

Peter Ablinger

## THE CONCERT AND THE CANVAS

Honey on canvas, rusting scrap-iron sculptures, cyber- or dust-culture—sometimes they seem enviable, these visual artists, because they have free and uninhibited access to their material and medium. There are no limits to their imagination.

For composers, it's a totally different matter: if they want a work of theirs to be performed, they have to bow before such a great number of agencies that whatever emerges at the end can only be something that has existed all along: a concert hall (that is, the pre-defined position of both sound and listeners), performers (that is, the pre-defined standards of what can be asked of these people), and standardizing bodies (that is, the pre-defined history of forms, notations, and virtuosity)—to name but a few.<sup>1</sup>

It took me a while, but finally I realized that music's dependence on institutions such as orchestras, ensembles, academies, education, instrumental traditions, concert halls, and musicology is not only responsible for the overwhelming historicity of the music business but also becomes a corrupting trap for the newest music—or at any rate it creates a prejudiced climate in relation to all kinds of activities in music, which in their turn only partly try to bypass these institutions.

This kind of corruption becomes extremely obvious to me when I compare music to the visual arts. In music after 1945, one can find neither a Dubuffet, nor a Warhol, Serra, or Abramović. Nam June Paik might have been able to retrieve our honor as composers, but—very wisely—he changed his discipline. An author's free access to his medium is just a fiction as far as contemporary composers are

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<sup>1</sup> First published as "Das Konzert und die Tafelmalerei" in *klangforum Wien Agenda 2013/2014*, 16–17. This text is largely an assembly of bits from earlier texts. The first two paragraphs formed part of some program notes I wrote on the occasion of a concert performed by the Ensemble Zwischentöne on February 6, 1996. Parts of this montage also appeared under the title "Due Pratiche," in *Neue Musik und andere Künste*, edited by Jörn Peter Hiekel, Mainz: Schott, 2010, 236–244.

concerned; and the concept of "anything goes" is still not even half-way realized.

Most contemporary music does not venture any further than "abstract expressionism." If one is on the lookout for links between the visual arts and new music that go beyond the abstract expressionism of the fifties, one will come to the conclusion that there are serial, minimal, stochastic and modular concepts in both fields—but one will also realize that in the field of music, such concepts hardly ever describe the musical whole, but are mostly applied to a particular level only—for example to composition or to instrumental techniques. In a manner of speaking, the question "Where do my notes come from?" shelters the composer from the need to question the institutions that surround him and force him to turn his gaze inwards, to direct it toward problems concerning composition, techniques and technologies—the microcosm, the atomic range of everything that in fact constitutes music.

The term "abstract expressionism" thus refers to the intactness of the outward appearance—or, to put it differently: it describes the compromise between the aspiration of writing "new music" and the existing institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Expressionism is still the governing category of mainstream contemporary composition. And so that no one can say they don't belong to this category, here's my definition of mainstream. It's quite simple and requires no aesthetic criteria: the mainstream encompasses everything that is suited to bourgeois concert halls and programs, and to mainly classical instruments and conservatory-trained instrumentalists, and is composed in more-or-less complex staff notation. Just to clarify, or to identify the individual who is writing here: I myself have written many pieces that fall into the mainstream category, and I would by no means want to lose this traditional context (in particular the high degree of specialization in collaborations with this genre's virtuoso instrumentalists—even though this context isn't nearly enough for me, and though even my most "pragmatic" pieces seldom fail to bring along a healthy portion of resistance against the context for which they were made.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The preceding paragraphs are slight amendments of a text that was also written in 1996: "Fragmente einer Verteidigung" (<http://ablinger.mur.at/docs/fragmente.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup> The preceding paragraph is from the text "Expression/Sonata," first published in parts in *Positionen* 73, 2007; complete edit: Armin

All the above-mentioned criteria deserve to be carefully scrutinized and critically considered. However, the rest of this text will concern itself with just one among them: the concert-hall.

I compare the creation of music destined for a classical concert hall, which can be played on classical instruments, with easel painting; with oil on canvas. Of course, oil on canvas is not passé—if we take Gerhard Richter, for example—but it certainly isn't the dominant medium within contemporary art—if you take the example of someone like Bruce Nauman.

The concert-hall is not comprehensive. It by no means represents all that is acoustically possible—just as oil-painting doesn't encompass all that is possible in the visual arts. On the contrary: the concert-hall represents only a tiny segment of tonal reality. Indeed: reality is exactly what the concert-hall tries to keep at bay. Truly—the concept of music itself seems to have something to do with the exclusion of reality. If we take perception as a starting point—that is to say, anything that can be perceived by listening—one has to come to the conclusion that music and perception seem to be in competition, perhaps even mutually exclusive: music functions only by excluding reality and the environment. Jacques Attali's *Noise* as well as Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* were published in the same year, 1977. Schafer describes the artificiality of the concert hall's silence as the prerequisite for music, while Attali identifies the orchestral space of the bourgeois concert hall as a space of exclusion—keeping out everyday noises and the everyday itself.<sup>4</sup>

A concept of music, however, that needs to seal itself off from the rest of the world, that needs to ban the outside world in order to survive, such a concept has no future—it is already history.

History may have been overwhelming, and the concert is a venerable form. But to play music in concert-houses that have been erected especially for this purpose, to arrange

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Köhler, Bernd Künzig (Hrsg.): "u n d+ / Komponisten, ihre Musik und ihre anderen Künste", Katalog, Schott Verlag, 2014; English translation in: Peter Ablinger, NOW!, MusikTexte 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Preceding paragraph from "Cézanne and Music," lecture at the Universität Graz, 2013; first published at MusikTexte 140, 2014; English translation in: Peter Ablinger, NOW!, MusikTexte 2022.

the audience in rows of seats, to confront the stage with the auditorium, the theatrical staging of artist-performers, the rituals of applause, the walking on and off the stage, shaking hands, embracing and taking bows, etc.—all this belongs to a classical tradition that started in the late eighteenth century and continues to exist in contemporary music. In most other artistic or cultural fields such structures would be considered inappropriate, if not downright bothersome.

As far as I am concerned, there is nothing to say against preserving the historical format—these 250 years of music history, which are so indissolubly bound to the concert hall, are after all a cultural heritage. But 250 years are by no means everything in relation to which we should show ourselves historically responsible. In the years before and after this period, listening to music wasn't necessarily arranged in rows of seats! The form in which music ideally should be listened to is itself part of history—or culturally determined.<sup>5</sup> The last hundred years have presented us with completely different spaces for acoustic perception—such as Luigi Russolo's "acoustic stroll" in a loud modern city at the beginning of the twentieth century; or, at its end, the widespread electrification of the act of listening, owing to new media and technologies. Composition that fails to accept the challenge of such transformations and experiences and instead insists on its sequestration may still have an important cultural mission, but according to my definition, such an undertaking, if it is disconnected from the present, pertains to *culture* rather than *art*.<sup>6</sup>

The people who consider the concert hall to be sufficient are also those with the outlook that music is principally that which sounds. But what about the architecture in which this music resounds, what about the luthiers, the lumberjacks who store the spruce needed for a violin corpus

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<sup>5</sup> A little story in relation to cultural determination: only a few weeks ago I returned from a trip to the Iran. Amongst other things, we had spent a few days in the desert for some workshops and special projects. There is a piece of mine that deals specifically with rows of seats and the resultant posture of the listeners. I had proposed it for our foray into the desert—I thought, it would be simple to realize—until I had to acknowledge the fact that there didn't exist a single chair in the whole village of our oasis!  
(see: [ablinger.mur.at/docu01.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/docu01.html))

<sup>6</sup> See also for example the short text dealing with the confrontation of opera versus musical theatre "Art and Culture," first published in *Positionen* 55, 2003; English translation in: *Peter Ablinger, NOW!, MusikTexte* 2022.

for thirty years, what about the printers of programs and the authors of work analyses and newspaper announcements, the ticket collectors and the tailors who sewed their aprons, what about the stonemasons and blacksmiths of the staircases, the stucco workers and painters of the great hall, what about the upholsterers who cushion the seats upon which rest the asses of those who believe music consists only of that which sounds?<sup>7</sup>

Much, much more could be said or asked in connection with the music of the concert hall and the many above-mentioned "agencies" of musical creation and concerning the act of composing in the twenty-first century, an expanded concept of music and probably also of the terms "ensemble" and "performance." But there is even more to compose! Therefore, instead of making many more words, I'd like to mention a piece that was recently published and is absolutely unsuitable for the concert hall, although I regard it as one of my most beautiful pieces. It belongs to the genre of reference pieces<sup>8</sup>, of mine and only consists of six words that can be read either as instruction or as suggestion for a type of music that can exist without concert halls, academies or instrument makers—it doesn't even need ears in order to be appreciated! It's called: *Hand in den Regen halten* (Holding your hand in the rain).<sup>9</sup>



*Translated by Vera Neuroth*

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<sup>7</sup> The last paragraph is an excerpt from "No Transgression," English translation in: *Peter Ablinger, NOW!, MusikTexte 2022*.

<sup>8</sup> See [ablinger.mur.at/docu08.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/docu08.html)

<sup>9</sup> See [ablinger.mur.at/txt\\_hand-in-den-regen.html](http://ablinger.mur.at/txt_hand-in-den-regen.html)