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# Seven projections in the music of Peter Ablinger

Peter Ablinger's works take very different forms: compositions for various instrumental combinations, orchestral works, the inclusion of jazz groups and popular music bands, electroacoustic and computer resources, installations, pieces to be imagined but not played, operas in different contexts connected by the characteristics of the setting, etc.

Were his musical thinking to be summarised in a few words, it could be said that his creations reveal an on-going interest in the link between the concept of audibility, its projection in time and reproduction in unconventional spaces.

Seven projections are presented and developed, above all as pointers in a search for links with his aesthetic and his works.

## **First projection: to be a composer.**

The current expansion of the possibilities for musical creation has led to a large variety of postures.

With increasing frequency, an individual is introduced as an artist or sound creator, free improviser, acoustic designer, etc.

It is also very common for musicians to suggest that their function is undefined, in the hope that this

indetermination alone might be capable of inaugurating a new category.

Peter Ablinger fits into neither of these two groups, and his response proves to be truly wayward, because he is above all a composer.<sup>1</sup>

*"Music is filled with prejudices. That's the fun about the thing! I like to play with those prejudices and I also like the word "music", just as I prefer the word "composer" to "sound artist". Clearly, as long as the prejudices exist, there are also limits. But it is the very limits which inspire me and press me to take the next step!"*

In the West, the idea of renewal was implicit in the composer's profession. At the same time, to be a composer with full historic awareness is above all an invitation to inclusion and flexibility.

Indefinition makes it impossible to open up. At times of confusion, the most conservative positions get the edge because, if we cannot know what we are talking about, why not just leave everything the same?

What Ablinger's assertion does achieve is to set initial coordinates which will then allow the limits to expand.

This attitude, to want to accept being a composer, originates the first multiple projection. This is not just no burden for Ablinger but rather, given the features and originality of his work, the concept of composition is enriched anew.

Restrictions are what motivate and inspire to go further, to energetically rupture their clear immobilising character. But then, how to define those limits in current composition?

**Second: the projection of object and perception, the audibility.**

*"It is not listening to something, but rather listening itself".<sup>2</sup>*

*"Sound is not my material. My material is audibility."<sup>3</sup>*

The point of departure is in the two most simply identifiable elements of a musical work: the object itself, and how it is perceived.

Listening has ceased to be an unattainable paradigm as was so often the case in the serial music of the nineteen fifties. To some degree, listening has in recent years been "humanised".

As to the object presented, the musical work, many composers have since the seventies insisted on seeking a solution of their own to the design of sounds and musical structures. Since then, there has been much enrichment of the possibilities of musical writing, instrumental techniques, incorporation of the new technologies, the adaptation of concepts arising from mathematics, psychology, psychology, acoustics, etc.

However, although Ablinger is familiar with these innovations, his proposal differs, offering a third way which integrates the two previous points of departure. What is important is no longer so much the object proposed nor the potential inherent to listening. The limits are projected on a different plan, based on the relation between the two: audibility.

This concept does not in principle seek measurable data or theoretical premises but is established on a permanent interdependence between the work and the listening.

Alvin Lucier<sup>4</sup> used oscillating frequency fields emerging from the relations between different microtonal tunings of two adjacent notes.

Ablinger applies the same idea, but projected upon the experience of perception. The oscillation caused between the representation of the sound object and its hearing is a third quality related to them both but which in turn has its own coordinates and behaviour.

This directly confronts the premise that pure listening is a whole, inherited from the avant-garde of the fifties and subsequent currents arising from serialism. But it also has a point of departure different from many conditioning factors inherited from the psychology of perception which were models for some of the composers from the misnamed *Spectral School*.

Gérard Grisey used the concept of pre-audibility as the "composer's true material" in creating a work, *"Including not just the sound but, even more, the differences perceived between sounds, the composer's true material will be the degree of foreseeability or, better still, the degree of preaudibility."*<sup>5</sup>

Grisey seeks to find the most fluid relation possible between the musical work, listening and the time in which both occur. The ideal would be to find a unity among these three configurators, thus creating a creative time continuum where it is possible to be in union with the work at all times.

This is not however essential for Ablinger. While the intervention of active time is, as in the previous case, primordial, our own personal characteristics must now be included and also, as a differentiating element, our presences and absences, a listening starting consciously from the habitual, so as to be able to go further.

The relation with the work begins with the same attitude as the one with which the everyday should be heard. It is even possible to perceive what is not present, in short the

right terrain in which to project our own imagination:  
"These experiences lack significant information, yet  
function as a mirror, reflecting something about ourselves  
at the same time as we read something in them, converting  
them into something anchored only in ourselves. Thus in  
these situations, we see ourselves".<sup>6</sup>

### **Third: the projection of silence, the noise (Rauschen).**

Ablinger's skill in avoiding clichés proves most  
attractive. Following Cage's propositions with works like  
4'33'', Morton Feldman with the relation between the  
writing of time and the control of silence, Luigi Nono with  
the relation between fragments, listening and silence or,  
finally, Salvatore Sciarrino with the presence of silence  
as part of the hidden energy of the sound, it can be said  
that silence has now lost all its value. Indeed "*silence is  
replete*".<sup>7</sup>

There remains however a lesser possibility, ignored,  
discomforting yet real and effective: noise. But not just  
any noise.

Three situations usually arise in speaking about noise.

The first, the most banal and recurrent, classifies it as  
something pejorative and annoying, a consideration of no  
further interest to what it is sought to show here.

The second refers to the extension of instrumental  
techniques in different works since the sixties. This is  
more engaging. When they function beyond mere effect and  
create content of their own, listening begins to extend its  
possibilities. A good opportunity to refresh the attitude  
to music.

The third is the one closest to Ablinger's stance and comes  
once more from the *Spectral School*: noise too is a whole.

In psycho-acoustic terms, noise is a component of sound.

On that basis, two extremes can be differentiated: on the one hand the harmonic sounds reproduced by periodic frequencies over a fundamental frequency, or the presence of noise itself, that is the non-periodic vibratory movements produced by a saturation of frequencies.

Between these two poles, a continuum is established once more in listening, and a large number of graduations and situations can be defined which assist in the constant levelling between the two extremes.

Ablinger however speaks of noise in his own way, considering it also to be sound and a whole but, on this occasion, also the integration of heterogeneous elements in an on-going situation. The idea is not to seek graduations in the types of relation but rather an invitation to the possibility, to act even below habitual silence, the presence, the quantifiable. Noise is for Ablinger also inclusive but is a whole "less than nothing", its importance based on an apparent insignificance, a sound field which changes, expands and is endless. *"Static noise contains all the information on the space, place, state, humidity, position in the surroundings..."*<sup>8</sup>

In his translation of the article "Noise/hipótesis", Alberto C. Bernal explains perfectly why the German word "Rauschen" cannot be correctly rendered in English. Apart from the equivalent "white noise" or "static noise" Bernal uses it must, in connection with Ablinger's music, be added that "Geräuschen", also "noises" in German, always need a context to be understood, and function almost involuntarily, perhaps even saturating perception.

"Rauschen" goes further, is itself what creates listening, the driving context of the different possibilities of perception across a large inclusive area, not needing a

context to be projected or integrated. It is integration and context itself.<sup>9</sup>

So, expelled from silence, we are left solely with noise, "Rauschen", the imperfect hypothesis, the living experience.

#### **Fourth: the projection of space, the time.**

Two different but complementary temporal planes are frequently encountered in the music of Peter Ablinger. On the one hand, a progressing living time where, little by little, listening finds its own coordinates. On the other hand, a wish to capture all the energy of the moment.

Audibility in Ablinger is a suggestion whereby we allow the perception to seek its own way to orient itself, something like the way in which looking functions for example in Mark Rothko's late work.

The spell in this case does not act quickly. A parenthesis is necessary, in the context of the bombardment of "isolating communications", to take the opportunity to perceive, an adventure gradually revealing a multitude of projections of sound, the listening becoming clearer as the listener interrelates with the work, making it possible in short to recuperate perception.

Karlheinz Stockhausen, in his famous article "Wie die Zeit vergeht"<sup>10</sup>, spoke as early as the fifties of the need to think no longer of music as a set of isolated parameters. Although the response came within the context of total serialism, it was also the beginning of the realisation to think of sound as a complex whole, configured with multiple interferences among its different components and in its relation with listening. The possibilities which Stockhausen's article opened up at the time were applied

among other fields in sound synthesis in the electroacoustic field.

Continuing this tradition, Ablinger today wonders, "*Is there a inevitable relation between bandwidth and duration?*"<sup>11</sup>

Gérard Grisey extended the different possibilities of the synthesis techniques developed in electroacoustic music, such as analogue, additive, granular synthesis, etc. Now this notion of synthesis was not just a technique but a model for an understanding of music, a concept he called "*Instrumental synthesis*": "*In instrumental synthesis, it is the instrument which wrings each component from the sound and, unlike electronic synthesis, these components are so complex that they in themselves constitute a micro-synthesis. To distinguish it from the latter, the instrumental synthesis designed to elaborate sonorous forms we will then call macro-synthesis. These forms, coupled with the entire scale of acoustic possibilities, from the partial harmonic spectrum to white noise, propose writing using untempered frequencies. It must however be made clear that this has nothing to do with the use of quarters or thirds of tones which often represent a refinement of the tonal system.*"<sup>12</sup>

Ablinger has once more renewed this concept, and we now speak of the Synthesis of Experience, "*Synonym of a utopia of immediate experience of the totality of the moment*".<sup>13</sup>

A quest to capture all the energy of the instant, while assuming its impossibility. This twin temporal perspective, far from crashing and cancelling out, is fundamental to projecting the listener's creativity and imagination.

Much has been said in the history of music of the importance of the moment. Luigi Nono himself mentioned to his assistant André Richard how much he was attracted by



the first seconds in which a sound begins to appear. This was the great opportunity for the being/listening so loved by Nono.<sup>14</sup>

As Ablinger says: *"Yes. I am fully aware that this never really exists in time, that this state lasts just an instant. However, for me, this moment is one of the main reasons why I do what I do. Everything related to that period of time is when I do not know what to say: that moment prior to which experience slips back into one of the many categories I have already prepared for the things I receive."*<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, this moment Ablinger speaks of means he can stand outside time and, thanks to the distance created on another living plane, what time is can be better perceived, as if a "frozen moment" beginning again and again during the work, a possibility to reconstruct the experience. It is like taking a constant photograph of the sound's very future which makes it possible to better understand the present.

Thus it is very attractive how Ablinger uses a procedure completely the opposite of Gérard Grisey's idea of process to secure similar results. Both deal with the limitations of listening, and they also have as common features the creation of a listening plane and for experiencing time arising from the interrelation of perception and object. However, while for Grisey the idea of transformation and temporal development is implicit in the work itself, in Ablinger is it absolutely dependent on our will to recreate. There is no process or temporal flow. Just potential audibility.

**Fifth: the projection of time, the space.**

Before the eighteenth century, music was commonly used to define a space. Thus the place for the rite, for the fiesta, for the encounter, was presented. A motet or a passacaglia served for a living experience of the architectonic or urban space via different works often composed specifically for those places.

The opposite happens with Ablinger, a step beyond Stockhausen, Xenakis or Nono. Depending on how it is treated, it is no longer the music which defines the space but now the concepts are once more reversed and the space defines the music. A space therefore which comprises a relation between thinking and feeling, driving various types of orders, of existences.

Yet again the projection allows the phenomena to be better understood, offering an opportunity to listen again in nature thanks to the discrepancy caused by being removed from it, to realise what listening really means, by perceiving that virtual space which involves and envelopes the spirit. Always a space dealing with what it is still possible to discover and realise.

**Sixth: the projection of tradition, the renewal.**

"I do not believe in the new. Maybe I believe in a renewal in the sense of a permanent process, a balance".<sup>16</sup>

In music, the demand for novelty increased exponentially as of the 1950s serial avant-garde referred to, and until at least the end of the eighties. The fact is that, today, some of the most innovative proposals of recent years have hardly been assimilated and novelty has been left as a sort of passing, trivial murmur. The present-day musical avant-garde has also lost its old revolutionary dream, novelty

now just a terrain defined virtually exclusively by marketing and advertising.

It is on the other hand hard to say what constitutes the new in music. The age of Beethoven is remembered for his most extraordinary works, not for those apparently less surprising. Moreover, the many pieces composed by the majority of his contemporaries are almost completely forgotten. The present seeks to understand Beethoven's time through the most original, innovative works, Beethoven the exception who finally defines his age. The past is remembered in terms of the dynamic forces which transformed it.

Thus Ablinger feels very close to the transforming spirit of the Viennese classics: Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Mahler, Schönberg, Berg...

He must confront them if he is to remain true to their force. Just as the stance of these great classics broke the rules of their time, today this happens with Ablinger.

The composer who remains within history is not just the one who develops in his or her historic context, but who also creates it. Their work must always seem new. This is the idea of dynamic as opposed to regressive tradition. At the moment when the process of renewal ends, the essence of our tradition is betrayed.

Transformation, renewal and becoming are the bases of Western music history.

Ablinger's music is therefore and in this sense entirely traditional. Happily and satisfactorily traditional.

### **Seventh: the projection of ourselves.**

There are in Ablinger's music constant changes of perspective, turning once and a thousand times upon the

position from which things are perceived. His music is, above all, a projection of possibilities and experiences. Something odd has happened in our daily round. The everyday has been displaced by a strange virtual reality, in which living the present is copied, to "miss-represent" it. Experience is banalised. To sit down just to listen to the surroundings has now become a subversive act.

Those frozen Ablinger moments, multiplied through time, make it possible to feel once more the weight of the present entirely naturally, to become again equally aware of the time experience and of the time of illusion. It is possible in short to identify oneself and project desires through a noise, a place, a duration. No special requisites are needed to attain this, or specific aural education. It suffices just to want to do it.

There can be no better way to conclude than with the words of Peter Ablinger himself, about how he wants to implement that projection of oneself:

*"I have learned from working on my own music that there is no perception without intention."*<sup>17</sup>

*If we could listen without intention, we would hear nothing! In this sense, I believe that there are many, many surrounding sounds we do not hear because there is no intention, because we do not know what to do with them nor why we should pay them attention. On the other hand, listening with intentionality implies creation of a relation between me, the listener, and the sound (or the music), meaning that our individual, socio-cultural personalities are always in play in any process of perception. We will never be able to listen simply to what "is"; we will also always listen to what we want. We may speak of a "projection", projecting ourselves, our possibilities, our sonorous education. That is the reason*

why we are unable to perceive sounds other than expressively: they always tell us something. Sounds as mere sounds are a fiction. In the same way, I conceive my music as a research project; research into perception. And about how perception creates us!"<sup>18</sup>

## Notes in the text

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<sup>1</sup> Gianera, Pablo: "Interview with Peter Ablinger", *La Nación Newspaper*, Argentina, at <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1416740-los-sonidos-siempre-cuentan-algo>. [Consulted on 30 June 2013].

<sup>2</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "OPERA/OBRAS", Peter Ablinger's website [http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/opera\\_obras.pdf](http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/opera_obras.pdf) [Consulted on 30 June 2013].

<sup>3</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "City Opera Buenos Aires", <http://ablinger.mur.at/city-opera-buenos-aires.html> [Consulted on 30 June 2013].

<sup>4</sup> A US composer born in 1931 in Nashua, New Hampshire, Alvin Lucier is one of the most direct influence on Peter Ablinger's music. Works in which Lucier uses the procedure discussed include *Navigations for string quartet*, dated 1991, *Small Waves*, 1997 and *Q*, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Grisey, Gérard: "Tempus ex machina, Réflexions d'un compositeur sur le temps musical", *Gérard Grisey, Écrits, ou l'invention de la musique spectrale*, p. 76, MF (Ed. Guy Lelong), Paris, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "Sounds do not interest me", Peter Ablinger's website, <http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/los-sonidos-no-me-interesan.pdf>. [Consulted on 1 July 2013].

<sup>7</sup> "Thus noise is maximum density, maximum information. But it is also the opposite: non-information, maximum redundancy. For me, it is less than nothing, less than silence. Silence ceased to be silence some time ago. It is now replete." Ablinger, Peter: "Ruido", Peter Ablinger's website [http://ablinger.mur.at/txt\\_ruido.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/txt_ruido.html), [Consulted on 1 July 2013].

<sup>8</sup> SCHEIB, Christian: "Static music - investigation of noise", Peter Ablinger's website [http://ablinger.mur.at/txt\\_ruido\\_esp.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/txt_ruido_esp.html). [Consulted on 1 July 2013].

<sup>9</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "Noise/Hypothesis", Peter Ablinger's website <http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/ruido.pdf> [Consulted on 1 July 2013].

<sup>10</sup> Stockhausen, Karlheinz: "Wie die Zeit vergeht", *Die Reihe*, pp. 179-193, No. 3, Universal, Vienna, 1957.

<sup>11</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "Noise Hypothesis", *Op.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Grisey, Gérard: "Structurations des timbres dans la musique instrumentale", p. 289, *Op.cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Scheib, Christian: *Op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Conversations between the writer of this article and André Richard on the concept of silence in Nono. André Richard was Luigi Nono's collaborator and assistant, participating as musical director and responsible for the live electronics for almost all his works from the eighties.

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<sup>15</sup> Ablinger, Peter, Szlavnic, Chiyoko: "Conversations between two composers", at [http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/szlavnic\\_2composers\\_espan.pdf](http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/szlavnic_2composers_espan.pdf). [Consulted on 3 July 2013].

<sup>16</sup> Ablinger, Peter: "Sounds do not interest me", *Op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> A direct criticism of John Cage's famous phrase, "The best intention is to have no intention".

<sup>18</sup> Gianera, Pablo: "Interview with Peter Ablinger". *Op.cit.*

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