

Lachenmann at Mills

An exploration in two parts.

by Matthew Goodheart

In January of 2008, German composer Helmut Lachenmann visited Mills College as the Jean Macduff Vaux visiting composer-in-residence. In addition to lecturing in music classes, he gave a public lecture on Thursday, January 24th, and a concert of his works was performed on Saturday, January 26th. The following is the second installment of an article which began in the March issue of the Transbay Music Calendar.

Part II – Concert

Saturday night; the concert. There are a couple online reviews, a blog by Richard Friedman and the webzine San Francisco Classical Voice, by Jules Langert. It is telling that there are no paper reviews, that the SF Chronicle was absent at this sol Bay Area concert during this residency of the winner of the Kulturpreis für Musik, the Kompositionpreis, the Bach-Preis Hamburg, the Ernst von Siemens Musikpreis, and the Royal Philharmonic Society Music Award. Nobody here but us chickens.

Langert is quite positive about the evening, specifically mentioning that *Allegro Sostenuto*, for clarinet, cello and piano, was an “exhilarating performance” (which also received a standing ovation). He describes each work in with a certain amount of detail, and even raises the possibility that there are humorous elements in Lachenmann’s work. Friedman disliked the concert, saying he found *Allegro Sostenuto* “really tedious, devoid of any sustaining interest beyond a few ‘nice sounds’ here and there.” Friedman, actually, went to so far as to respond to Langert’s review, writing in the comments section:

. . . the concert was a big big disappointment for me. I was hoping to hear some recent music by this composer. . . all the music played was from 20 to 45 years ago. Nothing new here. . . The style of cataloging bizarre things you can do with acoustic instruments was the rage in the 70’s and 80’s. When you run out of ideas just drag the bow below the bridge for no reason. . . And, I failed to see any tongue-in-cheekiness in any of it. In fact, this was no laughing matter. It was all very sad.”

Matt Ingalls, the clarinetist who performed *Allegro Sostenuto*, then responded to Friedman’s comment:

On the contrary, Lachenmann has been constantly developing his own way of MAKING music with “extended” instrumental sounds, combining a modern, “acousmatic” compositional approach with “classical” techniques. Indeed, a good example is *Allegro Sostenuto*—it is almost Beethoven-like in that the entire composition is spun out of the handful of motives introduced in the first few bars of the piece, with timbre being an extra dimension in which these motives can mutate.

And so it goes. The question becomes; how do we listen to what is presented to us? What is the framework? Friedman, for example, states “It’s hard to tell from the listener’s seat what compositional processes were involved. . . much of it sounded as if it could have been improvised” which supports his later statement “there must have been some organizational thread holding it all together, but I couldn’t find it.” Yet Ingalls clearly sees the connection implied by Lachenmann’s lecture. But he is intimately familiar with the work, and the familiarity creates the framework for his experience. He knows *Allegro Sostenuto* better than most people know the *Harp* quartet.

I must admit that from my own “listener’s seat” at the Mills concert, the developmental nature of Lachenmann’s work seemed evident to me, though this was the first time I’d heard both *Allegro*

Sostenuto and the string quartet *Gran Torso*. In fact, I began to wonder if his selection of the *Harp* quartet in his lecture was chosen with *Gran Torso* in mind.

As explored in Part I, the *Harp* begins with a subversion of the tonic, and that troublesome pause. . . and thereby hangs the tail. In *Gran Torso* the opening is capped by a 10 second pause at bar 15. Within that first minute of the piece, the fundamental elements of the work come in to play. The second violin begins the piece with a strong gesture, moving the bow at the frog in jagged shifts on the III string along the fingerboard toward the bridge, which then moves into a fingered B-flat, while the bow is more lightly drawn across the strings at a vertical motion from the fingerboard to the bridge. As it approaches the bridge, the IV string is added as a double stop (fingered on G, though it would “sound” as an F since the quartet is tuned scordatura). The effect of this gesture is to leap immediately from a somewhat aggressive buzzing sound, into the half-tone of the B-flat, which quickly dissolves into a filter-sweep white noise effect as the bow is drawn toward the bridge. This movement in and out of degrees of tone is one of the essential elements of *Gran Torso*. Additionally, this initial gesture in the second violin is quickly jumped upon by variations in the other instruments: more aggressive bowing movements up and down the fingerboard in the viola and cello; a *flautando* half-harmonic played near the bridge on the viola, a noisy sounding B-flat (fingered B), which then drops a 9th and glisses up, against which is juxtaposed an aggressive scratch-tone from the first violin.

So these elements show themselves right from the start: a spectrum from white noise to tone to aggressive “scratch-tone” like sounds. This becomes explicit in the second violin in bars 5-7; a *balzando* (gentle bouncing of the bow on the string, producing an accelerating rhythm) brings us into a clear F-sharp, which then shifts down a thick *vibrato largissimo* (sounding approximately A-flat to B-flat) as the bow moves from fingerboard toward the bridge. A second pitch increases the density as the bow is drawn back toward the fingerboard for a crescendo, which evolves into a scratch-tone.

But this development in the second violin is not in isolation: true to the “interconnected” part writing tradition of the string quartet, we can see the influence of each instrument on the other in this passage. The identity of the first violin up until this point has been aggressive scratch-tone like noise: as the second violin moves toward clear tone from *balzando* into the vibrato, the first violin interrupts it, spurring the second violin into its own aggressive noise. As the second violin moves to its scratch tone, the first violin reasserts itself, effectively cutting off the second. Yet beneath this, the cello does not allow the tone to be completely let go, holding on to a wavering *flautando* half-harmonic. The elaboration of this *flautando* into a *saltando* at bar 8 then pushes the cello in bar 9 onto bowing on the right side of the body of the instrument; a dissolution into white noise. White noise elements (mostly) continue to develop through the bows sweeping between finger board and bridge, interspersed with the occasional *sforzandi*, disparate reminders of the disruptive nature of the first violin. A moment’s pause in bar 13, and an aggressive reassertion of scratch-tone sounds, in a rather elegant cadential decrescendo from the cello to the first violin; perhaps harnessing some of the first violin’s disruptive energy?

Then we stop, for a full 10 seconds.

I spend so much time on this analysis because Lachenmann himself marks it off as something very important. 10 seconds is a *long* time for silence, at least in music that is as active as this is. But then, this presents a problem as well; is it a use of silence from the WWBD school, marking off formal sections. But if we remember our audience here at Mills, folks born and bred on Cage’s 4’33,” silence may have a different meaning, and would itself be a motivic element, rather than a formal demarcation. So, there, all of us in the audience; how do we approach that 10 seconds? Do we reflect on what we heard before, and understand that what is to come will emanate from it? Or do we listen to that dissolution of sound as bringing us into closer contact with our environment, with that “living

music” which surrounds us? Or is it, as Brian Kane suggested to me, a *torso*: a “truncated or unfinished thing.”¹

Our answer to that question deeply affects our experience with this piece, and with the performance at Mills in particular. If we answer with the first notion, then we listen for developmental, organicist structures; we look for design, and the piece is non-linear, self referential; there is an idealized version of it to explore and study. If we answer with the latter post-Cagean conception, then the piece is linear, sound flows into the real world, and then back on to stage; this postulate of a “piece of music” is a fiction; what happens before and after some mental construct of “silence” matters not.

Lachenmann places himself in the former camp: turn off the dishwasher so we can hear the music. Cage would probably say to *always* listen with the dishwasher on.

The lynch pin in the choice for many listeners, I suspect, is the language of “extended technique” that Lachenmann uses. The unconventional sounds (if we can still call them unconventional in 2008) might suggest, to many, an equation with that post-Cage school of experimentation. It is about exploring sound, or perhaps according to Friedman: “cataloging bizarre things you can do with acoustic instruments.”

But if the expectation is for formal development and motivic transformation, no matter what the technique, then our experience of the work is different; we are looking for familiar grammar in an unfamiliar language.

This issue of chosen paths arose in a very particular way at the Mills performance. About a third of *Gran Torso* deals with development of the white-noise end of the sound spectrum, from mm. 82 – 177. When listening to a recording of the work, one can clearly hear that many subtle variations and developments are taking place; the whole section moves from *flautandi* and filter-sweep movements of the bow up and down the fingerboard, to a barely perceptible extended *Tonlos* passage in the viola, to *balzandi* and *saltandi*; the whole group working slowly and hesitantly back toward tone. The problem with the performance arose from the nature of the Lisser Hall, the performance space. Built in 1903, and remodeled a couple times, but is poorly insulated from outside sound. This night, it was raining, the sound of which masked this significant section. So we could look at what the players were doing onstage, but we couldn’t hear it. Langert, in a section entitled *Sounds of Silence*, says: “At one point in *Gran Torso* the instruments start to bow thin air, as if silence has temporarily taken over, only to be gradually displaced by the return of sound.”

While the score certainly calls for a greatly different intent here, Langert is not wrong: this is actually what it looked like to us. So Langert, whose experience with *Gran Torso* seems to lie solely with the Mills performance, understandably states “Lachenmann seems intrigued by the interaction between sound and silence.” Langert’s “torso” is the truncation of sound.

And so we come here to another cross-roads. “Nature’s dishwasher” has changed our experience, and therefore the meaning, of the work. Which leads one, of course, to wonder what other factors affect that understanding. Does sitting at my desk plowing through the opening moments with a

¹ The question of “torso” is an important one, though not one addressed the reaction I found to the Mills performance. A case could be made for the “grand pause” of ms. 14 to be a truncation of the forward motion of the piece. My own feeling is that the actions which precede the pause are cadential material, though that interpretation is, of course, subjective. Additionally, the short, burst-like nature of the “cadential material” reflect the final moments of the piece, which is a series of pizzicati. The final moments, however, do not have the same cadential feel to me, and the final gesture; a cello pizzicato which resolves into a harmonic, leaves me with a semi-cadential feeling of interrupted motion. This “resolution” which undermines itself would therefore be a “gran torso” – the piece is finished, but implies that it is not. Secondly, the “classical quartet” quality of this work leads us to speculation about the body of classical string quartet music- is the classical string quartet an unfinished body of work, which the language of this piece is a continuation? Or, since this piece deals with more fundamental aspects of sound production, does *Gran Torso* in some way precede tonal language, so that the canon of classical string quartet work emanates like limbs from this trunk?

microscope really give me a better insight into *Gran Torso*? Is this really an extrapolation of my intuition about the Mills performance? The recording is not necessarily a fair representation either; from what I can tell, it is closely miced, so that the full presence of the quieter sounds is really a product of the recording studio. The subtle elements, the degrees of white noise, would vary significantly depending upon the intimacy and resonance of the performance space and distance of the “listener’s seat.” And then there is my expectation of how the piece is to function, of who Lachenmann is.

There is a place where all of these lines become blurred, where we cannot extricate our own experience of a work from the work itself; a “listener dependence,” if you will. We project our own certainty into and onto the music itself. *I know the sounds aren’t really that loud, but I love it that way.*

We have met the dishwasher, and he is us.

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Sound files relating to this essay can be found online at
<http://matthewgoodheart.com/lachenmann.html>