Peter Ablinger

Now!

Writings 1982–2021

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Quick, quick, now, now!

To the Reader

"Quick, quick, now, now!"—that's how many magic spells end, also the invented and made-up ones. For one of my latest pieces, "An den Mond," I contrived and made up such magic spells. It is not at all clear whether such products and artifacts would be less effective than the 'true and real.' This confession is, however, first of all a warning sign not to fall too easily into the pitfalls one has made. The unconditional of 'now' accompanied my work like a vision, but ultimately also hurled me into the deepest and most desperate abysses: to admit complete defeat in the face of my own demands. I had to painfully realize that the perception on which I had relied on so much to reach the now, that this perception lies: the now is always an illusion. But it is exactly here that the wondrous turn begins, the renewed ascent out of the darkness. Because there is something completely unexpected to discover in this illusion. With Alenka Zupančič we could call it "The Real of an Illusion"—that is the title of one of her books—something that provides an important argument in the longest and perhaps most labyrinthine of the texts collected here, "A Music That Withdraws." This not-being-what-it-first-appears arguably also denotes the relationship between music and writings. The writings here are not 'thinking' independent of the 'work.' No philosophy. They cannot be understood without the music they accompany. They are themselves part of the 'work' and only understandable in relation to the whole. Only in exceptional cases are the writings something like work texts, or even work explanations. Much more often they are about visual art, architecture, philosophy, music history or even questions about the not-yet-existing work. Music and texts are like two legs of the 'work': they support it. But they are also what makes walking possible: a step on one side is the prerequisite for the step on the other side—very well: sometimes I hop on one leg to land a step farther with the same leg. Or: maybe this is not about a biped at all, but about a tripod, or a multipede—even a beetle? Drawing and photographing is—to a not-so-extensive degree—finally also part of the sequence of steps. But never do I consider the other legs (activities) as anything other than being, or at least imagining, the music itself (or an aspect of it). And there is something of all aspects (legs) here. The present book is based on the German edition of my writings up to 2015. The selection for the English edition is not quite as extensive, but to compensate for this it is supplemented with some more-recent texts in which the "wondrous turn" outlined above continues to unfold.

My notebooks are the breeding ground of all my work. In them, I jot down not only thoughts about possible future pieces, but ideas and reflections on more general thematic

strands. Such entries are often accompanied by fleeting drawings that are not illustrations, and certainly not visual art, but an abbreviated representation, a shorthand for the respective thought or musical concept at hand. The most important reason for making these notes is to be allowed to forget them. The point is to be able to quickly file the respective thought somewhere and have one's head free again for the particular current piece. And it works: I actually forget the existence of quite interesting pieces or concepts for pieces—until I perhaps stumble across them again many years later and think, whoops, why didn't I publish that long ago? The notebooks probably contain ten times as much text as has been published, ten times as many pieces as those realized. So, whenever I'm asked for a text contribution, or for a piece, I first start browsing through my notebooks and choose from them whatever seems most appropriate for the request. So basically, everything that is requested already exists.

In fact, many of the chapters are compilations ('compositions') of such existing entries. And since I am so good at forgetting, I often use the same passage in different texts; these would be the refrains in this book.

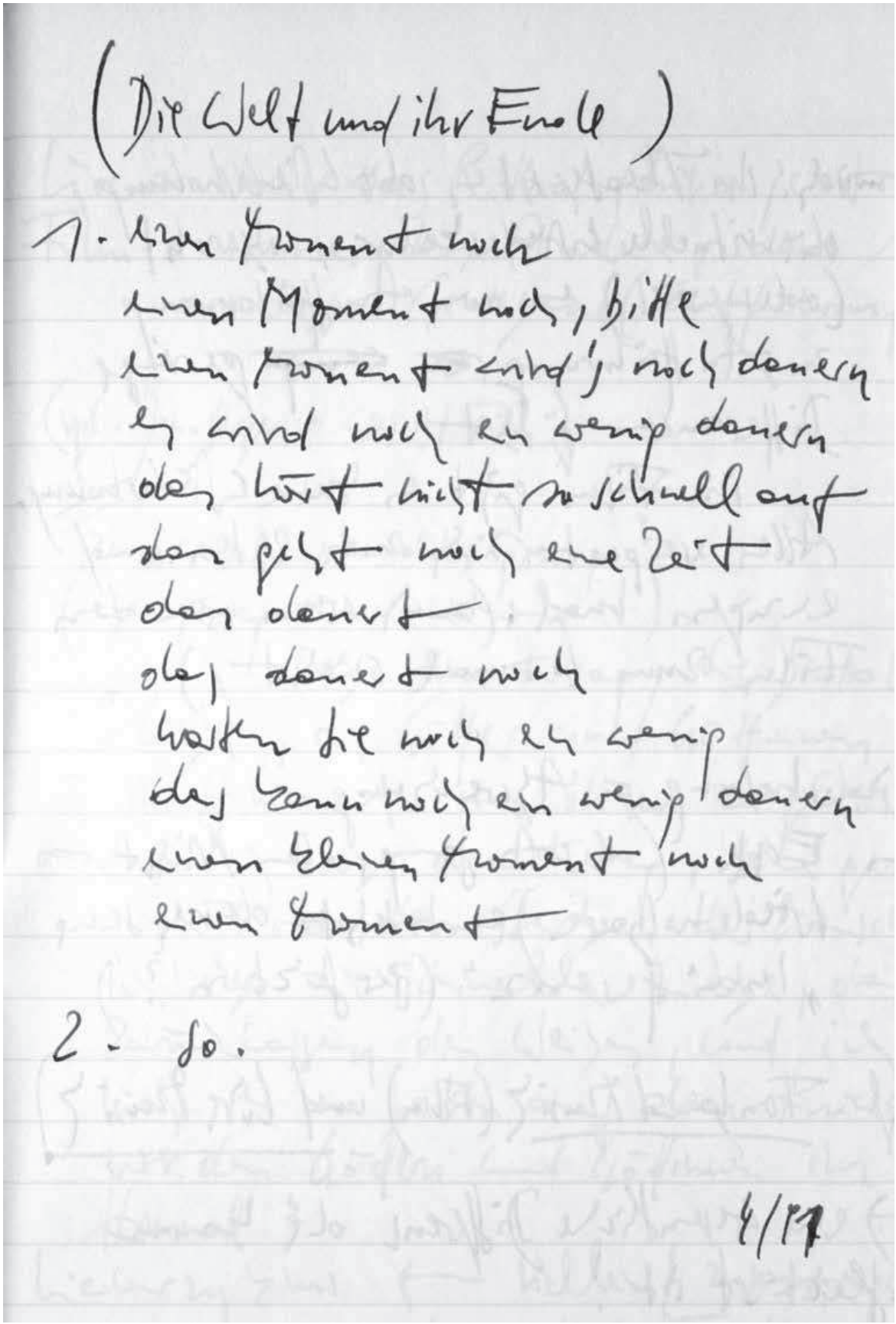
The texts are arranged chronologically, but the aforementioned montage principle leads to tangled, Möbius strip-like chronologies: so that, for example, the first longer text "Expression/Sonata" can be dated 1982–2007. With the following texts, the date narrows in a funnel-shaped manner, "Metaphors" 1983–2004, "Listening to See" 1984–2000, and so on, to come across a non-collage text for the first time with "Culture and Catastrophe," which is also my first text publication from 1989.

This arrangement means that at the beginning there is a normal-language, almost musicological text on expression, a content that is very important to me personally because its discussion of musical rhetoric refers to something that seems to me to be completely underexposed. It is followed by "Metaphors," a text that talks a lot about my career and the concepts behind it. This is followed by a rather more "poetic" reflection on the interpenetration of the visual and the acoustic. Thus, the conceptual field is marked out, and is differentiated in further texts and supplementary materials.

So the text types are quite diverse, ranging from essay, to notebook entry, to poetry. The different layouts, but also a certain playful handling of, and deviations from standard notation, are meant to bring out the differences of 'tone' of the texts. Texts with sparse or even missing punctuation marks, for example, are mostly borne in a certain 'holy' tone; they are almost 'prayers.' The model for this are those sacred Hebrew texts written without punctuation or vowel points—these would have tainted the script.

Yet a different key is struck by the more recent texts from "A Music That Withdraws" onward. In them, a downright presumptuous attempt is made to point out the limits of philosophy and to show possible incursions into music: an area on which philosophy must remain silent. And as every concert-goer knows, this silence is the unmistakable sign that the music can begin. My hope/wishes for the book are in the direction of being able to add a few incessant, if not eternal questions to put things in a different light.

Midas Ears, 2016



Notebook entry for "The World and Its End"

The World and Its End

1.
just a moment
just a moment, please
it will just be a moment
it doesn't stop so quickly
it will go for some time
it will be awhile
it will still be awhile

2.
done.

4/91

Letters, People, 2002 (from the sketches to the *Stadtoper*)

Expression/Sonata

Reflecting on "expression" as a subject has changed, or at least adjusted, a few things for me. I wouldn't have thought that I had much interest in expression at all. But no sooner had I begun to spread out my own (surprisingly copious) notes, which had been piling up for years, than it became clear that I would not be able to simply brush away this subject with a few remarks.[1] In fact, I would now assert that in a perceptual-theoretical sense, there is nothing *but* expression, and that for this very reason (the all-encompassing significance of expression) it is all the more important to draw various demarcations: between, on the one hand, widespread rhetorical expressions and expressive music, and on the other the diametrically opposed idea of sound as object and the resultant idea of intention-free (and therefore expression-free) agency à la Cage.

But this is not a text *against* something. Not a text against expression. Nor against intentionlessness. To be sure, saying "no" is, in evolutionary terms, the most human, most intellectual, most abstract operation there is. But it's not about refusal. It's rather about a higher form of affirmation—one that is ready to leave things behind. In this, an overly straight line of Cagean succession becomes the Scylla of my text, while the legacy of classical-romantic expressive rhetoric is my Charybdis. The fact that Scylla alone may cost me six men is a risk I must take.

Two types of sound.

At first glance, sound exists in two different modes: first as *given* and then as *intentional*, or *created*. Given sound is, broadly speaking, that which surrounds us: the physical, vibratory object (Cage). Intentional sound is that which is directed at us: sound as the expression of an intention (Schoenberg).

At second glance, the apparent objectivity of the difference between what happens to us and what is said to us evaporates into the realm of subjective perception. It depends solely on whether we are able to uncover the intentionality of a sound in a particular

1 The notebooks delved into here date back to the early eighties, in particular the "Figures" chapter. Some of my thematic strands would certainly merit theoretical exploration, but this text is not an academic one—even if it has a more linear structure than most of my other texts. I have not done any research on preexisting papers; the literature I mention consists of, let's just say, coincidental encounters. The text documents what was once or is now important to me, but also what seems to me to be underrepresented, if not positively suppressed, in the contemporary discourse on music.

situation. In truth, a "given" sound is merely one whose intention (and, in a way, whose speaker) we do not recognize, or that we ignore or reject. But even rejection is intention. And without intention we perceive nothing at all. We hear traffic noise as an expression of a threatening environment, and a symphony on the other hand as an expression of aesthetic pleasure. Both of these, pleasure and threat, are—in the Spinozan sense—passions.[2] We suffer them both, are impassioned by both, whatever their different connotations. Indeed, though the connotations may be different, the need for connotation is in both cases a precondition of their perception.

From the perspective of the term "expression," we can say that not a sound exists that we don't perceive as an expression (of something/for something) *for us*. There is no sound without expression. And this applies as a principle to every type of perception.

"Wherever I went, I listened to objects"[3] said John Cage. It is well known how much the problem of the isolation of sounds obsessed him. It was only when completely isolated from each other that sounds could be free of any relationship. Only then could they exist for themselves, only then was their object-status guaranteed. The aesthetics of the American sixties (and with them Cage) built upon the assumption that there *were* objects, and that these *had* certain qualities. But Cage himself also let us know how utterly he failed at achieving this isolation: how obstinately sounds turned back "into melody" for him—in other words, how unavoidably they established relationships with each other. In fact, there are no objects, only our behaviors, which turn things into objects in our eyes. There is no "sound as object." Sounds exist only as relations: as relations to each other, but above all as relations between us and them. Somewhat ironically, it was two composers from his own inner circle, Tenney and Lucier, who confronted Cage with the reality of the relations he was fighting against. ("Relationality" was a battle cry of American art in the sixties and a synonym for its presumed archenemy: Old Europe, mired in its myriad relationships and traditions—irrational, metaphysical, and hence needing to be surmounted). Cage quarreled with Tenney (who in *Critical Band* addressed the observer-dependent relationships between sound and listener) over Tenney's espoused concept of harmony, which Cage initially rejected as yet another trapping of relational thinking. Or Lucier, whose favorite subject-matter (as presented in an unending collection of pieces and installations) is also a relation: namely that between two tones in their production of a clearly perceived third element, beating. Beating is precisely that which is not present in either of the tones that produce it—it is that which *arises*, the precise expression of a relationship.

The same goes for the mind (and for expression). We think that our minds are in our heads. But the mind is *not there*. The mind is not a part of what does not *(only) exist*. The mind is what arises when that-which-is takes up a relation with another being. The

2 Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethik*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977.

3 *For the Birds. John Cage in conversation with Daniel Charles*, London: Marion Boyars, 1981, 74.

mind arises out of relations, just as beating arises from two neighboring tones. I learned this from Maturana.[4]

Free is he who has no choice. (Kitarō Nishida put it this way:
the will, faced with a choice, has already lost its freedom.)
On the concept of intentionlessness.

Based on the assumption in the American sixties (or more precisely the fifties to seventies) that there were objects, and sounds as objects—that is to say, things that could exist independently of us—it follows logically that an individual as the producer of such objects must have seemed dispensable. Not that production (of art, objects, products, consumer goods) seemed dispensable, but rather the individual, outfitted with far too many uncontrollable qualities.

Against the auratic charge of traditional artistic ideas, against the cult of genius and art-fever, but most of all against that dank and narrow idea of art shaped by the society-crowning Extraordinary Artist-Individual, we can clearly recognize the historically significant concept of intentionlessness, imported (or, as Nono said, "colonized") from Buddhism. The plethora of liberated artists—if not liberated sounds (see below)—and burgeoning artistic discoveries in Cage's legacy[5] since the early sixties is its own commendation. And this was, ultimately, the desperately needed counter-position to Darmstadt's self-proclaimed "Zero Hour," which never really existed. For just behind the *Structures* of Boulez, the same old historical rhetoric and expressiveness were making themselves at home. For even if these aspects never became part of a sustainable discourse—while serial structure-generating machines, elevated to the ranks of redeemers, enjoyed almost exclusive dominance over the conversation—*Gruppen* remains, first and foremost, a highly expressive work, to say nothing of the pathos of the massive sixties European orchestral hordes. The regression of New Simplicity in the seventies ultimately did little but bring to light what had, despite its suppression, never really stopped: the continuity of expressive music in the classical-romantic conception. The concept of intentionlessness thus made sense in the context of a particular cultural-historical stage; intentionlessness had an apotropaic effect.

Can we say that the danger has passed? Can we today view intentionlessness from another perspective?

4 Humberto Maturana, *Der Baum der Erkenntnis*, Bern: Scherz, 1987.

5 In a schematic sense, we can speak of a Schoenberg legacy on the one hand, and a Cage legacy on the other. The latter still ranks among the most important protests against expressive music and the (Schoenberg-based) European extrapolation of classical prerequisites; this legacy includes the outer edges of the "reductionism"-probing Wandelweiser group, composers such as Antoine Beuger, Michael Pisaro, and Jürg Frey, as well as a young generation of American composers (for example, Bill Dietz, Matthew Marble, Doug Barrett, and others), who forego the Schoenberg-Darmstadt-Complexity tradition to pursue an approach that continues the path, paved by Cage, of the Satie-Dada-Indeterminacy-Fluxus line, and seek to update and cross-examine avant-garde concepts.