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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Fox, Christopher. 1985. 'A Darmstadt Diary'. *Contact*, 29. pp. 44-47. ISSN 0308-5066.

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A Darmstadt Diary

33rd Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik,
Darmstadt, July 1984

The Darmstadt Ferienkurse in July 1984 was an extraordinary event—a sort of explosive combination of successes and scandals, compounded by aesthetic and ideological confrontations, and a schedule so crowded that it was impossible for any one participant to come away with a complete picture of the event. What actually *happens* at Darmstadt these days? Well, one thing that is quite definitely not on the agenda is the protracted exposition by senior composers of their compositional practice. Instead of Stockhausen, Ligeti, Xenakis, et al discoursing for three or four days on their latest work, the predominant format in 1984 was a 90-minute lecture, afforded to about 35 composers, giving them the opportunity to introduce particular compositional preoccupations and play a few pieces.

Most of these composers had been invited to be present, and had been given free board and lodging, travel expenses and the guarantee of at least one piece performed in a concert; they became the focus of a certain amount of resentment, particularly when it

emerged that they were also eligible for the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis.¹ As an invited composer myself (and fighting back the memory of the cynical (Groucho) Marxism 'I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member'), I am perhaps less than ideally placed to judge the success of this major innovation, but it did seem to allow a healthy compromise between anarchy and the restraints of the old, patriarchal Darmstadt model.

Friedrich Hommel's choice of composers was, inevitably, cause for much comment. The July issue of the journal *MusikTexte*² published suggestions by a number of German composers and commentators for new directions for Darmstadt; some of these also nominated musicians they felt should be featured in the Ferienkurse. Few of the names listed in the Darmstadt prospectus appeared in *MusikTexte* and those that did were familiar new music stars like Feldman, Schnebel and Lachenmann. However, there was a remarkable congruence between the idea of Darmstadt as a more open and democratic forum for the exchange of ideas, advocated by many of the contributors, and the Darmstadt that Hommel actually achieved.³ Particularly effective in this context were those people, like Klarenz Barlow, Morton Feldman, Peter Garland, Herbert Henck, Hans-Joachim Hespos, Erhard Grosskopf, Kevin Volans and Walter Zimmermann, who allowed themselves to become focal points for informal discussion outside the more structured lecture/seminar programme.

But at any new music gathering the most effective means of exchange is the music itself. What follows is a chronological account of my selective response to a few of the hundreds of pieces played.⁴

Monday 16 July

The first concert of the Ferienkurse is given by the German group, Ensemble Modern, who will be resident at the 1986 Ferienkurse, making possible, it is hoped, the performance of more ensemble works by participants rather than the endless stream of solo pieces. Their programme includes Wolfgang Rihm's *Bild*, which the composer regards as a piece in its own right although it may be given as live film music with the Bunuel-Dali film *Un chien andalou*. Tonight it is played during part of the film (the film lasts 20 minutes, the music about 9 minutes). Presumably this is to save time in a long concert, but in fact both music and film suffer: while the music plays with the film it is impossible to give either full attention; when the music stops the film seems to lose pace and coherence. As far as this performance allows one to judge, Rihm seems to have composed a brilliant analogue to *Un chien andalou*, creating musical equivalents of the gratuitously sensational images of the film. His ensemble of horn, trombone, percussion, piano, viola, cello, and double bass plays music intercutting different blocks of material, each of which is predominantly loud and aggressively dissonant.

Tuesday 17 July

The Clementi Trio (violin, cello and piano) open their concert with Clarence Barlough's *1981*, a wonderfully good-humoured piece which collages Clementi's *La chasse* (1788), Schumann's Trio (1847) and Ravel's Trio (1914). Using statistical operations, Barlough manipulates the instrumental parts so that each begins his piece in a different one of the source pieces; later on there are brief moments when all three players arrive together in the same piece at the same point, first Clementi, then Schumann, until Barlough ends with a magical cadence into Ravel.

The first half of the concert closes with five movements of Tom Johnson's (as yet unfinished) *Predictables*, the first and last of which use readily audible scalic processes. The lucidity of this music proves too much for some of the avant-garde backwoodsmen of the Darmstadt audience and in trying to repress sniggers they miss the more subtle logic of the middle movements. To my ears, Johnson's structures, which, as his programme note states, are 'far too interesting to bury underneath a lot of "expressive purposes"', sound quite beautiful.

Friday 20 July

The evening concert is entitled 'The New Wind' and, appropriately, has its fair share of compositional flatulence. However, the title is intended to refer to the development of the larger members of the various woodwind families—contrabass and octobass flute, base clarinet, contrabass saxophone, and bass oboe—as solo virtuoso instruments, by Pierre-Yves Artaud, Roger Heaton, Daniel Kientzy and Nora Post respectively. As a whole the concert has something of the atmosphere of a freak show, with musicians entering the arena to do battle with monstrous instruments, and it is hard to believe that most of these instruments will ever be more than expensive novelties. The bass oboe may well be the exception, for although, as the composer of *Broadway Boogie* for bass oboe and tape, I am not entirely uninterested in its survival, its extraordinary timbre—part cor anglais, part saxophone—may well attract other composers. Indeed it has already attracted Chris Dench, whose brand-new little duet, *For Nora and Roger*, combining bass oboe and bass clarinet, is premiered in this concert.

Monday 23 July

The evening concert is given over to a single piece, *Seiltanz*, by Hans-Joachim Hespos. I have had my first encounter with Hespos (b.1938) and his music two days earlier, at an open rehearsal in Roger Heaton's clarinet class of his *Harry's Musike* (1972) for bass clarinet, and been struck by his concern for the quality of the performer's experience in playing new music, evidenced in his own scores by a relatively free time notation and a profusion of non-standard graphic symbols (both rare in a Darmstadt where new complexity is the dominant calligraphic style). Essential to Hespos's music is the alternation of violently opposed extremes—frenetic activity followed by stillness, squealing multiphonics followed by almost inaudible air noise: in *Seiltanz* this extremism is carried into the domain of theatre.

One by one six wind players, each exploring the possibilities of his instrument to the limit, enter a space bounded to the left by an array of percussion and a double bass player, to the right by a large iron water tank. Once these six are in position, ranged across the back of the space, the conductor enters, harangues them and then begins to conduct. Occasional outburst of hammering emerge from the tank. The final performer enters. He is an actor, who brandishes an enormous length of timber which he periodically smashes to the floor, all the while contorting his face and body as if in the grip of some terrible dementia. 40 minutes into the piece, when the wind players have returned to their places after menacing the audience, the actor leaves and attention shifts to the percussionist who has by now cut his way out of his iron prison with an oxy-acetylene torch and is trying to bring himself to sound the percussion instruments. Eventually he succeeds and then cannot bear to let them stop ringing. After 70 minutes the

piece ends.

Seiltanz leaves most of its audience stunned, not only by the sheer brute physicality of the experience (the performers are close to exhaustion by the end) but also by its compositional risktaking. 'Seiltanz' translates as 'tight-rope walk', which Hespos sees as an appropriate analogy for the times in which we live, and *Seiltanz* teeters on the brink of the gratuitous sensationalism to which Absurdist theatre is always prey. Yet somehow, perhaps because of the musical commitment and theatrical plausibility of Manfred Reichert's Ensemble 13 and truly gripping performances by actor Harald Beutelstahl and percussionist Ulrik Spies, the piece totally convinces me.

Tuesday 24 July

The first of four evenings of string quartet music begins with the Arditti Quartet playing Volker Heyn's *Sirènes* (1984). Heyn (b.1938) was in his mid-thirties before he took up composition seriously and his music has a wayward originality rare in composers who have been through the full six years of processing in the German composer factories. Although rather too long for this listener, *Sirènes* has the same rapt intensity as the work of Scelsi and Heyn shares with Scelsi a fondness for music based around microtonally varying 2nds and 3rds and for an instrumental palette in which natural harmonics and variations of bow pressure produce much of the timbral variety.

The concert closes with Rihm's new quartet *Ohne Titel*, given a performance whose breathtaking virtuosity is heightened when Irvine Arditti's E string breaks early in the piece, only for him to continue to the end on three strings! The piece occupies Rihm's normal emotional range from *angstvoll* quietude to hysteria but, particularly in the context of much of the rest of the Arditti's repertory, his command of the whole expressive potential of the quartet medium from full-blooded unison writing to the most complex heterophony, and his ability here to construct music with an irresistible forward impetus combine to provide a thrilling musical experience.

Wednesday 25 July

In complete contrast, Feldman's Second Quartet (1983) is consistently quiet and uses none of the new techniques of 20th-century string writing. It is also extremely long—tonight's version, somewhat shortened, comes in at just under four hours and, although Feldman is not averse to listeners taking time out, the Quartet can surely only be heard *in toto*, since the extreme length of this and other recent Feldman pieces like *Crippled Symmetry* (1984) and *Triadic Memories* (1981) is as significant a feature of the composition as any single choice of pitch, timbre or duration. The Second Quartet is made up of many different pieces of material, repeated for a while, forgotten and then remembered again: for Feldman the act of memory is central to his making of the music and so too must it be for the listener as his capacity for attention rises and falls and material—new or familiar?—appears and disappears. Feldman says that he reintroduces material because 'I'm not sure of it, I want to hear it again', until eventually the piece simply 'dies of old age'. He also draws parallels with Proust—the act of recollection as also a remaking of memory—and with Beckett—the subtle adaptation of meaning through translation and retranslation. As with all Feldman's music, the combinations of pitch, timbre and register seem utterly right, quite inevitable, and the elegance of the writing is matched by the Kronos Quartet's perfect ensemble playing.

Debilitated by a surfeit of institutional food, music and late nights, I gave up after two hours and went for a Greek meal.

Thursday 26 July

The weekend has seen the Ferienkurse present a congress of composers and musicologists discussing tonality, one of the more vexed subjects in contemporary music circles these days. At the end of the congress things are, if that is possible, even more confused, since, with the honourable exceptions of Kevin Volans and Clarents Baalo, the composers have lectured only on their own 'tonal' habits and the musicologists have confined themselves to arcane theorising with little or no reference to any real new music. Chairman of the congress was Johannes Fritsch, once a member of Stockhausen's performing group and subsequently responsible for establishing the Feedback Studios in Cologne.

Tonight the Arditti Quartet, with double bass virtuoso Fernando Grillo, première his String Quintet. Since the early seventies, Fritsch's work has made much use of the harmonic series, rather than the tempered scale, as a source of pitch material. Early in the Ferienkurse Harry Halbreich has observed that 'whereas serial music is a system of organisation, spectral music is a type of material' and Fritsch's Quintet has lots of material but is woefully short of organisation. I find the piece baffling, particularly when a quasi-Middle Eastern tune (shades of Jonathan Richman's *Egyptian Reggae*) emerges occasionally from the murky soundworld.

Friday 27 July

Another four quartets, from the Kronos this time, including *Changes*, a set of four short movements by Philip Glass from the same mould as *Facades* in *Glassworks*. These are booed, presumably for being attractive and well-written. The major event of the programme is the world première of John Cage's *Thirty Pieces for String Quartet*, Cage's first work in the medium since the *String Quartet in Four Parts* of 1950. Nothing in the conception or organisation of the new quartet matches the staggering originality of its predecessor, for whereas in the 1950 piece Cage totally reinvented the string quartet, creating a quite new medium (this uniqueness can be the only reason why so few groups ever learn it), the new quartet's soundworld is that of the conventional, post-Bartók avant-garde string work. Indeed the piece reminds me most strongly of the Boulez *Livre pour quatuor* but, thanks to the chance operations, with attention thrown onto the sounds rather than onto structural considerations. This reminiscence may well be due to the seating arrangements imposed on the Kronos players by the demands of a live radio broadcast and the rather intractable space in which the concert is given: Cage's instruction that the players be seated as far apart as possible cannot be realised.

Saturday 28 July

The intolerance of sections of the Darmstadt fraternity resurfaces during the American composer Alvin Curran's performance of his *Love Songs* (1984). Curran has lived in Rome since 1965 and is perhaps best known as a member of *Musica Elettronica Viva*. Like much of MEV's work, *Love Songs* is part improvisation, part predetermined composition and uses a mixture of acoustic resources—Curran's voice, piano and harmonica—and electro-acoustic devices—a tabletop full of Serge Tcherepnin-designed modular units—together with tape. The piece opens with a Korean melody, sung by Song-On Cho and

multiplied by delay units; then Curran begins a series of smoochy jazz harmonies on the piano which is immediately met with cries of protest from a section of the audience. Curran responds with what appears to be a vocal imitation of these hecklers, rapidly building it into a dense electronic texture which remains more or less constant for the remaining 40 minutes of his performance. The mix of tape—much of which consists of recordings of environmental sound—and live electronics is thoroughly absorbing but, quite clearly, the aesthetic arrogance of a relatively small number of listeners has restricted the range of material that Curran feels he can use in the performance. Paradoxically, this sort of audience participation is in part a product of the openness of the new Darmstadt and virtually every shade of the musical spectrum is booed at some stage: however, the virulence of the attack on Curran is remarkable.

Later the same evening there is a concert of pieces written by, or prepared for performance by, Ferienkurse participants. As is the case in the later concerts, it is evident that some very ordinary pieces by participant composers are being played by some excellent participant performers (a disparity noted by the jury of the Kranichstein prize who award prizes to five performers, including Nancy Ruffer and Alan Brett, but to only three composers). In this concert Sara Stowe's performance of Kagel's *Recitativo* (1971-2) for singing harpsichordist provides the moment of enlightenment, to some extent because hers is a splendidly committed representation (complete with nun's habit) of the work's blasphemous protagonist, but also because the imaginative audacity of the piece is in such marked contrast to the turgid examples of *stilo SPNMo* that surround it. As further welcome relief, Clarence Balo's three-and-a-half-hour *Text Musik* (1972) for piano is being performed by Thomas Silvestri in a room which Barleeuw has thought-fully equipped with mattresses, wine and subdued lighting.

Sunday 29 July

A day-long marathon of new music from 11 a.m. until early the next day. Little catches my ear until late evening when the pianist Helmut Freitag plays *Six Nocturnes* (1981) by Carlo Alessandro Landini. As their title may suggest, these short pieces are almost, but not quite, Chopin: Landini has taken Chopin left-hand parts and elaborated them canonically to produce two-hand textures. Darmstadt's favourite terms of abuse—'kitsch', 'dilettante', and 'unprofessional'—fly around; at least the last of these is quite inappropriate to these skilfully fashioned pieces.

Monday 30 July

The last day of concerts yields another well written Italian piece, *Fragmento* for solo viola by Aldo Brizzi, in a fine performance by the Rumanian, Stefan Georghiu. The piece spins a tremulous but continuous thread of sound from the instrument, with double-stopped left-hand tremoli predominant. Brizzi reappears in the small hours of Tuesday morning as conductor of Horatiu Radulescu's *Iubiri* (1981), the orchestral climax to an all-Radulescu concert that begins after one and finishes a little before four in the morning. Due perhaps to fatigue, perhaps to Radulescu's stylistic consistency, it is the first two pieces I enjoy most: *The Inner Time* (which Roger Heaton premièred in London in April 1983) and *Das Andere* (1984) for cello. *The Inner Time* is given in a new version in which Heaton is joined by four more clarinetists, placed around the audience, who 'amplify' the solo clarinet by playing the pitches

whose internal elements he is currently exploring. The result is quite wonderful, the stratospherically high clarinet harmonics ringing in the resonant acoustic of the gymnasium, generating an eerie, other-worldly calm. This is followed by an equally spellbinding performance by Rohan de Saram of *Das Andere* in a new version for cello (it was premièred at La Rochelle as a viola piece). *Das Andere* is, at 17 minutes, quite short for a Radulescu piece and has an expressive intensity that is also unusual for this rhapsodic composer; de Saram's performance is all the more extraordinary since he has learnt the piece in a week.

And so to bed.

¹ In fact, of the three composers who shared the composition section of the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis, only Chris Dench was in the invited category.

² *MusikTexte* is an excellent new periodical, published five times a year and available from Postfach 30 04 80, D-5000 Köln 30. Recent issues have included material (scores, interviews, articles) on Cage, Feldman, Wolff, Stockhausen, Barlow, Globokar and many less well known musicians.

³ For example, Ernstalbrecht Stiebler writes: 'Darmstadt must be a forum for composers. There must also be a lively debate—through discussion but also through the music itself, in particular through major performances. New Music is no subject for a summer academy. The courses in Darmstadt have the opportunity, and they must use them, to get beyond the limited format of seminar and congress communication. Otherwise a new addition to the old "new" academia threatens.'

⁴ For those in search of exhaustive documentation of performances at the 1984 Darmstadt, I recommend the 20th edition of the *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik*, which Schott's will publish in early 1986.