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The Hespos phenomenon: a performer's point of view

für Lea, die Zukunft

I first encountered the music of Hans-Joachim Hespos when I came across his solo bass clarinet piece, *harry's musike* (1972). I was fascinated by both the way this piece looked and sounded. I had never seen a score with such fine nuances, that one *could* produce and that an audience *could* hear, combined with such surreal energy. Here, for once, was a solo bass clarinet work that was attractive both to learn and to perform and that still sounded 'new' and 'avant-garde'.

Hespos's music is a unique ingredient of the contemporary European new music soup, a source of discussion wherever it is performed. The 1984 Darmstadt performance of his monumental scenic adventure *seiltanz*¹ (1982) brought his music to the attention of an international audience for the first time; with one work Hespos polarized the *Ferienkurse* and provided welcome relief from the tedious arguments about tonality that were taking place at the same time.

Hespos is self-taught, one of the more successful composers of the generation, sandwiched between Karlheinz Stockhausen and Wolfgang Rihm, who toil in the shadow of these two well-known, prodigious and prolific figures. But although Stockhausen and Rihm may belong to the avant-garde, neither does much to extend or redefine the word 'music'. Hespos, on the other hand, *is* such a composer: his works are a constant attempt both to expand and to refine his listeners' sensibilities. Unconventional (and sometimes downright obscure!) instruments feature prominently in his scores; for example, he has written for piccolo A flat clarinet, piccolo heckelphon, contrabass sarrusophone, tárogató, sub-bass recorder, bass ophicleide, flugabone, singing saw, contrabass saxophone and girnata. His programme notes are concise, stimulating, but in no way intended to lead the listener by the hand. For the piece *point* he writes:

nacheinander/zugleich
interferenzen
musik – die vielzüngigkeit von stille
(successive/simultaneous
interferences
music – the many tongues of silence)

harry's musike he describes as 'spuren kratzen in die grosse stille' (scratching tracks in the great silence). Even his titles – *o.*, *Sns*, *mini mal!*, *-Z . . . ()* – are provocative.

As for the scores themselves, they are, as I mentioned earlier, full of the finest nuances. To achieve these Hespos has devised many new notational symbols to convey his wishes more completely to the performer and thence to the public (Example 1). In addition the scores contain many verbal instructions as to how the musical text is to be interpreted. Non-German speakers need a good dictionary and a lot of imagination, Germans only the latter, to realise instructions such as 'ver Stolpert' (stumbled), 'zäh' (sticky) or 'schattenhaft ruhig' (gently shadowlike).

There will be those who feel that it is just such notational innovations that deter more interpreters from learning Hespos's music. However, Hespos's invented symbols are not difficult to learn and retain; I have performed a number of his works and no longer find it necessary to refer to the sheet explaining the notations. The symbols are quite logical – indeed other composers might think about incorporating them in their own scores if they wish to achieve similar sounds, so that musicians are not confronted with a new symbology with every different composer. Furthermore, players unwilling to take the time and trouble to prepare proper performances are perhaps best advised to stay away from this music.

Example 1 Examples of Hespos's notational symbols and their meanings.

- = fleetingly
- ⌈•••• = very fast (grace note-like)
- ⌈••••⌋ = as fast as possible
- ◇ = just airstream
- < = barely coloured airstream
- ◁ = lightly coloured
- = = an almost imperceptible sound
- ⊖ = weakly audible
- = open attack, open release
- ◊ = open attack, clear release
- ⊕ = clear attack, open release
- :
- ⋮ = very short

- ~~~~~ = coarsely chopped glissando impulses
- ↑↓ = overblow (indeterminate pitch)
- ↓↑ = 'underblow' (indeterminate pitch)
- ↗ = mis-blown impulse, hard, squeaking (split-sound)

spoken sounds:

- = voiceless
- = voiced
- ⊖ = as in english 'never'
- f = as in english 'fat'
-)} = as in german 'Schuh'
- ⊖} = as in italian 'cento'

ar | i | f | ff

the differing letter thicknesses indicate the intensity of articulation – the differing sound-placements indicate their relative pitch, assuming that _____ = middle of the voice.

pico – line 1

What follows is a performer's eye-view of the opening line of *pico* (1978), a work originally written for Michala Petri and soprano recorder. (Unusually for Hespos, who rarely favours flexible instrumentation, *pico* has been performed on instruments as different from the soprano recorder as B flat contrabass clarinet and E flat contrabass saxophone; I play it on piccolo A flat clarinet.)

Example 2: *aufgebracht* = angry
aus dem atemstau = out of a held breath

I perform the second indication by taking a good breath, holding it in and then suddenly releasing the air, like an explosion. The result is an overblown pair of harmonic-like notes (*ff* – exceedingly short) whose pitches are not specified. A short rest. A high sound produced on the recorder by covering up the front air holes – in the clarinet version(s) this has been alternately interpreted as a high note produced by having the teeth on the reed or as loud rushing air (white sound). The first method is very spectacular on the piccolo A clarinet. These sound combinations last a maximum of seven seconds. (The graphic distance in the original is approximately one second = a bit more than one centimetre, but this is irregular.)

Example 2

gehetzt = hurried (under pressure)

A relatively normal sequence of notes is to be performed very quickly (circa three seconds or a *bit* longer). The interpreter must strive to differentiate here between the fourth sound, which will be like the second sound of the piece, and the ninth sound, an overblown note of indeterminate pitch. In addition, the last two notes (the first accented normally, the second with a hard accent) should have a rhythmic relationship, in spite of their speed, to set them apart from the preceding notes.

Example 3

stark gedehnt

Example 3: *stark-gedehnt* = intensely stretched C³ (written) accented and held at a *ff* dynamic for about seven seconds. An immediate change to *mp*, harmonic-like colour with a weak vibrato for the remaining four (?) seconds. A medium-long rest follows.

Example 4

schattenhaft bewegt

Example 4: *schattenhaft bewegt* = shadow-like agitated
schlaff = slack or limp

A lightly-coloured G¹ – (*pp*) slinks under and then up to an F^{#1}. This action takes less time than the graphic space would indicate due to the rightward pointing arrow under the staff (*accel.*). The F^{#1} fingering is held while the tone colour is totally altered to air sounds only (*p*). After approximately six seconds a B¹ is played (slurred, barely coloured airstream) in *mp*. These last two notes take more time in respect to their graphic notation due to the leftward pointing arrow (*rit.*). A large pause of perhaps 2½ seconds.

Example 5

Example 5: *gelassen* = calm

A barely audible F² is played, its pitch is unsteady (wobbles) with a light glissando near the end (*pp*). The syllable *bew* (b=bar; e=lesen (Ger.); w=Wasser (Ger.)) is simultaneously hummed (sung?) during the F² and after about four seconds glissandos up on the sound *u* (*u* =amüsieren) and *i* (*i*=Minute (Ger.)). All of these sounds are fully voiced. The F² is produced with a tendency to become a 'half-flagolet' (i.e. one of the player's fingers is not properly closing a hole or properly pushing down a key; the result being a rasping sound, as if it were a flutter-tongued, overblown note). A large rest that is somewhat shorter than the preceding rest. All of this occupies something close to seven seconds.

A grace note A^b (once again a barely coloured airstream – all of these indications indicate a mix of air and tone to various proportions) precedes a harmonic (i.e. a fingering is used other than a normal one to produce a distinctly different tone colour) A² (*ppp*). *Spitz* in this case would mean a pointed tone. The shortest medium-length rest. Altogether a bit more than six seconds.

Example 6

rasch

Example 6: *rasch* = quickly

A four note group. The F² is longer than the E-E^b³ grace note pair. The G³ is played hard and is long in comparison to the other notes (*ff*-dry). This lasts two seconds.

Three seconds of rest follows and then the first line (circa 50 seconds) is over.

This may seem like a lot of work for less than a minute of music. It is; yet no less effort is required to develop a valid interpretation of a Classical or Romantic score. Thurston Dart claimed that 'composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky leave the interpreter no freedom whatever; every nuance of dynamic, tempo, phrasing, rhythm and expression is rigidly prescribed, and the performer is reduced to the abject status of a pianola or a gramophone'²; although at first sight Hespös's scores may also seem 'rigidly prescriptive' their realisation is by no means the cold work of a pianola or gramophone. If there is a difference between the interpretation of a Classical or Romantic work and that of a Hespös score, it is that with a piece like *pico* the act of performance must first be made fully conscious; the score presents many problems of interpretation, each of which has numerous possible solutions, all of which must be carefully considered before a truly personal realisation can be reached.

In the years since *für cello solo* (1964), the earliest surviving hesposition, Hespös's music has become more and more involved with the performer as a person. Although the recent scores look similar to those of the early years (in the wind music, for example, he has consistently made use of air sounds and of the performer's voice), the newer scores are becoming more personal, more determined in their effort to change the environment around them through their emphasis on the theatrical and social dimension of music-making. The Hespös phenomenon continues to develop and grow.

¹ The use of lower case here is a Hespös characteristic.

² Thurston Dart, *The Interpretation of Music*, 4th edn. (London: Hutchinson, 1967), p.59.

Hespös was published by Edition Modern until 1978; he has published his own work since pico. A catalogue of all of Hespös's works, including those published by Edition Modern and listing all 90 titles is available from:

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