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March 20, 2008

### Helmut Lachenmann: *Ein Kinderspiel* – no. 1

Transcendence propels the listening experience in the music of Helmut Lachenmann—what is considered to be of the ordinary is exposed for its limitedness, at least by contemporary standards. Like most avant-garde music, the listener is confronted with the development of new approaches to musical perception. However, very few composers have directly questioned, explored, and disassembled tradition in favor of creating soundworlds that arise from an absolutist approach to music. The music of John Cage, the man who *liberated* sounds, comes to mind. However, unlike Cage, Lachenmann moves beyond establishing the equivalency of all sounds and their chance occurrence towards the physicality of sound production and its structural properties in what has been termed “instrumental musique concrete”.<sup>1</sup>

Tonality may therefore serve as a key element in the music of Lachenmann. Far from a rejection of tradition, Lachenmann has oftentimes employed well-recognized melodic strands in such works as *Mouvement* where melodic material, say of a popular German anthem, is clearly referenced within a context that may eventually lead to display its “concrete corporeality” (i.e. its rhythmic inertia, harmonically resonant qualities, etc...)<sup>2</sup> To come back to my idea of transcendence, well-recognized objects are transformed as their surface reveals an inner concrete beauty.

The work I have chosen to analyze, *Ein Kinderspiel*, is a collection of seven piano movements for children written in 1980— this essay will focus on the first one. Of particular

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Pace, "Positive or Negative 1," *The Musical Times* 139, no. 1859 (January 1998): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Nonnenmann, "Music with Images— The Development of Helmut Lachenmann’s Sound Composition Between Concretion and Transcendence," *Contemporary Music Review* 24, no. 1 (February 2005): 17.

interest were my initial attempts to conceive how Lachenmann could move beyond the twelve tones of the piano and make it into a sound vehicle without recalling novel, well-known extended techniques and/or preparations (i.e. attacks inside the piano). Add to this the familiarity of piano music (the instrument's well-tread repertoire) and the challenge is fairly set for a composer interested in deconstructive procedures.

The physicality of sound cannot be considered without the role of resonance. Such a physical quality is controllable on the piano through the use of the sustain pedal and, masterfully, Lachenmann employs such a consideration to initiate his piano collection. Not only does Lachenmann employ resonance as a blurring tool to harmonically saturate and timbrally liven the continuous descent on the piano but, more importantly, the play on resonance elicits three distinct sound events in *Ein Kinderspiel*: the punctuated attack (m. 1), natural echoes, and sustaining sound fields (m. 9). These three types of events may be a microcosm of what Lachenmann has referred to as “cadence sound, sound structure, and structured sound”.<sup>3</sup> Each plays a vital role in sustaining the formal aspects of the composition.

The punctuated attacks only occur in the highest registers of the piano as they balance the piece by being present in the introduction (mm. 1-8) and coda (mm. 25-31). Such inflections become sound objects in that, through the use of the sustain pedal, the ear is guided towards the diffusion (or cadence) of distinct attacks (points in harmonic space). Under this initial prompt, the chromatic pattern and ensuing use of major thirds (mm. 15-31) serves as a backbone linearly directing the forward motion of the work. The coda section washes this forward motion away as the lower resonances of the piano all but prevent material from progressing or developing. Therefore, as a large-scale consideration, the first attack of the piece, the “cadence sound”, embodies the design of the composition.

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<sup>3</sup> Elke Hockings, "Review: A Portrait of Helmut Lachenmann," *Tempo*, no. 185 (June 1993): 30.

Regarding the use of “sound structure”, I believe Lachenmann has chosen to highlight the particular ability of the piano to draw ghost resonances from held collections of notes as exhibited by the left hand, for example, in mm. 5-8. Such a gesture musically embodies the idea of a transparent sonic presence— a physical phenomenon and, in addition, foreshadows the arrival of the lower piano strings to the musical foreground. As a textural link between both extremes (that of the punctuated attacks and lower end resonant wash), Lachenmann posits, in mm. 9-12, rhythmically flexible held tones that appear as three distinctly structured chromatic fields— the latter of which continues to be held well into the arrival of the major thirds.

In this opening movement, Lachenmann has written a *complete* idiomatic work for the piano. The physical nature of the instrument and the manner by which it produces sound has been drawn out so effectively it functions on a level that is simple enough for a child to perform and an amateur listener to understand. The music of Lachenmann, far removed from the bells and whistles of novel applications of extended techniques, is firmly rooted in a philosophy that exploits the very nature of a sound creating body. The result is a music tinged with transcendent revelations.