

Songs from the hill and elsewhere

Composer talk with Nikolaus Gerszewski, moderated by György Bartok.

GB: Welcome to this virtual concert. Before the works will be performed, we will have a conversation. Sitting next to me is Nikolaus Gerszewski, visual artist, teacher, and composer, and I am going to ask him about the works that will be presented here. We already know each other, we have an ensemble together, but we have never before talked publicly like this.

So you make music as a visual artist; at least I like to see it that way. How do you draw the connection?

NG: I haven't worked as a visual artist in a while. I kind of switched the artistic 'gender' and have become a composer. I think the difference between me and a 'real' composer is, that I have no musical education. I work with homemade systems and methods.

GB: Since the 2nd half of the 20th century, quite a few composers have written music in this manner; using their own systems and methods; among these, several ones came from other fields of art, like Xenakis, Cage, and others. At this point, the question arises, what can they contribute, from that what they have gained somewhere else. With you, as I see it, one of those things is the aesthetics of your notation, even before the music sounds, the visuality of the score. The other thing I realized, regarding the foundation of the systems; not the immediate sound, also not the system of the sounds, but the spaciality, or the organization of structure... Now correct me.

NG: There is nothing to correct. I'd say, anyone who has ever visited a university of visual arts, knows, that they don't teach craftsmanship there anymore; they teach conceptual thinking. In conceptual art, craftsmanship doesn't have a place. All that matters is, that the work is thoroughly thought through. the rest is routine. In contrast, in the world of contemporary classical music, craftsmanship is still pretty much amplified. As if it were not possible to compose otherwise, or even as if craftsmanship itself were the actual art. I think that is the basic difference.

GB: I am still searching for the next question, because this is a difficult subject matter. What we have talked about so far, are generally the issues of 20th century music. However this is 21st century music. How does it appear, or how does it turn out, and to what degree. These methods like open form, mobile form, self imposed systems, appeared already in the 1950s. So in the 21st century, what else can we contribute.

NG: For once, in these pieces I don't even use open- or mobile forms.

GB: That's true, but we have already played together pieces of yours that apply mobile forms, and even the present pieces are closely related, in terms of how the process determines the music, the way the rhythm, the tunes, the whole procedure is organized; except that it is not a mobile form, but a linearly notated form.

NG: I don't know about 20th or 21st century. I don't think in narrow time intervals. I would claim that we are still in the Post-Cage-Continuum. Maybe what has changed, is, that composing in that fashion has become somewhat more natural, than it still was at the end of the 20th century. It has become more accepted, on festivals, and elsewhere. It doesn't have to oppose conventional composition anymore. We have a more natural relationship to this kind of approach; which I'd like to label as 'unconditional'. Even in the universities the situation may have changed a bit, at least in the West.

GB: What do you mean by 'natural' and 'oppose', could you elaborate?

NG: You don't need a manifesto, or some giant theory, in order to justify what you're doing. You may simply do it. You don't even have to deal with the question whether it is music or not. I structure sounds, that's what I'm doing, and I'm doing it in my own way.

GB: Finally I understand. But I have run out of questions. These conversations usually last an hour, or longer, but now we have a different frame. Even if there is still some time...

NG: I think we should talk a little bit about Chris Newman.

GB: Then you will have to talk, since I don't know him. How did you guys meet?

NG: I met him in Berlin, when I was living there. It was in 2012, when our two song cycles 'songs from the hill' and 'Modest songs' were premiered at Sammlung Hoffmann. The 'Modest songs' are actually derived from a composition by Modest Mussorgsky, I don't know which one.

Like me, Chris Newman is also a painter and a composer. He is about 10 years older, and he is still a figure of the 20th century. He studied composition in Cologne, with Kagel, and he personally knew Cage, Feldman and others. He is pretty much at home in 20th century experimental music.

I very much admire his music, particularly the songs, and particularly the 'Modest songs'. I think I've heard four or five of his cycles, and this one has always been my favourite.

What I particularly admire is his immediacy. Both the words and the music seem to simply pour out of him; there is no filter. You need a great deal of courage for that, and also talent. You have to be very self confident. He simply writes it down, I think he doesn't even correct it; at maximum he throws away what he doesn't like. He doesn't mess around with it, he writes it down in the way it comes out, and it is usually good.

Another reason, why I find him important, is the fact that he perfectly finds the balance between sc. high art and low art. Many have made their attempts with that, and it usually comes out pretty awkwardly; like the Pop musician who hires the London Symphony Orchestra, or the bad boy composer who applies a distorted electric guitar. With Newman this is not even an issue; the balance is structural, with both the lyrics and the music. He is equally at home in both worlds. Already in the 1980s, when he was studying composition with Kagel, he had been the frontman of the Punk band Janet Smith (you can find them on youtube).

Apart from that, he is perhaps less a conceptual composer, but still one who applies his homemade procedures. I would label him as 'post-tonal', which is already an exceptional position.

As I see it, in 20th and 21st century classical music, there are hardly any good songwriters. In Pop music you have plenty, but the song format itself somehow doesn't get along very well with modern compositional techniques, like the series, or noise structures. The way he solves it, is, to make use of the pool of classical music, as a material source; in this case it is Mussorgsky, at another time it may be Beethoven, or Schubert; and he cuts these materials together and combines them. This way there is always a built-in-tonality, but it is twisted.

GB: When I said we should finish, it would have been a perfect moment, but now I have so many questions, that we would have enough to talk about until tomorrow. May I propose, confused as we are, to just get on with it. Let the concert begin.