

Practicalities of a Socio-Musical Utopia

DEGREES OF "FREEDOM" IN MATHIAS SPAHLINGER'S "DOPPELT BEJAHT" (STUDIES FOR ORCHESTRA WITHOUT CONDUCTOR)

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In mathias spahlinger's *doppelt bejaht* [*double affirmation*], premiered during the opening concert at the Donaueschinger Musiktage in October 2009, the collective musical reflections of the composer over the past 40 years or so converge in a particularly effective constellation for their exploration and presentation: a large body of musicians – an orchestra of over 50 individuals – without conductor. The work polarized composers, performers and public alike, and polemic discussions ensued, not because of the four-hour duration of the work, not because of concerns about the effectiveness or musical interest of the concepts explored in the work's 24 individual pieces, not because of the "open form" of the individual pieces, not even because the piece was to be performed without a conductor. The central point of contention in the discussions was in fact about whether the orchestral musician can be, wants to be, or even should be "liberated", an issue which arose from spahlinger's use of the term *entfremdete Arbeit* [alienated labour], a concept elucidated by Marx explaining the division of labour in industrialized society, in relation to the structure of the orchestra. Dry, heady and sometimes unfortunately superficial discussions about and reviews of *doppelt bejaht* were the result: pros that hardly talked about the work itself in practical or musical terms, or only as a footnote, and cons that sometimes did little more than focus on the composer's socio-political beliefs with an accusatory

tone. Instead of contributing more fodder to this polemic, and perhaps unresolvable, *double one-sided* dialogue, here we step back from the fray to take a pragmatic look at what is actually involved in mounting this orchestral installation work for performance and what this implies for the "orchestral institution", before considering what this newfound *freedom* could possibly mean for the orchestral musician who is involved in the performance of such a work.

Score and Notation in "doppelt bejaht"

Due to my own unique familiarity with the work (I was the copyist who prepared the 40 individual performance materials for the premiere), it would seem appropriate to begin with a presentation of the piece from the perspective of its notation. Simplifying things for our present needs, let's consider that the primary importance of the score is not that it defines in precise terms what each musician plays and how they play it, but rather when they play it. The function of the score is then to coordinate the individual instrumental parts so that each musician "plays the right thing at the right time." This is the case not only for traditionally notated works, but also for works in so-called proportional notation¹ and remains true even for many scores using some degree of graphic notation. Without this crucial foundation of ensemble coordination, many pieces can quite simply not be performed properly.

The performance scores (the individual parts) for each of the 24 pieces in *doppelt bejaht*² systematically follow the same four-part structure, with the information in these

¹ This is a problematic term that has gained such currency in New Music that it is hard to imagine a suitable replacement could be found for it. One the one hand, Western music notation is by nature proportional, and one the other hand, there is hardly a work in "proportional notation" that is truly 100% proportional... but this is a much larger discussion for another time and place!

² For reasons of clarity, I will refer to the 24 individual concepts as pieces and to the whole of *doppelt bejaht* as the work.

four score components pertaining only to the piece in which they are found (Fig. 1):

- Title and instrumentation, the latter indicating who must play or who may choose to play or not³;
- Visual representation of the piece, the global form rendered in a graphic notation précis;
- Performance explanations, informational text as needed about such things as pitch content, rhythmic cells, playing techniques and specific types of material to play;
- Verzweigungen [branches], three visual representations (or, rarely, textual descriptions) of possible developments of the piece, with indications of the three separate pieces each leads into, respectively.

For some pieces, instead of a single block of visual representation (as in Fig. 1), a series of such representations details specific processes or sequences to be played in order over the course of the piece.⁴ In such cases, each representation in the series – varying in traditional, proportional, text or graphic notation (or a mix of two or more of these notation categories), and often with greater precision than the single graphic visual representations – is accompanied by its own performance explanation.

For the large majority of the pieces, the first three score components are fairly straightforward and require no further explanation here. The fourth and final component of the score, the Verzweigungen, indicates three pieces which could function as a socio-musically relevant succession to the piece currently being played. The choice of which of these three to play is dependent on how the current piece has evolved. For example, if the performance of 19. “mikrointervallisches klangband” [microintervallic soundband] (Fig. 1) develops in a manner that resembles the top graphic (the soundband, previously restricted to an ambitus of between a minor third and a tritone, begins to expand in intervallic breadth and rise in register), then 1. “naturtöne absteigend” [natural tones descending] must follow. If, instead, more and more string and wind noise is gradually introduced, then 14. “farbiges rauschen” [coloured noise] is to be played next. The transitions between pieces are shorter or longer, depending on the clarity of the collective decision made by the orchestra (more on this below) while playing – or rather through their playing! – and the nature of each

piece, but they are generally fairly continuous; i.e. a new piece does not begin abruptly.

In scores of Classical music, the music itself (notes, rhythms and sometimes tempo) is notated with great precision, and while these cannot be changed by the performer, the nature and quality of their performance can vary to a degree (within the boundaries of stylistic norms) from performer to performer, and even between different performances by the same performer. Individual interpretation of any text indications in the score (i.e. how the musician performs a crescendo or reads expressive markings such as *marcato*, *legato*, *animato*) can greatly affect the character of the performance, but will not in any way affect the melodic and harmonic content of the piece, which remains unchanged from one performance to another. This mixture of fixed and interpretable musical elements remains, in principle, in Spahlinger’s orchestral studies, except that that which is fixed and immutable and that which is open to some degree of interpretation by the performer can be fundamentally reversed, or otherwise radically altered, in comparison to the notation of Classical works.

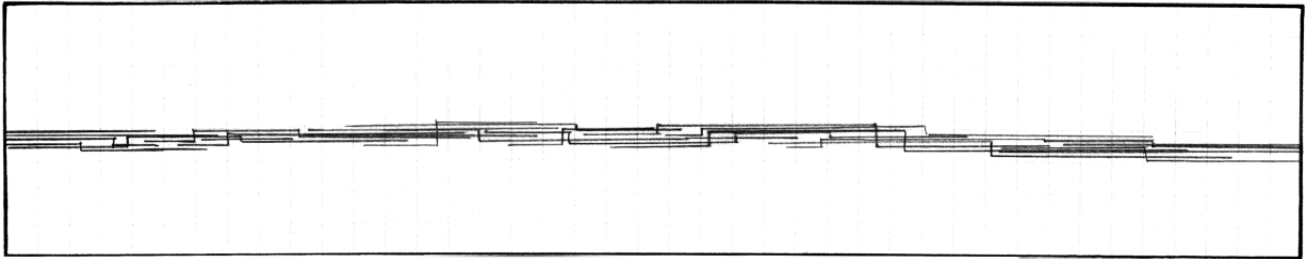
The scores in *doppelt bejaht* varyingly offer the performer a range of degrees of freedom of interpretation, allowing them to make decisions during the performance of the piece about such things as what to play, how to interpret what they are instructed to play, when to play and even whether to play in a specific piece or to “sit it out.” In 19. “mikrointervallisches klangband”, all wind, brass and string players must play, but each musician chooses freely when to start or stop playing. They are to play single pitches, medium to very long in duration, but can also play “micro-melodies” of up to five notes. Each musician chooses which pitches to play, provided they “fit” within the ambitus of the ensemble chord, which may vary from a third (or less) to around a tritone. Rather than indicating for each of the musicians the specific pitches of the microtonal cluster and the durations / rhythms they are obliged to play, the notation of this piece functions to describe the general pitch, rhythmic and stylistic characteristics of the piece, which each individual musician is expected to interpret in his or her own way, while the piece is being performed. If each musician respectfully follows what is notated in the score – i.e. makes decisions that fall within the

³ In addition to the musical reasons for the instrumentation of the individual pieces, this also allows the musicians to rest from time to time, to stretch their legs, to take a 30-minute pause, to go to the bathroom...

⁴ For example: 06. “ein ton, viele farben / klangfarbenmelodie” has a 17-stage development which includes, as might be expected given the title, a Schoenberg citation; 11. “hommage à scelsi” has three subsections which are still further detailed.

19. "mikrointervallisches klangband"

besetzung: alle bläser, alle streicher



akkorde aus tonhöhen, die nur minimal verschieden sind. jede/r versucht, die kleinsten lücken im akkord zu füllen oder einen möglichst engen anschluss ton zu spielen.

gesamter ambitus meistens ca. eine terz, auch weniger, höchstens ein tritonus. dabei kann das klangband im tonhöhenraum (langsam und möglichst unmerklich) fast um eine oktave wandern.

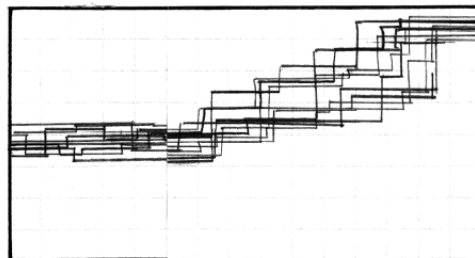
einzelnote (mittellang bis sehr lang) und mikro-melodien bis höchstens 5 töne, bläser eher weniger. dazwischen pausen, auch lange, bläser länger als streicher.

streicher: wenn es die situation zulässt, die geringen tonhöhenunterschiede von gleichnamigen flageolett-tönen mit verschiedenen grundtönen ausnutzen (z. b. a auf g-saite und auf a-saite).

verzweigung

besetzung: zunächst wie vorher

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folgt ①
"naturtöne absteigend"

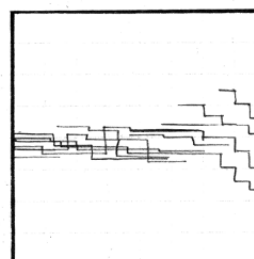
- • • streicher:
nach und nach nur noch streichgeräusch
- bläser:
nach und nach nur noch luftgeräusch

folgt ⑭
"farbiges rauschen"

Figure 1. Performance score used by all string players for 19. "mikrointervallisches klang-band", one of a total 24 pieces that make up mathias spahlinger's doppelt bejaht (2009). The performance materials for the premiere were prepared by the author from the composer's manuscript.

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nach und nach nur noch oben beginnen und nur noch abwärts



folgt ⑳
"treppauf /treppab"

boundaries of the notation and instructions – whatever he or she chooses to play should naturally be consistent stylistically with and “fit” in the piece.

For the performance, the orchestra was spread out mainly along two walls and on a “peninsula” extending out from one wall, forming a semi-closed rectangle (43 musicians on the floor and 9 on a gallery along one wall). The public was free to move around in the midst of the orchestra and to come and go at will during the performance via two doors, one which led out of the centre of the performance area, the other allowing passage from outside of the circle to the adjacent room.⁵ The set-up allows all musicians to see each other during the performance for coordination as needed, but also allows listeners to make autonomous decisions about their own listening position in relation to the musicians: in such a context, moving only a couple of metres can have a drastic effect on the balance of instruments and sounds one hears!

The configuration of this orchestral installation is not, as one journalist claimed ⁶, simply a throwback to the days when the relevance of the standard concert venue was called into question, but can be understood as a natural extension of the primary concept of the piece. If the musicians are free to make certain types of decisions about what and when they play, it would be consistent with the concept to allow audience members to make decisions about what they hear and from which perspective they experience the work. Pragmatically speaking, however, the distribution of the instruments was “weighted” throughout the performance space so that the listener could choose to position him or herself for more concentrated listening of the string section, or of the brass, etc.⁷

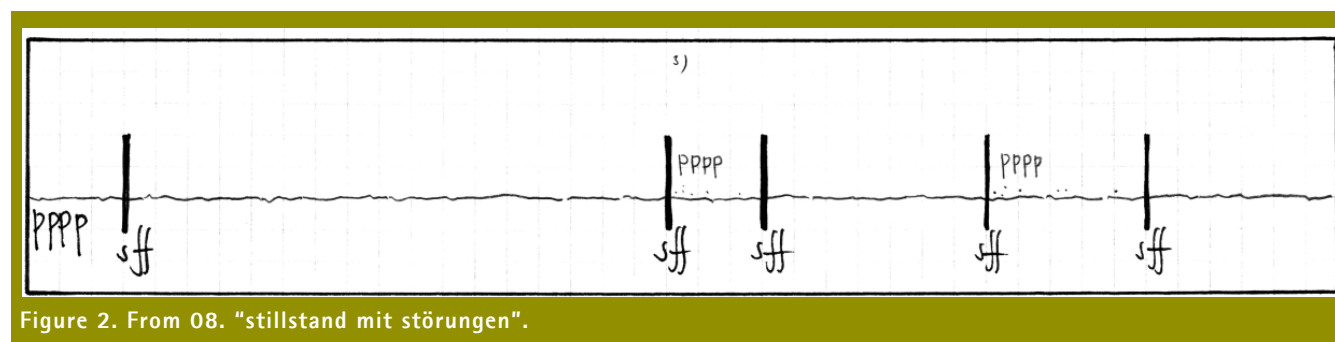


Figure 2. From 08. “stillstand mit störungen”.

Concept – Problem – Solution

A Musical Problem

The titles of the 24 pieces in *doppelt bejaht* reflect either musical processes or sound types and textures that the composer has explored and spoken about for many years, noting that they are in various ways typical of or even inherent to the contemporary period of Western musical thought which began, more or less, with the maturity of the Second Viennese School. Each individual piece can be considered a musical problem which the musicians are confronted with and examine, scrutinize and try to resolve as they play the piece, with the expectation that they will find a solution that is appropriate in conceptual, musical and socio-political terms to the nature of the

problem. Here it would be interesting to reflect on the distinctions and similarities between a relevant resolution of a problem on one or more levels and an engaging musical result, and to consider if, how and to what degree the two are mutually dependent and connected... but that is a topic for another time and space.

This is the first time that so many of these concepts have been brought together in such a categorical manner by the composer in a single work – certainly on this scale! – and it can thus be appreciated an integral representation and exposition of spahlinger’s reflections and musical interests over the past four decades or so. Furthermore, because *doppelt bejaht* features such a wide gamut of the sorts of figures, constructs and processes found in New Music over the past half a century or more,

⁵ Several photos and videos of the Donaueschingen premiere are published on the SWR site (see bibliography), showing the performance constellation and audience members walking about calmly, or even lying on the floor to listen.

⁶ Unsel, 17 October 2009.

⁷ Private conversation with the composer.

the work itself can be understood as a kind of morphological typology of New Music as perceived by spahlinger.⁸

After a look through the scores for the 24 pieces, anyone familiar with music composed in the past 60-odd years will concede that there is “nothing new” in terms of the notation or instrumental techniques used, the materials the musicians play or even the individual sounds that are likely to result during the performance of *doppelt bejaht*. Graphic and proportional notation (Figs. 1, 2), or scores containing a disproportionately high amount of text detailing performance praxis, are perhaps less commonly encountered in contemporary works than in those composed some 40–50 years ago, but should by no means be foreign to any professional concert musician working today. Even scores that consist of virtually nothing but text, such as spahlinger’s earlier collection of conceptual works with variable instrumentation, *vorschläge: konzepte zur ver(über)flüssigung der funktion des komponisten* (1993), or Stockhausen’s *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968), pieces which require a much more personal and intimate contribution by the musician than is customary, while fairly rare today, are nevertheless not unheard of in the New Music milieu.⁹

There is nothing in this work, from the point of view of notation, playability, performance techniques, etc., that is completely foreign to a contemporary performer. And considering that the premiere was given by the SWR orchestra, who perform year after year in one of the world’s most renowned festivals for New Music, such concerns are even completely irrelevant in this context. But the key concept of this work, its main “problem”, is not one of notation or performance praxis, but rather that it is to be performed without a conductor. This collective of 50+ individual musicians bound together in the socio-musical structure of an orchestra is given the responsibility of making individual choices that have a recognizable impact on the nature of the processes and sound structures they play, during the course of the performance. For example, the musician may have to choose between playing one or another materials, each of which is fully notated (pitch, dynamics, rhythm). Or, no dynamics are indicated and only indeterminate descriptions of the pitch and rhythmic/duration content

are provided (Fig. 1). Decisions about what the “right thing” to play is, and especially and when the “right time” to play it is, are the responsibility of the individual musician.

Additionally, the orchestra is given the task of collectively and democratically making more large-scale decisions about the performance, a role traditionally assigned solely to the conductor. The most obvious example of this is the choice of which of the three pieces is to be played next in succession (see the description of the *Verzweigungen*, above), a group decision that is to be made while playing. The idea is that the tendency of the piece will be more or less clearly understood by each of the musicians and the way each plays and affects this development will respect and support the evolution and establishment of a group consensus, which is confirmed more and more convincingly as the next piece begins.

Hypothetically, there is no reason not to expect that each musician in the orchestra could be “a conscious, creative artist” (Nonnenmann 2009, 42)¹⁰ and collaborator in this socio-musical proposition, but from a pragmatic point of view, there are some fundamental issues that stand in the way.

A Collective of Individuals, or: A Social Problem

At the base of *doppelt bejaht* is a democratisation process informed by Karl Marx’s principle of *entfremdete Arbeit* [alienated labour], in which the worker is the means to the production of an object that does not belong to him and which he has no role in designing; the product itself is not reflective of the value of the labour of the worker, whose understanding of the larger context in which the object is produced is more or less limited to his own position in the chain of production. A counterproposal to this production model, situated within an artistic context which would seem to resemble it in many ways, is proposed in spahlinger’s “studies for orchestra without conductor.”

In the socio-political structure of the orchestra, decision-making responsibilities are delegated according to a long-established social and professional hierarchy that remains essentially unmodified no matter what piece, which composer the orchestra is contracted to play – i.e. none of the music that this hierarchy is meant to serve

⁸ It should be noted, however, that the musical result is by no means as dry and academic-sounding as its theoretical description here!

⁹ Consult Ensemble musikFabrik’s spielBar [playable] project for descriptions of these and several other text- or concept-based works. Several of the individual pieces from *Vorschläge* and *Aus den sieben Tagen* have a dedicated page offering a description of the piece, its difficulty level, the challenges and skills involved and suggestions for instrumentation. See <http://spielbar.musikfabrik.eu/komponisten.html>

¹⁰ “Jeder im Orchester ist hier ein wacher, kreativer Künstler.”

today in fact plays any role in defining its nature! Each member of the orchestra must align their contribution to the performance of the work so that it conforms to this status quo, the definition of which they as individuals have virtually no say in: bow marking are decided upon by the string section leader; each section must have a homogenous sound, i.e. no single voice should be heard above another in terms of volume or sound quality, except for the few codified permissible exceptions such as solo passages (another immutable form of hierarchy!); the conductor alone decides such things as how to interpret the tempo and the tempo changes, and what parts need to be rehearsed more, or less; the manager decides on the rehearsal schedules; the union defines pay rates – which vary greatly across the orchestra, again according (in part) to this hierarchy – as well as the maximum time the orchestra may play before the musicians must be given a break; the artistic director chooses the programme (under the scrutiny of the finance department which perhaps has the final say in whether the proposed programming is accepted or not)... The orchestra is first and foremost a political body; after that, perhaps, a musical one! ¹¹

The dogmatic, verbatim interpretation of any socio-politically charged concept is always a dubious affair; the transposition of the concept of *entfremdete Arbeit* to the orchestra should therefore be negotiated with caution, in a less-than-literal manner... to an extent. Although the contemporary orchestra is obviously not comparable to an Industrial Revolution-era sweatshop, it is hard to deny that the division of labour and socio-political structure of the orchestra do strikingly resemble those of a factory, with its hierarchy of superiors and subordinates: workers, assembly line managers, foreman, union boss, plant owner, etc. That said, the composer is not inciting the “subjugated masses” of the orchestra to rise up and revolt against their oppressors, he is not calling for a general strike or a lynching of those at the helm of the machine. The worker is not exhorted to smash the windows of and burn down the factory that is the means to their exploitation! Nor does the project intend to propagate Marxist ideas (spahlinger in Unseld 2009a, audio) as a replacement for the existing protocol of socio-political organization in the orchestra. But rather, spahlinger is more concerned here with “making the aesthetic implications of a specific means of production

audible” (*Ibid.*).¹² The revolution need not be filled with blood and violence; what would be revolutionary in the modern orchestra, however (if it were indeed possible), is the empowerment and responsabilization of the individual voice within the larger collective.

While it is not the goal of this project to improve the working conditions of the orchestral musician (although that too is something that should be done [spahlinger in Heuer 2009, video]), *doppelt bejaht* offers two dozen studies for the development and exploration of a context in which all individuals involved in the performance of the work have the otherwise extremely rare freedom to make creative decisions (*Entscheidungsfreiheit*) about the production are engaged in, and more importantly, decisions which inevitably have a direct and recognizable impact on the aesthetic result, i.e. on the nature of the work itself. However, there is no pre-determined, abstract right or wrong decision here; what is “right” can only be determined from within a concrete musical context and only at the moment when the musician enters this context and faces the decision. As the role of the musicians in the production is no longer restricted to playing exactly – no more, no less – what the composer has individually notated for them, under the regulating baton of the conductor, each and every one of them must be willing to assume the risks of this decision-making process.

One might feel that, complementary to the obvious socio-political implications of this artistic proposal, the sonic and performative richness that this freedom offers should provide ample motivation for the musicians to be enthusiastic about taking the risks mentioned above. Perhaps the comparison is slightly forced, but maybe it is not entirely inappropriate to consider what the performer is asked to do in *doppelt bejaht* as a radicalized form of the freedom of interpretation and decision-making responsibility that we have long come to expect from a string quartet performance. They are offered an opportunity to emancipate themselves from the constraints intimately coupled with the hierarchical organization of the production and presentation of musical works and to participate directly in the creative process as conscious, willing collaborators. Alas, inevitably perhaps, there are those who aren’t interested in emancipation – “Ich will aber gar nicht befreit

¹¹ See Köhler 2009 for more on the inherently inflexible socio-political structure of the orchestra.

¹² “Mir kommt es eigentlich viel mehr an, auf die ästhetischen Implikationen hörbar zu machen, die eine ganz bestimmte Produktionsweise hat.”

werden!”¹³ – and who are quite content to acquiesce to the status quo, seeing nothing fundamentally wrong with a social and performance protocol that has been in place for over 200 years, despite the many fundamental musical and social developments that have occurred over the same period. While freedom is not something that can or even should be forced on anyone – indeed that would bankrupt the very concept of freedom! – the mechanisms of a generalized aversion to it in today’s orchestral musician merit closer inspection.

The Case of the Orchestral Musician, or: A Professional Problem

There are a number of factors that would understandably lead to such an aversion. The first, and the one that surfaces the most readily in *doppelt bejaht*, is that musicians entering a position in an orchestra are quite simply not trained to make these sorts of decisions and do not expect to be asked to do so in the course of their work. Consider that an actor takes singing and dance lessons as integral parts of their studies, because sometimes in the course of their work they will need to sing or dance, and that a dancer takes acting and possibly some music lessons for the same reasons; both are also familiarized throughout the course of the studies with the classical as well as the modern works of their respective art forms. The Classical musician, on the other hand, is trained only in musical matters: in summary, how to read what is written in their scores and to reproduce it correctly according to performance standards that are more or less fixed according to genre. They do not expect to be given choices pertaining to the performance of a work such as what to play or how to play it and very rarely encounter works that make such demands. There is no comprehensive training in improvisation for musicians heading for a career in the orchestra, nor are there complementary composition courses to help them decipher the works they play. On average, the classically trained performing musician will have taken some basic courses in analysis, but will hardly, if at all, encounter very recent works there; the focus will most surely be on Classical music, perhaps with music by

composers such as Bartók, Schoenberg and maybe even Webern representing the “modern music” segment of the course.

It is these Classically trained musicians that enter the workforce and take up chairs on the orchestra stage. And the problem does not necessarily disappear for the musicians who do indeed have broader experience in creative decision-making than they would gain from the standard music programme, whether because they also perform contemporary chamber music or have, on their own initiative, acquired a more complete background than the standard musical training offers – in the position of orchestral musician, they are almost never called upon to use these talents. The Artistic Director of the orchestra decides on the programme for the season and someone in the administration has the job of telling the musicians what pieces will be played in the coming year as well as when they will be rehearsed and performed. The score tells the musicians which notes to play and when to play them in relation to the conductor’s baton movements and the conductor tells the musicians when he prefers to have the tempo or the dynamics of an instrument or group of instruments played differently than written in the score. This ubiquitous performance protocol and its putrefied social hierarchy, by and large the situation even for the majority of the newest works for orchestra, effectively inhibits – and even prohibits! – on a continual basis the expression of the individual musician’s talents and experiences.

There is perhaps reason to believe this could change in coming years. Not because we can expect the musical education institution as a whole to take the initiative to comprehensively re-evaluate and overhaul their programmes,¹⁴ not because more and more contemporary composers are composing music that demands such changes, but because the profile of the professional musician is changing. The level of familiarity with different styles of music that musicians had at the start of their careers 30 years ago is incomparable to that of musicians fresh out of the conservatory today; they have immeasurably more music “in their ears” than their more senior colleagues.

The orchestra is first and foremost a political body; after that, perhaps, a musical one!

¹³ “But I don’t want to be liberated at all!” –Mathias Fischer, second violinist for nearly 30 years in the SWR Orchestra, during a podium discussion preceding the opening concert at Donaueschingen 2009.

¹⁴ There are, however, individual changes here and there, but these are isolated. For example, in 2004, conductor Peter Eötvös founded the Eötvös Peter Contemporary Music Foundation, which builds on previous initiatives of the International Eötvös Institute Foundation in promoting expertise and broadening knowledge about New Music amongst conductors and musicians. More recently, at the Frankfurt music conservatory, a new course teaching performance praxis in new music has just been implemented which is mandatory for *all* musicians, taught by ensemble recherche founding member and Arditti Quartet cellist, Lucas Fels.

Due in part to the omnipresence of advertising, televisions, smartphones, YouTube and such, today's new orchestra recruit enters the workforce immersed in all sorts of music that they are not normally exposed to in the hallowed confines of the Western music institutions. The astonishing range of rock styles blaring in film and television advertising, and electroacoustic and even noise music in film soundtracks are some obvious examples of widespread accessibility. This alone by no means guarantees a generation of more skilled or dedicated musicians, but it is not an insignificant point in regards to the potential capacity they might have to appreciate and have an interest in music from a wider variety of backgrounds and sources than they will have encountered over the course of their musical education.

On the other hand, one thing that today's younger and older musician do have in common is that their studies have in no way prepared them sufficiently to convincingly perform the range of musical styles they will come across in their musical lifetime on the stage, i.e. as *professional musicians*.¹⁵ Much of what the orchestral musician learns today about the various musical and conceptual strands, concerns and fetishes of New Music composers is actually learned during rehearsals of works the orchestra has never performed before. "A fantastic job," one might claim, "I could only dream of being blessed with so much on-the-job training, and well paid, at that!" But unfortunately, this training is framed in a rigid temporal framework that allows little room for personal (musical) development, and is entirely indifferent to the inevitable variations in the learning curves of the orchestra's 70-odd individual musicians. Further complicating the matter is the fact that orchestral musicians do not as a rule – with fortunate exceptions! – take their parts home to continue learning new works outside of the already chronically insufficient rehearsal time.

If this is already a significant problem for musicians in small to medium ensembles, the situation is far more

Freedom

It is not difficult to imagine the impact this deplorable situation can have on the quality of the presentation of new orchestral works. In requiring musicians to make the

distressing in the case of orchestral musicians, who typically spend significantly less time rehearsing than their chamber music counterparts for music of the same duration. There is a schedule to keep, and so the machine moves forward, completely indifferent to the progress of the individual musician's unique personal and professional journey. And when the time comes, the musicians take their position on stage, the baton is raised and the performance begins, ready or not.

As if that didn't complicate the potential for a convincing performance of new works enough, consider that many new orchestral works today rarely see a second performance, and when they do, it is not usually with the same orchestra as at the premiere. Each time the work is performed anew, the same painfully incomplete learning process begins from scratch. It is indeed wonderful for the interested public to be able to hear brand new works at each and every festival event they attend, but this puts enormous demands on an already stressed milieu. This is even more absurd when one considers that the central function of the vast majority of orchestras today is to play works of a long gone past; New Music is a sideline, not their core focus.

This fetishization of the premiere would seem to be more acute in France than in Germany, perhaps due in part to the much greater degree of cultural centralization in the former, in contrast to the existence of various relatively similar-sized "islands" of cultural activities in the latter.¹⁶ In a private conversation, Colin Roche, Artistic Director of Paris-based Ensemble l'Itinéraire, spoke last year about the problems of creating programmes for the ensemble to perform outside of their homebase that do not feature world premieres or first performances of a work in France. Further, the proposition of a programme elsewhere in the country that "has already been played in Paris" is often met with unenthusiastic and almost insulted response. —————◆

types of creative decisions discussed above, works such as *doppelt bejaht* expose, by their very existence, the systemic flaws in "the case of the orchestral musician." One can easily understand the orchestral musician's hesitation, or even unwillingness to contribute any sort

¹⁵ This and the following points are obviously moot for the orchestra which plays no New Music at all.

¹⁶ Around 18% of France's inhabitants live in the Paris metropole, with the country's next largest centres, Marseille and Lyon, each representing less than 2.5% of its population. Compare that to Germany's largest population concentrations: the Ruhr metro area (an industrial urban agglomerate) contains some 6.5% of the country's population, Berlin around 4% and several other German cities each represent around 3.5% of the population.

of “individual expression” to the performance of a new work. With the musicians scattered around the perimeter of the room and the public free to move about during the performance, even able to approach the musicians and stand at a distance of less than two meters from them, the listener is given the chance to scrutinize the performance of individual musicians with a degree of intimacy that is virtually impossible in a “normal” orchestral setting. The flagrant inadequacies in the system are exposed via the individual musician and there is a risk that a flaw of any sort could be perceived by the listeners as being the fault of the musician, rather than of the production machine, or the “Orchestral Institution”, as composer and conductor Michael Gielen¹⁷ referred to it in 1975 (Köhler 2009, 8).

Given the inherently problematic situation of the orchestra in relation to the potential for individual creative input from its members, it comes as no surprise that there are musicians who “don’t want to be liberated,” especially when confronted with the implications of this particular artistic context. The exposure of the individual musician’s responsibility in the global result increases and decreases in direct proportion to the degree of “freedom” the musicians have in performing the various parts of spahlinger’s orchestral studies. This is a crucial point, as it is to the conductor alone that this particular area of responsibility is normally delegated. Even in cases where a conductor is ostensibly not needed (most orchestras today could effortlessly play many Classical works without a conductor), it is not the individual musician who holds the responsibility for the presentation and performance of the piece. But in *doppelt bejaht*, the seventh second violinist is elevated – subito! – to the same position as the Konzertmeister (whose privileged position has been liquidated along with that of the conductor’s). The centuries-old hierarchy of the musical body formerly known as the orchestra is suddenly neutralized and the responsibility for the “success” of the performance of the work is spread amongst a body of musicians who are not equipped to deal with such responsibilities.

On the surface, this might seem like a fairly radical proposition, but to be clear, before any naysayers burst forth with reactionary uproar claiming this kind of “freedom” constitutes “musical Bolshevism” or that only “anarchy” (a term too often misappropriated to imply

total disorder¹⁸) can result, it is important to emphasize that what is proposed here is not a merciless overthrow and dismantling of the institution – even if there are some who feel that “pulling the plug” would be the most appropriate solution for a cancerous institution riddled with so many seemingly irreversible and unresolvable complications. spahlinger’s *doppelt bejaht* proposes rather to situate the musicians within a democratic musical context where each and every musician is free to actively contribute to the creative presentation of the work using his or her own individual and personal talents, skills and experiences. In other words, the concept of freedom is not an unrestricted authorization for the musicians to do “whatever they want to do.” Inherent to this emancipation is the expectation that the musician will make professional, informed artistic decisions within a context in which they were formerly expected to slavishly play everything the composer and conductor dictated. Indeed, freedom has its responsibilities.

The Freedom to Decide to be Free

Journalist Claus Spahn has suggested that the performance of *doppelt bejaht* failed in its intentions of mobilizing the musicians into an emancipated state of being:

The working classes turn their backs on promises of freedom, and, shaking their heads, step into line to begin their shift like well-behaved workers.¹⁹ (Spahn 2009)

Despite the banal cynicism of the image, the analogy does draw attention to the idea that in order to be truly emancipated, the worker must actually desire some sort of freedom from the life they are forced to lead as an exploited worker, no matter how utopic it may seem. More importantly, he or she must be willing and eager to actively participate in the process of his or her own emancipation. But (again making the problematic transposition of the situation of the factory worker to that of the orchestral musician), as Mathias Fischer’s unabashed declaration so perfectly illustrates, this is not always true. There is no reason to think that the life of each and every orchestral musician should be functionally different from that of any other working class member of society who has been in the same job for two or more decades and lost enthusiasm for it half so many years ago. The daily routine may in fact be strikingly similar: wake up, slog begrudgingly to work,

¹⁷ Gielen was later conductor for the SWR Sinfonieorchester in Freiburg 1986–98.

¹⁸ Journalist Mirko Weber (2009), for example.

¹⁹ “Die arbeitende Klasse quittiert die Freiheitsverheißung mit Kopfschütteln und zieht es vor, auch weiterhin brav zur Schicht anzutreten.”

stretch out the coffee breaks as much as possible, goof off and disturb other colleagues in between meagre patches of concentrated work, complain about or even mock the boss or other colleagues behind their backs, protest indignantly when obliged to learn something new, and when the shift is over, go home, crack open a brew and watch a film or go out to eat with a partner or friends... Start. Play. Stop. Repeat. “Learn something new on my free time to perform better on the job?” one might ask. “With no change in my pay rate or working conditions? And no promotion possible? You aren’t serious, are you?!” The orchestra is a large and extremely diverse body of individuals and it should not come as a surprise if some of them are not exactly bursting with enthusiasm for the work they do, let alone for every single piece they are told they will perform.

But then again, to be fair and objective, this generalized lethargy and lack of motivation amongst orchestral musicians in regards to their own “freedom” is also, without a doubt, partly a product of their environment – the orchestral institution and musician exist in a symbiotic relationship of powerlessness to change or make changes. Nevertheless, before simply declaring the concept of professional artistic freedom in the individual orchestral musician bankrupt, a somewhat broader perspective needs to be considered than that endorsed by journalists such as Spahn, who seems to feel that the success, or rather the “failure” of *doppelt bejaht* as a socio-political entity can be measured by such superficial criteria as it not being awarded the “popular prize” by the musicians of the orchestra. Perhaps he imagines the musicians having the power to punish the composer for not being able to change the system they are an integral part of: “No emancipation for us, no reward for you.”²⁰ The situation of the orchestra today is far too complex to be judged by one performance of one piece by one orchestra. While every revolution is retroactively characterised by a singular event, a critical juncture beyond which “the course of history was changed,” such

an event is but one component of a much broader series of developments that extends in time far beyond the juncture itself. From this perspective, it really doesn’t matter if the SWR Orchestra’s musicians woke up the day after the premiere feeling smashingly emancipated or not. Considering the complexity of the situation as discussed above, the effect that this work has had and will continue to have on the milieu’s understanding of and sympathy with the question of the individual musician’s creative role in the modern-day orchestra can clearly not be understood solely from its performance at the 2009 edition of the Donaueschingen Musiktage.

As has been discussed elsewhere, some of the “May ’68 generation” of composers already denounced the “antidemocratic character of the orchestra structure” some 40 years ago.²¹ The reasons for the supposed “failure” of that generation of composers to successfully bring about widespread changes in the orchestral institution are numerous and complex. Perhaps too many attempts to implement “freedom” in the orchestra have had an aggressive, hierarchically structured approach, the solution too closely resembling the problem. Emancipation will most likely fail if implemented using force, manipulation or trickery from the top down – i.e. when the “oppressor” obliges the “oppressed” to be free.²² Perhaps too few composers have regarded the means to their livelihood with a sufficiently critical stance and have thus, through their implicit resignation, inadvertently colluded in maintaining the status quo of the orchestral institution. There are also undoubtedly composers who, like Fischer, are more than content with the current situation. In any case, whatever the reasons, although many of the fundamental problems that fired debates in the early 1970s about this centuries-old institution can still be seen to exist today, the musical background and experience of the average orchestral musician is incomparable, there are 40 more years of New Music feeding critical thinking about the situation, and therefore the means by which the questions are

²⁰ It should also be emphasized that the attribution of a prize in the arts milieu is always part of a complex socio-political situation and process, and should by no means be understood as representing an objective and singular measure of the artistic value of the work to which the prize was awarded.

²¹ See Köhler 2009 for a discussion in this regard of several orchestral works from the early 1970s, esp. Vinko Globokar’s *Das Orchester* (1974).

²² For example, musicians playing Vinko Globokar’s *Das Orchester* (1974) were given the option of having things they preferred not to play replaced in the performance with a recording of an interview the composer would hold with them in which they were asked to explain why they refused to play said music. In the end, all musicians played everything that was written (Köhler 2009, 9).

raised – in musical as well as socio-political terms – must also be reflective of these innumerable changes. This would already be a sign of progress, if not in the orchestral institution itself, at least in the thinking of the members of the milieu:

doppelt bejaht distinguishes itself from earlier orchestral concepts also by the fact that it does not exhaust itself in the pedagogically, politically or psycho-socially motivated emancipation of the orchestral musician from the lashes of the composer and conductor, but is geared towards a mature, concert-ripe presentation whose sonority – symphonic opulence, in the end – the public experiences just as well as the dynamics of the coordination and regulating mechanisms between the musicians.²³ (Nonnenmann 2009, 47)

It would be myopic to claim that “the revolution didn’t work” because no momentous metamorphosis in the orchestral institution has yet been seen. If composers today still find such critique as was discussed in the early 1970s relevant, it is hardly because the discussion is “out-moded” or anachronistic (Weber 2009), but rather because the revolution has not yet occurred, or more precisely, it is still in progress but perhaps still only in its early developmental stages. The importance of such critique even today is substantiated, not to mention given significant weight, by virtue of the fact that an institution such as Donaueschingen Musiktage – an institution whose very existence depends on, or at least is built around, the orchestra – proposed the issue of revolutionizing the orchestra as a central theme in 2009. Progress is now perhaps measurable, but it might be that another generation of engaged composers, musicians, festival directors and all other actors in the machine will be needed before lasting changes will be seen, before the entire milieu is ready on all fronts for its own Quiet Revolution²⁴ and all it implies. Until such a time, every composer who writes uncritically for the traditional form (at) of the orchestra, every musician who goofs off during the already chronically insufficient rehearsal time for a

new work or revolts against learning new pieces or techniques, every critic who desecrates more profound reflection on the thorny issues of the orchestral institution with superficial comments about composers’ political beliefs or personality²⁵ – and thereby exposes their own incapacity or lack of desire for a richer understanding of the complex situation –, every festival director who only programmes the “classics” of New Music or other “accessible” works contributes to the maintenance of this mediocre situation, in which the orchestral machine lags far behind the state of the music it attempts to play correctly on stage.

The concept of “freedom” is not to be understood here as some sort of absolute state of existence, a black and white contrast between total liberation and total subservience. It is rather a sliding scale concept always considered within and in relation to a specific context. Some contexts encourage or even require a greater degree or a different nature of freedom than others, such is the variety found in *doppelt bejaht*. Indeed, spahlinger is aware of the complexity of both the concept of freedom and the process a musician needs to go through to achieve it: “freiheit will geübt sein” [freedom must be rehearsed] (spahlinger 2009, 38). It is not something that appears with the wave of a magic baton, as some journalists seem to have interpreted the composer’s comments and writing on the issues. These “orchestral studies” are a proposition that are, as a whole, a decades-old reflection of the complexity of the situation, which cannot be changed via a single performance:

i see absolutely nothing exclusive here, as if this were the only true way. there are numerous problems in numerous forms in new music, problems which demand the most diverse manners of resolution.²⁶ (spahlinger 2009, 38)

The work can be understood and appreciated as a grouping of 24 individual studies of various concepts and processes typical to New Music, but more importantly, it ultimately positions itself as a collection of studies of

²³ “Von früheren Orchesterkonzepten unterscheidet sich *doppelt bejaht* auch dadurch, dass es sich nicht in der pädagogisch, politisch oder psycho-sozial motivierten Emanzipation der Orchestermusiker von der Knute des Komponisten und Dirigenten erschöpft, sondern auf eine konzertreife Präsentation zielt, deren Klanglichkeit – einschließlich symphonischer Opulenz – sich dem Publikum genauso mitteilt wie die Kybernetik der Steuer- und Regelungsvorgänge zwischen den Musikern.”

²⁴ *La révolution tranquille* was a movement during the 1960s in the province of Québec, Canada during which power was wrested from the Catholic Church and widespread reforms in the social, economic and educational structure were implemented. The Church as institution was not dismantled, but the power structure it reigned over was radically overhauled, as was, accordingly, its role in society.

²⁵ Mirko Weber (2009) suggested that the composer “still had a little Lenin in him” (!), while Kirsten Unseld (2009a) for some reason felt it was relevant to devote an entire paragraph in a very short commentary to the red scarf worn by the composer.

²⁶ “ich sehe darin keineswegs, exklusiv, so etwas wie den einzig wahren weg. probleme in der neuen musik gibt es viele und vielgestaltige, die auf die unterschiedlichsten weisen bearbeitet werden wollen.”

how an individual musician might find his or her own version of freedom within a social, political and artistic context that is so fundamentally flawed, across so many layers of its existence, and that is consciously built to be so impenetrable as to virtually prevent any such freedoms from developing. The orchestral musician is, in the end, free as an individual to decide to join this “revolution” and to accept this personal and professional challenge, this freedom with liabilities [*responsibilisierte Freiheit*] and all it implies.

Works such as *doppelt bejaht* and others that call into question not so much the existence of the orchestra as its form and function stand as beacons, as reminders of the little progress that has been made in the past 40 years and as a rallying call for more important changes in the orchestral institution. In time, such calls will supersede in number and importance the signs of resignation that are rampant today in the milieu of this almost impenetrable institution and real progress will begin to be more measurable.

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