

# The sounds do not interest me

*An e-mail-interview with questions by the  
composer Trond Olav Reinholdtsen*

Trond Olav Reinholdtsen: What was your path to composing? What is your relation to the classical tradition, or rather: what is the relation between your work and that tradition?

Peter Ablinger: I never wanted my music to sound like classical music nor like new classical music or classical avant-garde. At first, I wanted to be a painter, then a jazz musician; and through art and jazz I have experienced that there is something like new art or music at all. But it was only after hearing Cecil Taylor play that I found out that there had been someone called Arnold Schönberg...

Anyhow: I have played the piano since the age of six. After my jazz phase I studied composition in Vienna. I am as familiar with the classical tradition as I am with Sachertorte. I still love playing piano extracts from Bruckner symphonies for myself. The tradition is past, my own past, too, part of it, nothing to be ashamed of but equally nothing I consciously wish to continue. To be frank, I do not think much about the relation between my work and the tradition. My sources of inspiration I find somewhere else. They spring from the present, my environment, everyday life, or, if I have to name one of the arts, then it is visual art rather than music.

**TOR** Expanding the material is perhaps one of the main interests of the classical musical avant-garde. Are there untapped possibilities here, or rather, do you think that this is a subject relevant to today's composers (and for you in particular)? What interests you in noises as musical material (for example in the piece "Kleine Trommel und UKW-Rauschen"; small drum and FM-noise)? Are there still new sounds for us to discover?

**PA** I do not believe in the new. At best, I believe in a renewal in the sense of a permanent process, in the sense of an equilibrium. Renewal is needed for things to stay the same. For things to carry on. It is like having babies: a new-born child is new because it has not been there before. But the process is as old as mankind and its only purpose is to preserve the species!

Noises as expansions to the musical material do not interest me in the slightest. Noise (*Rauschen*, white or

static noise) is different to noises. To me it is almost the opposite. Noise is certainly one of the oldest sounds of which humans have become aware. A waterfall, the sea or a forest rushing can involve an experience comparable to the sight of a mountain range, the desert or the stars at night. Such experiences are as far as possible devoid of meaningful information yet they act like a mirror, they throw something back upon ourselves insofar as we read something into them, turn them into something which is anchored only in ourselves. Hence, in such situations we experience ourselves.

Noise has the tendency to trigger auditory illusions in us. Illusions I take not in the sense of *trompe l'œil* which prescribes what we are to hallucinate but as projections actually generated by ourselves individually. I often work with the possibility of such illusions, design my sounds in such a way that illusions are promoted or I play with them so that it is not entirely clear whether sounds are actually really in space or just inside our heads.

The combination of noise and instruments is also about the concealing function of noise. When we are even close to a fountain and listen to other people talk we may notice that the consonants of language can hardly be heard any more because they are enveloped by the noise and only the vowels remain from which we reconstruct what has been spoken. These are moments in which we may become aware how our perception works, namely that it continuously reconstructs and does not simply record what is happening "out there".

This act of perception as the continuous construal of our own world is what preoccupies me. Therefore it may be that I envelop some other sound by means of the noise in order for me to have to concentrate even harder to be able to uncover what has been concealed. This state of heightened concentration as such - if I am prepared to follow it - is quite something!

**TOR** I find that your macro-time-(form) structuring is softer closer to an installation and visual art in general than to traditional forms of developing music. What is your approach to time in your work? Is form as compositional "parameter" completely levelled off and left to the subjective navigation of the audience?

**PA** What you describe is often the case. Equally often, however, it is different in that time, changes in time, plays an important role. There are pieces in which the

timeless aspect comes to the fore and the listener is left to his own devices to blaze an auditory trail through the piece. But there are also those pieces in which the temporal aspect is more pronounced and more direction is given to the listening. Many pieces attempt to keep a balance between the two. That is what actually interests me: to get to the bottom of the two fundamental ways of listening which, for me, are also ways of being. They are two fundamental modes of finding-yourself-in-the-world or being in the world; a distinction which I sometimes describe in terms of "thought" and "listening". There are strong points of reference in the tradition here; not in music but in architecture. Late baroque architecture in Southern Germany provides examples such as the monastic churches by Johann Michael Fischer, Balthasar Neumann and Dominikus Zimmermann. Their lives' work consisted in suggesting solutions to an old European conflict: that between basilica and central-plan building, between longitudinal and circular building, between perambulating and omnipresence, between scholasticism and mysticism; and one might add: between "path" and "place", between concert and installation, between theology and presence, between thought and listening.

**TOR** What is a work of music for you? Is traditional abstract music flawed?

**PA** The music of the past is not flawed; it is just that - past. I live now and I need a justification for my existence. That is nearly all that is to be said. The rest is culture. And from that point onward it gets complex: for in our culture, for the contemporary composer there is no right to existence to be had by simply repeating what our grandfathers have done. Other cultures which place the highest value on the reproduction of old traditions are probably wise in doing so because they do not have to fool themselves into believing that there is something new.

Well, what drives me to the limit time and time again? Because we are poor driven humans who do not derive enough tranquillity from the wisdom offered by tradition. Because this deficiency coerces every single one of us to create the whole world from scratch. And because that is the reason why the limits are the only places where I can survey the outline of the world as well as my perception of it.

**TOR** leading on from the previous questions: why (and how) do you use "reality" as a material in your work? Is this to do with the paradox of introducing documentary recordings (such as city sounds from Berlin or recordings of historical

personalities) into the music? Or is this about a kind of musical realism? Is the notion of the everyday crucial for you?

**PA** The general answer to the question what reality has to do with my work I have perhaps given just now.

The specific answer is partly indeed about realism. Namely, I asked myself years ago (when I was still a jazz pianist) what the concept of photographic realism could mean for music. At that time I began improvising to recordings of the environment in such a way as to meld the instrument with the environment-recording. Many years later, in developing the series of "Quadraturen" ("squarings"), I took a further step towards the method of photorealism, to render a photograph with the means of brush and canvas - for music this would seem to mean: a sound-recording ("phonography") rendered by the instruments of a classical orchestra. Indeed, a genuine "phonorealism" would only be possible if the instruments had no overtones and their playing speed could be taken beyond the limit of the continuous, namely 16 beats per second, and if series of changing parameters could be rendered at that speed. The latter condition can only be met with a computer-controlled piano; the former cannot be met by natural instruments at all. What can be realised, however, is an approximation which results in a situation where we have a comparison: comparing music and reality. The music operates here as an observer: music observes reality. And it is precisely the limits of this approximation which afford us some insights into the instrument of observation. Music, the cultural creation, becomes a metaphor for perception. Perception cannot by any means do justice to what is perceived. Yet in this failure it can report all the more clearly on the limits of our capacity to perceive as well as report on the process of world-making in perception.

**TOR** The relation of conceptual art/ conceptual thought and music is in my opinion of not a particularly close one. Perhaps it is no coincidence that someone like Cage has never been completely accepted into the canon of classical-modern music but has often enough been the sole point of reference to music for visual artists. How do you see this relation between (your) music and conceptual art?

**PA** Up to a point I can follow what you have been saying on the relation between conceptual thought and music. In the main, positions of today's art and those of new

classical music often lie miles apart. The latter often seem incapable of progressing from the middle of last century. On the other hand, something deeply conceptual seems to be inscribed into composing music from the very start. Yes, writing a score which is later realised on stage by others is just the definition of conceptual art (Sol LeWitt). Inherent in the difference of concept (score) and realisation is at the least the possibility that not just the object-like result but a thought can be art or at least form an independent part of art.

Personally, I would not like to limit the scope of what I am interested in to conceptual art. As I said at the beginning, I have learned a great deal more from visual art than I did from new classical music. But among the artists that are or were important to me are also those who can hardly be captured by the concept of conceptual art such as Gerhard Richter, Barnett Newman, Antoni Tàpies, among others. However, it is already conceptual in itself as soon as you start to think about what certain visual designs could mean for music - a consideration which admittedly arises almost automatically with me if I see a work of art.

The reason why the visual arts, or even more directly, reality, were (and remain) the better teachers, is my desire to make something that is not immediately "art", cannot readily and conveniently be pigeonholed. If I was to compose a string quartet, the lid would have closed on the box before even the first note sounded. It would be hard to escape from the categorisation. The mere fact of composing for orchestra instruments is in this sense problematic to me because it would have to be overcome with every single piece. This is about immediacy, about reaching out to the listener without an intermediary authority. Every case of classification is just such an intermediary authority - even the category of "composer".

**TOR** Is your piece "Hörtexte" (Weiss/weisslich 11b) an epitaph on the genre of music?

**PA** Whether the "Hörtexte" bear music to her grave? Well, if that was possible I would do it: bury and burn. For, after all, I am certain of it: what would rise from the ashes could not be worse than what we already have. Probably it would not be better, either, but perhaps it would have less dross, was purged in its relation to what is and what has been.

No, *Hörtexte* do not have that intention. They developed almost without any intentions. Originally they were just a

little notebook on sounds, mainly environmental sounds, and some thought about them - until I began to make real-time-notes, texts that is, in which I wrote down what I was hearing at the time. These texts were initially for private reading only until it so happened that I read one of them in public. Only then did I realise the potential of the whole process and how much it had to do with the very issues in my work. As I am reading these pieces between other pieces at a concert, it may in turn happen that the reading of these sound-minutes turns into music. The listener who follows the text will find it hard to avoid imagining the sounds that are listed, at least in part: thus inside her head, a kind of acoustic environment-collage runs its course. And once more we find ourselves generating something: reality? Music? Yes, and if she only listens to the voice, then it is music anyway, a priori.

**TOR** Often in your work the process listening itself seems to be at issue. To me it almost seems like a phenomenological investigation - or even an existentialist exercise. What does "listening" mean to you?

**PA** Listening is representing any type of perception, the ways in which we react to the world which we have to create through the same perception in the first place. Listening is thus the means of observing perception.

The sounds do not interest me; not as such. Sounds and auditory phenomena are mere objects to me, materials by means of which I can set into motion certain constellations of perception.

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