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Playing with Shadows: Reinjection Loops in Georg Friedrich Haas's Live Electronic Music

ABSTRACT

Background

The music of Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas is often grouped within the loose generic bounds of spectralism, but the composer flatly dismisses this characterization. When recently asked about his relationship to the spectral school, Haas replied: 'Yes, I use overtone spectra, but I would protest against being called a spectralist'; likewise, he has complained that he's 'not really comfortable with being pigeonholed as a microtonalist composer' (Varga 2011). Instead, Haas prefers to position his work at the intersection of several compositional approaches. Recent scholarship appears to support this view, suggesting that Haas's music is best understood as a dramatic confrontation between 'clashing harmonic systems' (Hasegawa 2015). Building on these observations, this paper shows how Haas stitches together a patchwork of systems in his works with live electronics. Detailed analyses of two pieces show how Haas deploys a relatively straightforward technical procedure — the reinjection loop, or the delayed playback of recorded material at variable speeds — to juxtapose different modes of pitch organization and create a musical dramaturgy between the performer(s) and electronics. Through these processes, the composer brings spectral thought into dialogue with microtonality and serialism, staging a historical conflation of styles.

For a detailed description of the codes that inform Haas's musical dialect, we can look to his 2003 essay, 'Mikrotonalitäten' in which he argues that there is 'no microtonal tradition' but rather several dispersed traditions that evolved largely independent of one another (Haas 2003). In particular, Haas identifies four generalized approaches to microtonality: a) tempered subdivisions of the octave other than 12-TET; b) orientations around the proportions of the overtone series; c) *Klangspaltung*, or 'sound-splitting' techniques that produce beating effects between near-unison waveforms; and finally d) aleatoric approaches that yield unpredictable pitch content. Within each of these categories, Haas identifies a number of exemplary composers, explaining how each achieves a different outcome while remaining within the boundaries of the stated approach. In offering this broad survey of the field, Haas constructs a makeshift microtonal tradition that we can use as a referential framework for understanding the derivation of his own compositional style. As my analyses show, Haas's music is filled with token sonorities that make their historical references readily apparent. Indeed, his borrowing from different systems is, at times, so direct that the music borders on pastiche, recalling Frederic Jameson's description of art based on 'the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language [...] blank parody' (Jameson 1984, 65).

How should we interpret Haas's appeal to the past and his collage-like assembly of various musical codes? What are the consequences of this practice for the integrity of the musical work? And how might the intertextual nature of Haas's music cause us to reconsider traditional notions about the relationship between an authorial 'self' and his/her musical 'others'?

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The two works analysed in the full version of this paper are String Quartet No. 4 (2003) and *Ein Schattenspiel* (2004). One of my primary aims in choosing these pieces is to shed light on an area of Haas's compositional output that has received very little attention: his recent endeavours into live electronic music. An article featuring my analyses of these two works is forthcoming in a special issue on post-Wychnegradskyian microtonal traditions in the Canadian journal, *Circuit: Musiques contemporaine* (Winter 2019).

Methods

This study analyzes the co-mingling of divergent pitch systems in these two works by drawing on established theories of serialism (Rufer 1954), microtonality (Wychnegradsky 1972), and just intonation (Partch 1979). Expanding on these texts, the paper also includes a hermeneutic reading of the juxtaposed historical references implicit in Haas's choice of harmonic systems.

Implications

In *Ein Schattenspiel*, the performer is recorded and then played back at a consistently accelerated ratio of 33/32, skewing the pitch upwards and yielding a composite quarter-tone system. Within this tuning framework, Haas litters various historical references — Giacinto Scelsi's *Spaltklänge*, the Second Viennese School's serial ordering, Steve Reich's temporal phasing — but the work's primary harmonic vocabulary centers on Ivan Wychnegradsky's ultrachromatic *espaces non octaviant*. These sonorities first appear as *imperfect* binary divisions of the major seventh in the solo piano, and then as *perfect* binary divisions of the same interval once the reinjection loop is deployed. Over the course of the work, these 'Wychnegradsky chords' return in various guises, often with Haas harnessing the temporal lag between the performer and live electronics to stage harmonic sequences built from interlocking chordal stacks of major sevenths or minor ninths. By contrast, the fourth string quartet reinjects recorded materials at different speeds (33/32, 17/16, 7/6, and 11/12), setting up fluid pitch relationships between the performers and the live electronics — just-intoned harmonic structures clash with near-octave chordal sonorities, twelve-tone melodic writing is harmonized using overtone spectra, and at times, indeterminacy throws the music open to chance. A close reading of these works shows how Haas uses the reinjection loop to stage dialogues between not only the performers and their immediate

pasts, but between himself and the musical shadows of his compositional influences.

Keywords

Georg Friedrich Haas, Live Electronics, Microtonality, Spectralism, Serialism.

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