

# 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 24<sup>th</sup>, and a concert of his works was performed on Saturday, January 26<sup>th</sup>. The following article is the first of two installments, the second of which will be published in April issue of the Transbay Creative Music Calendar.

## Part I - Lecture

Saturday night, the concert is over. I see one of my friends, a local guitarist, composer and improviser. A semblance of our conversation, as I remember it:

*What did you think?*

*I think I prefer his music on CD. I can lie on the floor and crank it. I know the sounds aren't really that loud, but I love it that way.*

Thursday night, Lachenmann stands behind the podium, beautifully crafted from Hawaiian hardwood by a carpenter whose daughter went to Mills, and lectures. Art, what is art, what is art about. What is and isn't. His daughter loves house-music. He says they argue over whether it is art, and subsequently enters into a lengthy description of the clamorous nature of his dishwasher. At first we think he is making a comparison between the sound of house-music and the sound of a dishwasher, an observation I find startlingly acute. (I say this as a firm advocate of listening closely to one's dishwasher.) However, it soon becomes clear he is talking about something else. Approximately; "Art is not something you can listen to as your dishwasher is making noise, it requires your full concentration, since every element is essential. If I can listen to it while putting away the dishes, and not miss anything, then it is entertainment, not art."

For Lachenmann, it seems, the test of serious art is the attention required to grasp the details and their relationship to the whole. He gives examples; Webern's Op. 10, fourth movement. The analysis is loose; the mandolin plays six notes, the violin five, the trumpet four: something is going on, an order disordered throughout the score. But it is not just mathematics. The mandolin would evoke to Webern's contemporaries something else as well, the amorous young man beneath his beloved's balcony, plucking out his nocturnal longing. Her voice in the final violin line, falling and rising: "Go away."

Inevitably, it is on to Beethoven. He pulls out analytical sketches of motifs from the *Harp Quartet, op. 74*, first movement; What is this strange introduction? These big silences? It inevitably leads to our big chord in ms. 25, which is then arpeggiated, forming the touchstone for the whole movement. See how it transforms, into pizzicato, and into those repeated notes. Oh, and look at the tonal scheme: we are in E-flat Major, the end of the Exposition moves us to expectedly to B-flat Major, but the Development starts directly in G-Major (surprise!), and look we've outlined our triad again. . . He highlights his points by interspersing short passages, from memory, on the piano. He does not delve too much into detail: it is all there; the first motive of the introduction, the instability of the descending base line through a V42/IV chord leads to the pause, the pause leads to other pauses, which erupt into the *forte* chord, which finally leads to the clearly established tonic harmony and the arpeggio. All these elements remerge, into and out of that chord. A neat, organicist package, to which we must pay absolute attention if we are to apprehend it. The dishwasher must be off.

And then we listen to it, the whole first movement.

It is a particularly odd, and perversely pleasurable experience, sitting here among the West Coast avant gardists of Mills, listening for motivic development in Beethoven, led there by what we all feel is one of the more hip and underappreciated composers (at least in the US). The audience is filled with Mills students and faculty, local improvisers, students from Stanford, the SF Conservatory. Lachenmann's music has been largely unperformed in the Bay Area, and those few performances have been largely through the efforts of Matt Ingalls and the sfSoundGroup, whose Christopher Jones performed his massive *Serynade* for piano last summer. But apart from that diligence, a single piece on Marino Formenti's piano recital in 2007, and a CD or two at *Ameoba*, his music is largely absent from the Bay Area scene. While legendary in Europe, his obscurity here lends its own aura of mystique; and now we can hear him *speak*! Perhaps he will reveal some inner secrets. . .

And in a way, he did.

Of course, he had been lecturing for the past days in several Mills classes, and apparently talked more about his work then. But he has chosen this face to present to the public; the traditionalist. I think of this as the quartet moves into the development section, my favorite part of the *Harp*, where the rapid elaboration, distillation, dissolution, and reassembling of motives is particularly. . .good. One of those passages that reminds me that Beethoven, the composer we love to hate, was. . .well. . . a really great composer.

So I look around, at all of us assembled here, and wonder: *What does this mean?* Lachenmann here has allied himself with the core principals and works of the Western Canon. There is no mention of what Mills more often represents: contemporary aesthetics, iconoclasm, the challenging of what music is, the underdog, the school for artists for which the world has no place. The contradictory *experimental tradition*. Rather, this lecture smacked of that great patriarchal, oligarchic tradition that those many of us in the audience feel is our want to overthrow: What Would Beethoven Do?

Of course, it may be just me. The twenty-four year old Mills student that I was sets fire to the lecture hall. The thirty-nine year old that I am douses that fire out, but saves an ember to take home. (Truthfully, I always liked the music of Beethoven, though not Beethoven the God of Music.) But the question remains:

Do we claim the music, or do we claim its embodiment as a school of thought? A fundamental, and hopeless, distinction.

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