CD is a subset of the 2002 work *1-127*, comprising the last 95 of the latter work's individually numbered segments, and from the listener's point of view it is so transparent that it is virtually opaque. This is not music in the accustomed sense. So what is it?

The piece itself could not be more straightforward. Again and again, ninety-five times in all, a scale descends, with gentle and unpredictable irregularities of both rhythm and pitch, from the top of the electric guitar's range to the bottom. The sound of the instrument is clean, clear, and precise. And then, at some point in each of these tranquil, neutral scales—all but one of them, anyway—its progress is interrupted by a cacophony of recorded street noise, which the guitar, now louder and rougher in tone, attempts flailingly to accompany. A moment of this, or a few seconds; then the scale resumes as if nothing has happened. It reaches the bottom of the instrument, the track readout on the CD player clicks upward on its way to 95, and we begin again. But why these scales, and why this noise?

The figure of the scale, ascending or descending, regularly or irregularly, has been a fixture in Peter Ablinger's music for almost thirty years. *Weiss/Weisslich 1* (written in 1980, when the composer was twenty-one) consists entirely of two scales, first descending on the white keys of the piano from the top of the instrument to the bottom, then doing the same in reverse; since then, series of pitches rising or falling by step at a moderate tempo have figured prominently in countless pieces, notably the large-ensemble work *Der Regen, der Glas, das Lachen* (1994), *Grisailles 1-100* (1991-3), and *6 Linien* (2004), which has a structure essentially identical to that of *33-127*. More specifically, Ablinger notes in his manifesto-essay "Metaphern" ("Metaphors") that, over the course of several years, he wrote a large number of pieces in which "an instrument steps down its particular range, from top to bottom." This particular gesture, out of which *33-127* was born twenty-five years after *Weiss/Weisslich 1*, reappears inevitably and obsessively in work after work, and it forms something absolutely fundamental to Ablinger's art.

Clues to the significance of these descending scales, always taking in the entire available compass of the instrument in question, lurk in every corner of Ablinger's thought. He studied graphic design

before turning to composition, and even then one of his primary teachers was the visually-minded composer Roman Haubenstock-Ramati. Ablinger writes often of the inextricable connection in his work between music and the graphic arts; in this sense, a scale is an axiomatic stroke of the pencil, the definition of a field. "This line," he has written of his attachment to the scale, "was my personal manifesto of the fundamental."

Ablinger also draws constant motivation from the distinction between simultaneous and successive, vertical and horizontal, aria and recitative. (An entire series of works labeled *IEAOV-Instrumente und ElektroAkustisch Ortsbezogene Verdichtung*, or "Instruments and Electroacoustic Site-Specific Condensation"—is based on the computer-driven process of literally tipping chunks of sound onto their side, so that the successive becomes simultaneous and the simultaneous successive.) The scale, as a diagonal stroke, is the most efficient way of mapping out a two-dimensional space in which both "recitative" and "aria" have their place. The slowly and irregularly repeated scales that form the backbone of 33-127 are the frame upon which the canvas is stretched, and an insistent reminder of all that is left out.

Despite the continuing focus on the scale, though, if one had to choose one focal concept to define Ablinger's art, it would be noise. Not "noise," precisely: *Rauschen*. The dictionary would have it that the German word means, in fact, "noises"; but for Ablinger it is more than that—it means the noise of the natural world, waterfalls and wind and rain, noise as a fact, not to be mastered or claimed for musical purposes, not to be absorbed into a discursive syntax, but to be acknowledged, confronted and plumbed. *Rauschen*, for Ablinger, are not musical material; he is not Luigi Russolo, John Cage or Helmut Lachenmann, looking to broaden the definition of music incrementally to include the heretofore rejected. It is telling that noise in Ablinger's music is virtually always recorded or synthesized, and almost never produced by instruments of any sort. (*Der Regen, der Glas, das Lachen* is a prominent exception.) This noise does not exist in relation; it cannot be rationalized by surrounding discourse, or absorbed in any comfortably "musical" context. To hear *Rauschen* is not to listen to music at all, but, in Ablinger's words, to "hear hearing."

Noise is also surfeit. It is the result, particularly in nature, of the accumulation of individual sounds beyond any hope of recovering them in their particularity. It is the pure incomprehensibility of too-much-ness. To perceive noise, for Ablinger, is immediately to perceive something *in* noise: "[everyone] hears his own melodies therein, and can rightfully say that they are contained in it." Another of Ablinger's obsessive pursuits in recent years, accordingly, has been the freezing of this experience within the

frame of the work of art. By laying an abstract grid over a recording of noise (street noise, the noises of nature, even speech), rationalizing that noise with the help of computer software into pitches and rhythms, and transcribing the results for musical instruments, any environmental sound can be reflected in a more "musical" surface. What we hear, then, is an externalization, a making concrete of the inward experience of hearing the unheard. The results can vary widely in the fidelity of the reproduction of their origins, depending on the fineness of the divisions of time and of pitch; in the remarkable series *Quadraturen III* (1996 - ), not only contours of speech but individual words emerge audibly from a computer-controlled player piano.

This is what happens in 33-127 as well. The recorded street noises that break into the oblivious tranquility of the scales are excerpted from Ablinger's *Das Buch der Gesänge* (1997-9), a nearly five-hour compilation of one hundred recordings of ambient Berlin sounds. The guitar, loud and distorted as an additional agent of sudden change from the placid scalar surroundings of these interruptions, does the best it can to keep up, filtering the densely overlaid urban cacophony into a spasmodically jagged series of pitches that are often barely perceptible from within the general chaos. The scale eventually resumes, inevitably: it maps out all those pitches, and all those stretches of time, left out of the excerpted streets of Berlin. "That which one sees or hears is the complement of that which one does NOT see or hear," Ablinger writes; it is not a question of foreground and background, precisely, but of obverse and reverse, statement and counterstatement, act and consequence, blank canvas and wall.

The compositional process of 1-127, from which 33-127 is excerpted, was a combination of the aggressively arbitrary and the unaccountably intuitive. Why 127 sections? Why not? Why the specific series of descending pitches and slightly irregular rhythms in each scale? Why not? By contrast, the insertions of the prerecorded material and its rastered instrumental accompaniment are as rationalized and rigid as their surroundings are capricious and uncontrolled. Each scale was first written out in full, without a window of interruption. Each pitch in each scale has a duration of three, four, five, or six sixteenths; the first time the chain of durations lands on an imaginary quarter-note beat, the recorded excerpt takes over, and the second time this happens the excerpt ends. The portion of tape from *Das Buch des Gesänge* available for use shifts forward incrementally for each of the 127 pieces in the full work 1-127; and the pitches available to the guitar in its filtered accompaniment are those within the interval between the last scale note before the interruption and the first note after. Once the scales have been intuitively and arbitrarily assembled, everything about these noisy interruptions follows as a consequence.

33-127, in other words, is simply a stark juxtaposition of two strands of Ablinger's work, each reaching back, in various forms, through decades. The diagonal line of the scale defines a canvas, a space, a palette. It is the axiomatic presentation of the simultaneous and the successive; it is the first principle. The noisy interruptions are the true field of operations. They are the domain of *Rauschen*, of *hearing* as opposed to of *music*. The guitar is not the protagonist in the interruptions, and it is not the narrator it is when playing its descending scales; the roles are reversed, and here the guitar is a listening ear.

Because of the differing compositional approaches of the two areas, furthermore, the *Rausch*-interruptions have the same role formally that they do sonically. The interruptions are harsh in their arbitrariness. They are violently anti-subjective, and as the ninety-four of them amass in the listener's memory their impenetrability only increases, until by the end of 33-127 we are aware that we have heard a waterfall, a set of unrationalizable *Rauschen* domesticated and framed by the scales (fashioned by hand, cognitively transparent, *human*) that both delimit them and foster their emergence. The seemingly endless near-repetition, with a constant mutation of local detail just disruptive enough to prevent complacency, is also horizontalized *Rausch*: an accumulation of detail that builds up to sublime incomprehensibility, the waterfall laid on its side.

Finally, we return to the graphic arts. A burst of white noise is, to Ablinger, a black vertical line, while a less homogeneous but still overwhelming noise—the excerpts of *Das Buch des Gesänge* incorporated into 33-127, for instance—is a mass of dots and strokes too dense to be separable. 33-127, then, is comparable to the visual art of Ablinger's favored Giorgio Griffa and Agnes Martin — a series of vertical and diagonal lines, intersecting, perhaps drawn freehand and thus slightly irregular, the predictable structuring of the locally unpredictable evoking the experience of gazing, as Ablinger has it, into "the clear blue sky."