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Philosophy Recomposed: Stanley Cavell and the Critique of New Music

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Abstract Stanley Cavell's 1965 article "Music Discomposed" argues that modernist works have become codependent on the philosophical justification surrounding their production and consumption. The writings and compositions of two contemporary composers, György Ligeti and Helmut Lachenmann, echo this argument, confronting the role of criticism as a responsibility the modernist object bears toward a skeptical listener. Ligeti's *Apparitions* (1959) deals specifically with serialism as both a modernist legacy and a hindrance to the composer's "seriousness and . . . sincerity" that Cavell considers of central importance to modernist art. It functions as a metaphor *in se*, representing Cavell's hypothetical example of a solution to a compositional problem that "has become identical with the aesthetic result itself." Lachenmann's *Kontrakadenz* (1970–71) concerns itself with the strained relation of artwork and audience in an era that demands an unprecedented trust in the musical object. It thus engages its audience in its own critical project, in an open dialogue with traditional forms and functions. Both works suggest that modernist music can escape the cycle of justification between the musical object and its analysis only when the object itself acknowledges the dangers inherent in the modernist situation and engages its audience directly in its risky endeavor.

STANLEY CAVELL'S 1967 ARTICLE "Music Discomposed" famously uses the situation of modernist, postwar music as a limit case for the difficulties posed by modern art in general. In this essay, I reexamine the assumptions of the original article before discussing how two composers from that era, György Ligeti and Helmut Lachenmann, confronted the situation Cavell diagnoses as his central argument: that modernist works have become codependent on the philosophical justification surrounding their production and consumption. Each composer offered detailed verbal support for his music, although I will suggest that Lachenmann and Ligeti offered their strongest critiques within their music. The self-reflective structures of two compositions that flank the 1960s, *Apparitions* (1959) and *Kontrakadenz* (1970–71), accept the role of criticism as a responsibility the modernist object bears toward a skeptical listener. Yet the structure and perceived intention of each work illustrate a slightly different aspect of Cavell's argument. Ligeti's *Apparitions* deals specifically with serialism and "total organization" as both a modernist legacy and a

hindrance to the composer's intentions, the "seriousness and . . . sincerity" that Cavell considers of central importance to modernist art (Cavell 1969b, 228). Lachenmann's *Kontrakadenz* concerns itself with the strained relation of artwork and audience in an era that demands an unprecedented trust in the musical object, "knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed" (Cavell 1969a, 188). Both works suggest that modernist music can escape the cycle of justification between the musical object and its analysis only when the object itself acknowledges the dangers inherent in the modernist situation and engages its audience directly in its risky endeavor.

Cavell's "Music Discomposed"

Cavell first explores what it means to experience art, before explaining why modern art is qualitatively different from anything preceding it. His definition invokes Kant and puts the question of value up front. For Cavell, art by definition demands formal criticism and judgment, activities separate from the content of aesthetics. And art is purposive, as revealed by a structure that presumes intention, which explains our experience of certain works as "perfectly realized, or contrived, or meretricious" (Cavell 1969a, 181). From the outset, then, Cavell implicates a dialogue between artist and critic, as the latter searches for philosophical justification regarding "why the thing is as it is." He goes on to consider these questions of judgment and intention with respect to the condition of music in contemporary society. The historical succession of style is irreversible, he argues, less because of anything inherent in the art object itself than because of its position in a historical and social context. As opposed to earlier eras, the twentieth century subjected all of history to its withering gaze and rewrote it from constantly shifting vantage points. Thus, the modern places an even greater burden on the critic-philosopher of art, who must mediate the relations among a modernist work, its audience, and traditional art in light of the "experience of the modern" (184).

Cavell avers that the experience of the modern has become particularly alienating for new music, a condition he analyzes by examining the discourse surrounding contemporary music.¹ This discourse, he argues, is symptomatic of the Promethean "burden of modernism" and corresponds to a situation in which the ideological and technical concerns composers must employ to have a seat at the modernist table "themselves insure that their work will not be comprehensible to an audience" (1969a, 187). The experience of the modern in music is unique for Cavell as it alone among the arts has a specialized, technical vocabulary for description. This fact seems to go hand in hand with a lack of critical engagement, "as though music has never quite become one

¹ Stephanie Ross picks up where Cavell left off and concludes that music's lack of representational content answers the question of why it, among all the arts, is at

such a disadvantage in the modern era. In Ross's view, composers "cannot reinvigorate old forms with new meaning because music has no meaning per se" (1985, 33).

of the facts of life, but shunts between an overwhelming directness and an overweening mystery” (187). As avatars of this divide within the new music community of the 1960s, the music journals *Die Reihe* and *Perspectives of New Music* vacillated between abstract philosophy and technical description. The dichotomy between mathematical analysis and “a mild or protracted cough of philosophy” provides Cavell with textbook examples of modernist anxiety (185). Rather than describe a work by means that are both accessible to an audience and respect that work’s particularity, the composer-critic is caught in a vicious cycle of rule-bound validation, one based on criteria outside the actual experience of the work itself.² New music journals thus usurp the role of the art they celebrate, by attempting to compose an artistic community in disarray by fiat. This role reversal puts a heavy burden on the critic, who is forced to serve as detective, lawyer, and judge “in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike” (191).

For Cavell, there are no empirical, much less philosophical, guarantors for the value of art, the assessment of which relies on experience and a kind of knowledge “in feeling,” borne by conviction but resistant to prescription or prediction. J. M. Bernstein (2003, 122) calls this merger of orders of fact and orders of feeling an “expressive empirical order,” a sensibility that—in the modern age—is threatened by the collapse of traditional authority, the belief that meaning is correlative to convention, and the dominance of a reductive naturalism.³ Thus, the modern artist and critic in essence face the same task: “Describing one’s experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it” (Cavell 1969a, 193). Critic/composers like Ernst Krenek who shoulder this responsibility imply that new works cannot stand on their own, but are necessarily codependent on the philosophical justification of producing and consuming such art. Cavell dissects Krenek’s essay on serial techniques (Krenek 1960) to reveal the contemporary composer as a tragic figure, the artist who has sold his soul to the impersonal mechanism of the serial method to escape the greater burden of history, the inability to “feel any idea as his own” (Cavell 1969a, 196). Because the ability to judge and know art is inseparable from a personal “sense” of it, Krenek’s embrace of the unexpected undermines his dual identities as artist and critic. As if an agent of fate within a classic tragedy, he finds his choices have but the appearance of will and result in consequences he could never

2 Drawing on a Lacanian critical vocabulary, we might say these journals revealed the split subject of modernism through their appeal to the paternal rule of law and its unavoidable surplus, that willful excess that cannot be accounted for by symbolic analysis but that remains bound to it nonetheless.

3 Cavell’s idea that artworks are “*known by feeling*” becomes the central tenet of Diana Raffman 1993, elaborated most fully in the third chapter, “Does Music Mean

What It Cannot Say?” In a later work, Raffman marshals both Richard Taruskin and Cavell to support a rather dubious argument: that some compositions of John Cage, along with “twelve-tone music,” are not art, because they do not communicate “pitch-related musical feeling experiences” (2003, 86).

foresee. Alienated from the experience of making art grounded in personal intention, Krenek knows not who or what might be considered fraudulent in this perilous new world.

Taken as a whole, the discourse surrounding contemporary music reveals that the risks of fraudulence and trust are endemic to the experience of contemporary music and, by extension, art in general. Cavell asks us to accept fraudulence as not only a possibility but also a necessary part of our experience of the modern. Rather than unmask imposters, he invites the critic to present something about the object itself, to convey a kind of experiential knowledge based not on empirical certitude but on conviction. The arcane procedures that Krenek resorts to in his late music are substitutes for “the real satisfaction of knowledge,” one that relies on our presuming that something more than empty forms and procedures lies behind the work (Cavell 1969a, 205). Cavell elsewhere calls this type of satisfaction “acknowledgment,” a special concept of knowledge that moves beyond certainty to express—in essence, to exhibit—the object of knowledge itself (1969c, 258–59). The early critiques of “Music Discomposed” by Monroe Beardsley and Joseph Margolis objected to the notion of fraudulence, and—assuming the article as an actual critique of modernist music—proposed categorical criteria for judging art. Yet in his response, “A Matter of Meaning It,” Cavell stood firm on his central thesis. His ethical notion of the artwork, as a projection of an artist’s intention and sincerity, leads directly to his assertion that the *classification* of modernist art is bound up firmly with its *evaluation*. What counts for form or content in a work cannot be understood apart from that work’s address to an audience or a critic. If form and content are never neutral, never passive receptacles of meaning, then neither is the audience passive in their grip. In the words of Timothy Gould, Cavell discards conventional ideas of form and reconceives it as a “medium of knowledge and power.” “The form of the work,” Gould writes, “is what presents itself as *active* in that work: active in the work’s claim on an audience; active in its working out of the implications of a particular ‘content’ or element; and active in its relations with other members of a genre or medium of an art” (1998, 213).

This double bind—on the one hand, modernist art is left without a shared language or set of conventions ratified by history and tradition; on the other hand, no modernist work is an island: all such works *share* this condition—ensures that fraudulence remains a central problem in modernism. Yet the danger of fraudulence should not excuse us from engaging with contemporary art. Krenek’s description of his compositional method may suggest an aesthetic con, but it does not negate the fact that criticism and art, and philosophy and music, are now helplessly entwined, for this is the very condition of modernism.⁴ “Music Discomposed” calls instead for a

⁴ Francis Dauer (1990) attempts to found a theory of art on Cavell’s presentation of the circular relation between art and criticism.

self-reflective criticism, one aware of its power and the responsibility it bears toward both its object and its audience. Hence, Cavell's ideas have been cherry-picked by musicologists and other scholars calling for a "humane criticism" that might counteract the rampant positivism of Anglo-American music theory.⁵ Philosophers, on the other hand, tended to focus on the terms of Cavell's debate. Some opposed the definitions of authenticity and fraudulence—and their centrality to the modernist dilemma—outlined in "Music Discomposed," although Gould implies that what they may have been resisting were the problems of modernism itself.⁶

Ligeti's apparitions

Postwar music of the 1950s focused on the difficulty of the music itself, but in the 1960s composers came to terms with the dependence of new music on its philosophical justification, in a culture in which art became ever more divorced from its wider social context. György Ligeti dealt with this problem in a series of writings influenced by Theodor Adorno's ideal of the self-reflective, critical work, as filtered through the ostensibly pragmatic concerns of a vocational composer.⁷ For Ligeti as for Adorno, musical material was subject to both historical preshaping and contextual evaluation. For Adorno, this historical preshaping meant that musical materials were infused not only with remnants and echoes of earlier music but also with social and philosophical meaning—history "sedimented in the figurations in which the composer encounters the material" (Adorno 1930). Cavell shares a similar view: that all serious art arises from a struggle with its own past. Using painting as an exemplar, he writes, "What will count as a relevant change—is determined by the commitment to painting as an *art*, in struggle with the history which makes it an art, continuing and countering the conventions and intentions and responses which comprise that history" (1969b, 222).

In the late 1950s, Ligeti first became acquainted with Adorno's writings; during that time he composed his famous essay against integral serialism, "Metamorphoses of Music Form" (1960), and completed his first orchestral work, *Apparitions* (1958–59). *Apparitions* made its actual premiere at the International Society for Contemporary Music Festival in Cologne on June 19, 1960, and reviewer Everett Helm feared it might signify the end of

⁵ Early on, "Music Discomposed" was cited by Leo Treitler (1969, 5; 1982, 153) and Joseph Kerman (1980, 321), with Reed J. Hoyt (1985) going on the defensive. Yet Cavell's criticism did not go unacknowledged by theorists; see Maus 1988 and Lochhead 1998, 2009.

⁶ See Bearn 2000 for examples. Gould (2003, 66) writes that "nothing made Cavell's efforts to break down the barriers between philosophy and certain kinds of criticism more unpalatable to the very audience that might

otherwise have been sympathetic than his insistence that philosophy allow modernist art . . . to become a problem for modern philosophy."

⁷ Ligeti's fraught relation to Adorno is discussed in Ligeti 2007a and Thun 2006. A more memorable account appears in those letters to Ove Nordwall reprinted in the fourth chapter of Burde 1993. Marcus Zagorski (2005) gives a lucid account of Adorno's relation to the Darmstadt crowd in general.

“Occidental musical history” (1960, 243). Ligeti’s presentation of *Apparitions* to this audience, the same audience that read *Die Reihe* and was invested in the philosophical and ideological debates surrounding new music, took two apparently incompatible forms. One was a metaphorical description of the work as based on a childhood dream, wherein a huge spiderweb enveloped his bedroom, thwarting forward movement and trapping all manner of insect life (Ligeti 2007c).⁸ This highly charged image mapped eerie, isolated sound types to images of dying, monstrous life set in an unregulated, stream-of-consciousness-like flow.⁹ Ligeti ties the morbid connotations of this image to a description of the *Agitato*’s first movement: “The sonic structures recall the network of the dream, and the course of the form as a whole corresponds to the process of transformation to which the web was subjected” (1993, 165). The second description of form clarified the work’s debt to serial methods and rational construction. As Erkki Salmenhaara (1969, 62) notes, the work’s microdetails are determined by almost mechanically severe logic. According to the composer, the Golden Section in the form of the proportion 0.618 serves as the dominant formal principle on both the macro- and microstructure of the work, determining its overall form, as well as the relation of smaller formal elements.¹⁰

At first glance, Ligeti’s self-critique runs afoul of Cavell’s dictum, shifting between the “overwhelming directness and . . . overweening mystery” of empirical, quasi-scientific versus metaphorical description. Yet Ligeti’s use of the Golden Section to structure his work is anything but a display of Cavell’s “aesthetically and intellectually irrelevant . . . fearful scientism” that substitutes “precision for accuracy” (1969a, 208–9). Ligeti’s “quasi-serial” repertory of duration elements functions like a printer’s case of letters, with 127 different values identified by their duration in sixty-fourth notes. The compartment with the shortest values is equivalent to the printer’s box housing the most frequently used letters, while the compartment with the longest value contains only one “letter.” Thus thirty-second and sixteenth notes are used most frequently, as accents performed by pizzicato strings or massive clusters in piano, celesta, or harpsichord. In the musical world that Cavell outlined, where the future of a young composer seemed to depend on “choosing the



8 This version of the essay, published in the posthumous *Gesammelte Schriften*, is compiled from several variants, with the original written in 1960. Jonathan W. Bernard translated a previously published version as Ligeti 1993.

9 Martin Zenck (1987) identifies six serial sound types and their associations. Richard Steinitz (2003) discusses prior versions of *Apparitions* and includes a reproduction of a passage that indeed incorporated limited improvisation along the lines of Witold Lutoslawski’s “aleatory counterpoint.”

10 Ligeti 1983 (43, 131):

There are no true series in this, but there are predetermined formulae in the areas of rhythm, dynamics, timbre, pitch, compass, note density, character of motion, formal articulation. There is no single order governing all these areas together: the rhythmic relationships, for instance, are different from the dynamic relationships, and so on. But a relative unity is achieved through the manner in which the various areas are linked together, similar to a machine, which contains various components such as wheels, cogs, axles, belts, etc., the very diversity of which enables the whole apparatus to function as a unit.

right doctrine” (186), Ligeti’s rhythmic structure takes an artistic risk, substituting a statistical model based on letter frequency for the rule of a series with theoretically equivalent, if discrete, members. Born of an artistic conviction that any notional structure should “make its effect directly on the sensory level of musical perception,” the system of durations in *Apparitions* is intended to produce a “static and rhythmically balanced shape” independent of a variable syntax that could link these elements together (Ligeti 1983, 131, 133–34). The constantly changing articulations, dynamics, and instrumentation display similar, statistical arrangements. Forty-six individually notated strings follow twenty-two different performance directions that, alone and in combination, merge with twenty different dynamic markings. Figure 1 shows the carefully apportioned web of performance directions and dynamics that govern individual passages in the string section during movement 1. Five subsections (violin 1 and 2, viola, cello, and contrabass) are linked with a series of four separate performance categories:

- (1) The binary decision to mute or not (*con sordino* is indicated by the  branch, while *senza sordino* is represented by the  branch)
- (2) Seven separate options for vibrato or tremolo (including no direction, labeled n.d. in the graph)
- (3) Thirteen performance directions (some of which shift over the course of a passage)
- (4) Twenty-four different dynamic markings (some static and others that crescendo or decrescendo)

Without regard for simultaneous attacks, the seventy-six combinations follow a weighted proportional arrangement, in which five combinations appear four times, five appear three times, eight appear twice, and twenty-five appear only once. The “printer’s case” appears more clearly if we view dynamics alone: *p* appears ten times, while *ffff* and *pppp* appear eight times each; eleven dynamic markings appear only once. Although no single order governs all of these parameters, Ligeti compares them to a machine whose “very diversity . . . allows them to function as a unit” (1983, 131).

At the other end of the spectrum lies the metaphor of the spiderweb dream, which seems to belie the clinical care and complexity of *Apparitions*’s statistical design. Yet this metaphor has an express critical purpose: to convey an experience of the work that, in Cavell’s terms, can only be “known in sensing” (1969a, 191). The novel metaphor of a massive spiderweb depends on several sophisticated conceptual metaphors, mappings between, on the one hand, an underlying idea, image, or experience of the world—typically a concrete, visceral realm of experience—and, on the other, a separate experiential domain (see Bauer 2004). The web itself is understood as a source domain: a physical space in which each “knot,” “pillow,” “cavern,” and “immo-

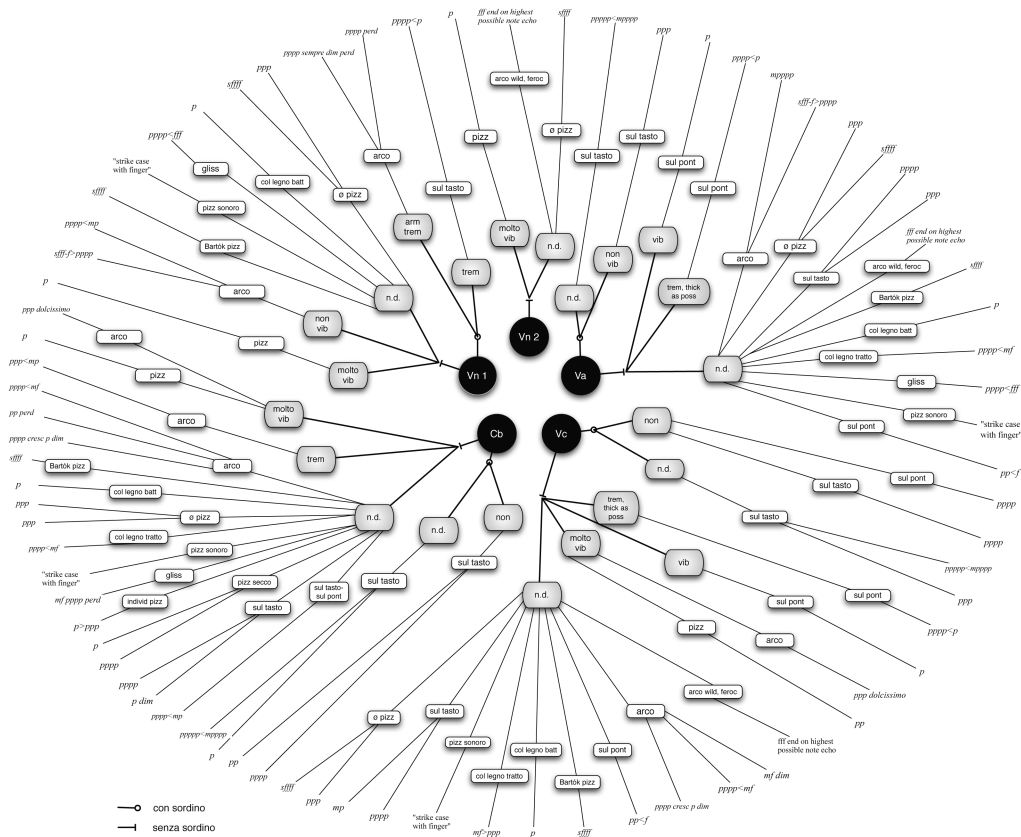


Figure 1. Performance directions and dynamics for strings in Ligeti's *Apparitions, I*

bilized insect" marks a location. Movement through that space manifests as a change in the condition of trapped objects; if alive, they struggle vainly to free themselves, but if dead or inert, they are merely acted upon. The web metaphor details the variable syntax of *Apparitions*, the intervals and pitch-specific pillar tones that link tightly packed clusters, "trapped insects" that hover between sound and noise, distinguished by orchestration, registral placement, and the presence or lack of internal movement. As described in "States, Events, Transformations," two types of clusters carry on a virtual dialogue, unfolding as if in antecedent-consequent relation, to imply "merely imaginary" syntactical connections (Ligeti 2007c, 171).¹¹ A feeble light flickers above the "little bed" where the dream's protagonist seeks escape, as a sign of hope and a metaphor for movement toward the high harmonics at the movement's close.

¹¹ See also discussions of this by Savage (1989, 88) and Salmenhaara (1969, 49).

This very specific metaphor conveys an ethereal melancholy, “the hopelessness of elapsing time,” as well as serving as a source that transfers the structure of an explicitly natural domain to the self-conscious and artificial realm of postserial music. The utility of this metaphor lies in its extensive entailments: assumptions about the target domain *Apparitions* implicitly derived from the spider dream as source. We are encouraged to see the two cluster types as organic objects, whose “delicate, resonant ‘textures’” possess corporeal qualities. The opening Agitato establishes the first of Ligeti’s many static forms, meant to induce an illusion of “frozen time” (Ligeti 1988, 9). This is not the clear, crystalline beauty of Anton Webern’s symmetrical web structures, which Ligeti also analyzed at length, but a suffocating timelessness that connotes loss and death.¹² In his commentary on *Apparitions* Ligeti appears to internalize Cavell’s assertion that—in the modern situation—criticism seems both inevitable and internal to the experience of art (1969a, 207). But Ligeti’s account of the work avoids the dangers Cavell cites. His critique is neither necessary nor prescriptive but offers two divergent paths toward understanding the work that function as a kind of acknowledgment, a token of the composer’s intention that “*bears explanation*, not perhaps the way tides and depressions do, but the way remarks and actions do” (1969b, 225).

A difficult work, emblematic of its time and place, *Apparitions* marked the beginning of Ligeti’s long career at the forefront of European modernism. Yet it also represented a prime example of that paradoxical appearance of the modern that attempts to keep faith with tradition (Cavell 1969a, 206). When the furious climax of the Agitato subsides, Martin Zenck hears a Benjaminian “aura” of the past in the trumpet melody at m. 44, a harbinger of orchestral works to come and suggestive of Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Apparition* (1987, 165). Mallarmé’s poem not coincidentally preserves a quite different dream, yet one that also recalls childhood visions of a magical, lost time. *Apparitions* stands, then, as a paradoxical memorial to two fantasies: the childhood dream and the lost perfection of serialism, without which it would never exist. We know this because of Ligeti’s writings, yet—unlike those serial works surveyed by Cavell—*Apparitions* does not depend on verbal or mathematical justification. In a very tangible way it represents Cavell’s hypothetical example of a solution to a compositional problem that “has become identical with the aesthetic result itself” (1969a, 207).

Ligeti’s “Metamorphoses of Musical Form” (1960/1965) identifies five “destruction-types” born and nurtured in the corporate atmosphere of serial organization. The discrete quantification of pitch, duration, tone color, and intensity works to dissolve the unique properties of each parameter and level

¹² Ligeti employed the web metaphor in descriptions of Webern’s atonal and twelve-tone practice, where it served to differentiate the latter’s technique from that of traditional harmonic progression (e.g., Ligeti 2007b, first broadcast on the Bavarian Radio, Munich, on February 17, 1960).

Ligeti had planned a book on the music of Webern to be published by Universal Edition, but the text languished when he began work on *Atmosphères* (Lichtenfeld 2007, 13–14).

the contrast among multiple dimensions. Without differentiation, we are unable to distinguish temporal and registral events, leading to the ultimate indifference of time and space, a situation that resurrects determinism's volte-face: chance and contingency. The proportions that structure *Apparitions* are held up as an edifying example of a serial-inspired innovation that maintains the independence of separate dimensions. As such, they function as a musical precursor to the written critique, one that embodied a more sensible and pragmatic approach to musical rationalism.¹³ But more than this, *Apparitions* offers an aesthetic solution to the problem of lack in integral serialism, whose pure rationality harbored something utterly irrational (Adorno 1955/2002). *Apparitions* cannot be contained by any one description, be it allegorical or technical. It functions as a metaphor *in se*, a work that contains its own internal critique of the new music, in a form that communicates the composer's intention and sincerity.

Lachenmann's countercadence

The German composer Helmut Lachenmann (b. 1935) established his avant-garde credentials early as a student of Luigi Nono and through his active participation in the Darmstadt summer schools for new music. His early serial work gave way in the late 1960s to a new style, more radical in its musical and ideological aims yet, at the same time, more committed to communication with an audience. A prolific writer and lecturer throughout this period, he elaborated his personal aesthetics at great length and linked the progression of his musical thought to specific works and genres.¹⁴ Lachenmann's musical goals are rooted in an active theory of listening strikingly similar to Cavell's proposition that "works of art are objects of the sort that can only be known in sensing" (1969a, 191). Lachenmann rejects listening as passive feeling in favor of listening that embodies the existential idea of acting out of knowledge. He uses the German verb *abtasten* to describe a musical perception that goes beyond mere hearing, one that captures the sense of "touching one's way through" musical material as a cognitive, physical, and empirical act.¹⁵ This type of perception—"more adventurous and existential than that of listening"—is self-critical by nature (Lachenmann 1995, 98). The "self-perceiving perception" becomes the object of music itself and a means toward increased awareness of one's self and social condition.

Lachenmann's advice takes to heart two of Cavell's primary themes: that genuine responses to art are the work of individuals and that criticism

¹³ I analyze the structure and interrelation of these dimensions in greater depth in Bauer 2001.

¹⁴ Lachenmann's articles are assembled in Lachenmann 1996 and include an analysis of his second string quartet, translated into English as Lachenmann 2004.

¹⁵ See Lachenmann's essay "Hören ist wehrlos—ohne Hören" (Lachenmann 1996, 116–35) and Mohammad 2005.

should learn to “distrust its own success,” lest it give in to the temptations of hegemony and prescription (1969a, 207–9). In retrospect, Lachenmann understands the classical period of serialism captured in the pages of *Die Reihe* and *Perspectives of New Music* as a legitimate reaction against, and resistance to, the social structures and bourgeois aesthetics in force during the 1950s. His new aesthetic appears to reject both serialism and “bourgeois convention” in turning away from the traditional basis of Western art music in defined pitch structures and historical performance traditions to fashion a music that incorporates new sounds, new gestures, and new modes of performance.¹⁶

Lachenmann’s concept of *musique concrète instrumentale* takes its name from Pierre Schaeffer’s *musique concrète*. Schaeffer began with prerecorded sounds of nature, manipulated and presented as a musical object on the stage. Lachenmann, by contrast, begins with concert instruments approached as though they were simply natural objects whose bodies, beaters, and bows present opportunities to defamiliarize the worn clichés of the concert hall. Relying on novel orchestration and a host of extended techniques, the composer draws unconventional, mostly acoustic, timbres from the familiar strings, woodwinds, and brass orchestral families.¹⁷ Lachenmann became infamous for this notion of musical “rejection” (*verwiegerungen*), which he later clarified as relating not to music but to ingrained habits of perception that must be discarded if we are to experience music anew, to “give back sound its virginity.”¹⁸ He sometimes employs the term “tonality” to cover a host of sins associated with reception habits in the “age of mechanical reproduction” (Hockings 1995, 8). The notion of rejection, then, like tonality, is inherently political. It involves a pact between audience and composer but places the modernist work at the center of a triangulated discourse composed of three terms: audience, composer, and the “aura” of a work—the associations and memories that have accrued to sounds over time.¹⁹ This notion of aura stems from Walter Benjamin, but it would seem to capture Cavell’s sense that only one who understands and questions tradition—including the question of what is a medium of music—can ground our acceptance of new works (1969b, 220–22).

As Rainer Nonnenmann notes, Lachenmann’s works are never innocent representatives of their particular genre: “His pieces are never simply orchestral works, string quartets or piano concerti, but rather Music for Orchestra, Music for String Quartet or Music for Piano and Orchestra, a résumé of the resources employed replacing a traditional formal classification” (2005, 3).

¹⁶ See Pace 1998a for discussion of Lachenmann’s early period.

¹⁷ See Lachenmann’s interview with Heinz-Klaus Metzger in Lachenmann 1996, 191–204.

¹⁸ He later regretted his choice of “rejection” (Lachenmann 1996, 211–12).

¹⁹ Discussed in Lachenmann 1996, 35–53 and in Hockings 1995, 6–12.

Kontrakadenz represents Lachenmann's fourth work for orchestra; its specific focus is no longer genre critique per se but that most elementary of musical forms, the cadence. It performs a kind of internal analysis on several levels, embracing the social history of the orchestra and its instrumentarium, as well as the forms, structures, and sounds associated with "Music for Orchestra." *Kontrakadenz* fills in those gaps that Cavell found not only in *Die Reihe* and *Perspectives* but also in most histories of music, embodying a kind of "humane criticism" that strives to articulate more than mere facts or structural details (1969a, 185). The social world of the orchestra is invaded by four "ad hoc" players, which perform various duties from turning on the radio to bouncing Ping-Pong balls. Lachenmann augments the traditional orchestral corpus with electric guitar, Hammond organ, a huge array of percussion, and a collection of everyday objects that includes Styrofoam, Ping-Pong balls, cardboard tubes, a radio, and a zinc washtub.²⁰ A great deal of subtle humor is generated by the composer's attempt to domesticate the recalcitrant sounds of such common objects through a vast array of sticks and scrapers. All the string instruments (including guitar) are in *scordatura* tunings, although their pitch often seems subordinate to the timbre and rhythmic patterns produced by constantly shifting articulations. In the first three bars alone, strings move from *legno saltando* cluster glissandi through cluster harmonics to *legno battuta* double-stops that accelerate into rapid *ponticello tremoli*, the beginnings of a pointillistic and varied texture that continually threatens to climax before subsiding into the relatively tranquil background of spinning metal plates, hissing Styrofoam, or the light sound of wood upon strings.

The listener who assumes, given its title, that *Kontrakadenz* will offer a critique of musical form is not disappointed. Falling sounds occur at every level of the work, without ever melding into a homogeneous and definitive closing gesture. The inclusion of sound sources external to the orchestra critiques the border between art music and sound; similarly, the inclusion of radio interruptions—including a taped commentary announcing the work midway through (m. 187)—questions the border between the work and its frame. Approximately two-thirds of the way through the piece, the orchestra halts the sloshing of water in the washtub (mm. 235–36), capped off with a cymbal swung and rotated through the air. As Nonnenmann adds, this archetypal image of "warmth and security" undermines the entire notion of the virtuosic solo, although the full tub as "instrument" was fully prepared for its moment in the spotlight by various scrapings (m. 189ff.) and fillings (m. 226ff.), not to mention the dissipation of the full orchestra into trickling sounds (2005, 13). Toward the end, *Kontrakadenz* rouses itself to form one final definitive cadence (m. 313), laboriously erected from single notes and

²⁰ Later works such as *Mouvement (-vor der Erstarrung)* (1982–84) focus almost exclusively on conventional orchestration, albeit augmented by a healthy percussion

section. On the connection between *Kontrakadenz* and Lachenmann's opera *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, see Metzger 2009, 205.

attacks that become chords, and then glissandi (in strings) and repeated clusters (in brass, winds, and percussion). Midway through, this climactic gesture collapses into scattered fortissimo bursts (m. 332ff.); the entire twenty-nine-bar passage is repeated “at least 5 times” in what sounds like a futile attempt at a final culmination, one that explodes in a flurry of thirty-second notes in winds and brass and glissandi clusters in strings (mm. 355–60). When *Kontrakadenz* does eventually cadence, it is with the high, piercing screech of air as forced through four recorder mouthpieces.

Lachenmann’s own commentary on the work clarifies his intention and conveys how important it is to him that his audience not just understand but “feel” its social and historical critique:

That which resounds does not resound for the sake of its tonality and its structural modification, but signals the actual use of energies in the musicians’ actions and renders the mechanical conditions and instances of resistance associated with these actions tangible, hearable, anticipatable. Form and detail resulted from the effort of realistically laying bare this aspect and placing it in the dialectical setting imposed by the use of a symphonic apparatus. The title may save the piece in good time from being perceived as an extreme case of antitonicity instead of, as intended, an example of an immanent logic which must be assumed and the handling of which is a matter of aware awareness.²¹

What *Kontrakadenz* shows, perhaps more clearly than Lachenmann’s commentary on it, is an emphasis on the energy involved in sound generation. The composer’s ethics preserve the labor involved in the active creation of sounds, made tangible and concrete rather than divorced—as in electronic and much commercial music—from their production. Lachenmann would seem to follow Cavell’s call for a new music that engages its audience in its own critical project, in an open dialogue with traditional forms and functions. The reduction of instrumental lines to brute physical forces exposes a hidden truth—that the use of instrumentation has no definitive grounding.²² The movement of strings through a flurry of articulations and tremoli in the opening bars may recall Ligeti’s *Apparitions* but serves a somewhat different purpose. The strings’ progress—often indistinguishable from that of unpitched percussion or other stringed instruments—defeats expectations based on the conventions of both traditional and serial narratives. Listeners are asked to elicit their own criteria regarding what constitutes the sound and function of an orchestral section they once took for granted, as melodic progress toward an identifiable goal, much less a “cadence,” is continually thwarted. Cavell might say that, in failing to satisfy normal expectations, this passage exposes convention as contingent on what, following Wittgenstein, he calls the “forms of life” (1969d, 52). Quite opposed to the “nihilism” of Krenek,

²¹ Program notes to *Kontrakadenz/Klangschatten—Mein Saitenspiel / Fassade/Kairos* CD 0012232KAI, 2001.

²² I am indebted to Brian Kane for this observation and the reference to Wittgenstein.

the difficulties of Lachenmann remain accessible to an open-minded audience committed to what, in Gould's paraphrase of Cavell, is *active* in the work; *Kontrakadenz* not only internalizes its own criticism of the past but seeks "to undo the terms of criticism and reception it anticipates from a given audience" (1998, 214).

* * *

Ligeti's *Apparitions* and Lachenmann's *Kontrakadenz* are separated by more than a decade, yet they both represent modernist orchestral works that cast a critical eye on the legacy of the postwar avant-garde while remaining cognizant of their role in its continued existence. While *Apparitions* incorporates an explicit critique of serialism, with a nod toward the discerning listener, *Kontrakadenz* is more concerned with eliciting that critique from, and in concert with, its audience. In later works, both composers would incorporate explicit references to traditional music and find common ground with its conventions. Yet they never lost the extremely self-conscious stance cultivated in their earlier experimental works, which embraced both the burden of producing art and that of describing it (Cavell 1969a, 193). They emerged full-grown from the modernist debates that were waged in the pages of *Die Reihe*, fully aware of the perils outlined by Cavell in "Music Discomposed." If they flirt with the implied "fraud" of a precompositional schema, or the mannered subversion of convention called *musica negativa*,²³ yet they owe their continued importance to the deep-seated trust they have established with their audience, an audience for whom modernist music still matters "in the sense that it is *meant*" (Cavell 1969b, 237).

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²³ *Musica negativa* was a term coined by Hans Werner Henze to disparage Lachenmann's approach; see Pace 1998b, 6–7. Lachenmann distinguishes his own dialectic from that of *musica negativa* in an interview with David Ryan (1999, 20).

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