

# Shadows of Ideas: on Walter Zimmermann's Work[1]

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## Introduction

It may well seem strange to you that an Englishman who emigrated to Australia long ago should be invited here to talk about the work of a composer currently living in Berlin. At the time, it rather surprised me too. But perhaps it can be justified on two grounds. First, we have had personal contact for almost 30 years, and a kind of 'co-existence' that goes back even further. In the third volume of Stockhausen's *Texte*[2], as well as the Stockhausen entry in the first edition (1980) of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, there is a photo of Stockhausen playing one of the *Aus den sieben Tagen* texts at the 1969 Darmstadt Summer Courses. Behind him one can see a small part of the audience, including the composer Nicolaus A. Huber and the now celebrated Wagner specialist John Deathridge. Also in the picture are the 20-year-old Walter Zimmermann, and the 24-year-old Richard Toop. As far as I can remember, we didn't meet at the time, and didn't get to talk to one another. But 4 years later, once I was Stockhausen's teaching assistant at the *Staatliche Hochschule für Musik* in Cologne, we were in regular contact. Walter's flat was barely 500 m. away from mine, which was where I gave my classes. But even this short distance encapsulated some basic social divisions. Where I lived, in Kleverstrasse, there was a modestly endowed Polish Consulate to the left of my flat, and above it, according to the house owner, was a very discreetly run brothel. In contrast, the Am Stavenhof alley where Walter lived was a flagrant brothel street on the edge of the Turkish quarter. So my flat's location was comparatively 'conformist', whereas Walter's was emphatically not.

At the time, Clarence Barlow und Claude Vivier were studying with Stockhausen, and thus also with me. They lived in the same area as Walter, and it was probably one of them that first facilitated contact. I seem to remember that we first visited him around midday, and one had the impression that - just as one might expect from a jazz musician - he had only woken up in the last half hour or so. People have sometimes commented that the young Wolfgang Rihm looked rather like Schubert, but with Walter, the resemblance was

uncanny. One could almost imagine him in his dressing gown, sitting down sleepily at the piano to play through a newly composed sonata.

So much for this first, personal-sentimental justification. The second one is this: it seems not inappropriate to me that one would invite an 'outsider' (geographically speaking, at least) to talk about another outsider. And in terms of German contemporary music, Walter Zimmermann has always been an outsider. How did that happen? Partly, no doubt, through temperament, perhaps in conjunction with personal circumstances - I think the two are rarely entirely separable. I don't intend to say any more about this; it is for the composer to decide whether or not it is worth talking about such things. But in addition, there are obviously aesthetic preferences that are scarcely inconsequential. At a certain point one notes, whether with pride or regret, that one is on a different path to one's colleagues - for example, one might see the composer's role differently. But if one's personal conviction is strong enough, there's simply nothing to be done about it: one just pursues one's own path.

One of the things that distinguishes Zimmermann's own path from that of most other significant contemporary composers is that it has been trodden in such an unpretentious, reticent, yet dogged manner (here, one can't help making comparisons with Webern). I can readily imagine that most composers of standing would prefer not to hear just one of their works in the course of a concert, but several; probably, they would rather hear only their own works. In most cases, this could be regarded as pure egotism. But there are also other possible reasons, which are particularly relevant to Zimmermann.

It's like this: if one hears a single composition by Zimmermann - let's say in the course of a 'normal' New Music concert - one will certainly be struck by its 'otherness'. Yet at the same time, there is a danger that because this music doesn't proclaim a polemical position - no 'complexism', no 'new romanticism', no obvious social critique - its 'otherness' might initially be perceived merely as passive negation. Sure, a different world, but what sort of world? How does it function? What are its particular features? Of course, one can try to communicate these through programme notes. But what use is that, when there is neither the time nor the context that would enable the listener to perceive these particulars for themselves, and think them through?

The five concerts at the 2002 Weingartner Tage provide an almost ideal opportunity to become familiar with these personal features, to compare them, and to reflect on them. What follows is an attempt to provide a framework for this.

## 1st Theme: Europe / America

If one were looking for a single feature that distinguished Walter Zimmermann from most of the European composers of his generation, it would have to be his early engagement with the American avant-garde. Clearly, this can be ascribed to personal dissatisfaction with aspects of the European situation, including the avant-garde's 'star system', and its exaggerated concern with fashion. In addition, there was surely also mistrust of the politically 'engaged art' which was becoming almost obligatory at the time. This was scarcely a matter of ignorance: we are talking here about someone who even as a schoolboy sat for hours in the train, passionately discussing Adorno's *Negative Dialektik* with a friend! Besides, in those days there was a widespread cynical tendency among the European avant-garde - with Kagel as its main exponent - that was quite foreign to the young Zimmermann, even though he was in contact with Kagel. In this context, the idealistic outlook of the American avant-garde (especially Cage, but Feldman too) may have offered a much-desired way out, and even a possible salvation

When Zimmermann was at the beginning of his career, Cage's later music was already quite well known in Germany, though it was mainly presented and performed as a kind of *musica negativa* that didn't necessarily match the composer's intentions. Yet it wasn't Cage's later output that initially attracted Zimmermann, but rather the so-called 'na•ve' works of the late 1940s, which culminate in pieces like the *String Quartet* of 1950. Feldman's music was performed less in Germany at that time - perhaps because it wasn't so compatible with the interpretative strategies of the post-Adornoists. But Zimmermann had already got to know some of his work while working as the pianist in Werner Heider's Nuremberg-based *ars nova* ensemble.

Part of Zimmermann's attraction to American experimental music must surely have been that, compared to tradition-orientated European New Music, it appeared to be an accumulation of individual actions, where the composers were best seen as solitary

figures, as outsiders with their own personal visions. One might think here of the Greek poet Archilocus's dictum (made famous by Isaiah Berlin)[3]: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one great thing". In this respect, one can regard American experimental music as a hedgehog tradition, irrespective of who is involved: Ives, Partch, Nancarrow, Cage or Feldman. Admittedly, one talks about a 'New York School', but here too, the idea of 'school' is open to question. One is talking about highly individual figures, drawn together by a common cause in the early fifties, who one would still come across sometimes in pairs in the sixties and seventies. By the mid-seventies, Cage and Feldman had obviously emerged as the 'key figures'. But while it was obviously these two that influenced Zimmermann most profoundly, one can't help noticing that, if one looks at the programmes of the so-called Regenbogen-Konzerte ('Rainbow Concerts') that Zimmermann mounted in Cologne in the late seventies, that he was particularly concerned to demonstrate the sheer diversity of individual 'voices' within American experimental music, including Robert Ashley, David Behrman, Phil Niblock and many others[4].

Looking back now at this astonishing concert series, one notes that, at least initially, Cage and Feldman played no great role in it. But paradoxically, this may actually confirm how important they were for Zimmermann. As far as I can see, Zimmermann didn't present a single work of his own during the 7 years of the Regenbogen-Konzerte. Accordingly, it might also be logical that his two principal 'mentors' would have stayed in the shade.

What did he learn from the two of them? He once put it this way: "I tried to combine Cage and Feldman within me, so to speak: the Cage of the matrixes and chance systems, and Feldman's lyricism". While that's true enough, the situation is actually a little more complex. In particular, from the middle of the 1980s the actual sonority of Feldman's music is unmistakably evoked; one could even say that certain chords sound 'like Feldman', albeit within a highly structured context that has little to do with Feldman's working methods. And Cage's influence cannot be restricted to matters of theory or composition technique. Echoes of the pure, non vibrato string sounds familiar from, say, Cage's String Quartet or Six Melodies are pervasive aspects of Zimmermann's sound world. Moreover, Zimmermann's very idiosyncratic approach to orchestral sound shows affinities to Cage, and especially to the orchestral version of Cheap Imitation and the Quartets for Orchestra.

So much for the obvious influences from America, which Zimmermann has never sought to deny. Yet one can scarcely imagine any American composer conceiving music in the way Zimmermann has done over the past 30 years. How ever far removed his music may be from the 'main currents' of contemporary German music, it remains, seen from outside, inextricably linked to German conceptions of art. It would be gratuitous to analyse these here in detail; it is enough to mention some principal themes: art as a matter of utmost seriousness, and therefore also as a moral initiative, as expression of a sense of responsibility, as self-reflections etc.

## 2nd. Theme: Work / Project

Many contemporary composers seem to think not so much in terms of individual works, but in cycles of works. For Zimmermann's output, the key notion is neither work nor work cycle, but project. It denotes essential aspects of the way he composes, which is based above all on intensive study (he often reads an amazing amount by way of preparation), reflection and testing, so as, with luck, to produce a successful end product. To that extent, one could compare his work-method to scientific research, and research, as a form of self-immersion, certainly plays a role: he has spoken of his "urge to become completely caught in a world of thought"[5]. But that is only one aspect; in an important article on Cage and Zimmermann from 1984, the English composer Christopher Fox described Zimmermann as being committed "to the expression of what is as much a spiritual quest as it is a musical career"[6], and this is surely a fundamental insight. However, contrary to most other contemporary music that one might be inclined to regard as 'spiritual', Zimmermann's work contains no messianic element; it has no intention of preaching or saving, simply to attune the listener to contemplation and perhaps self-reflection. If composing is, for Zimmermann, in part a 'spiritual exercise' (almost in the sense of Loyola), it's not one he seeks to impose on others.

Let's look a little more closely at what a 'project' means for Zimmermann. One is dealing with series of works that share some common stimulus; such stimuli might come from art, from philosophy, from ethnology etc. (some examples will be provided below). There are three initial factors: source - fascination - investigation. The source is not usually

consciously sought: it is more likely to emerge by chance - through casual reading, or in conversation. One might surmise that there is something in the composer's mind that is already looking for this source, but that's something one can't prove. What is certain is that as soon as a source is discovered, the composer Zimmermann is ensnared, so to speak. So fascination, but often a kind of fascination that threatens to become punitive, in as much as he feels forced to investigate every conceivable aspect of the topic: it looks almost as if he had sentenced himself to extended hard labour. This labour is also physical; it involves endless writing: hundreds, even thousands of handwritten pages (mainly in B5 format), of which only a tiny proportion lead far enough to be finally linked to the fourth stage of actual composing. Scarcely something to recommend to other composers, but for Zimmermann that's how it has to be.

The notion of project also explains one initially puzzling external aspect: the way in which Zimmermann will be pre-occupied with one particular author (be it St. Augustine, Lucretius, or Roland Barthes), produce a cycle of works, and then seemingly abandon that author for another. Quite possibly, this abandonment (or renunciation) has a certain cathartic element for Zimmermann. But here a further, albeit superficial, comparison with scientific research may be useful. No single scientific project, however exhaustive and sophisticated, stands alone. It always forms part of a larger project, whose completion, if at all conceivable, would surely depend on the prior completion of all its individual parts. Once completed, it too would form only part of a still larger project, and so forth, ultimately extending to a (frankly inconceivable) completely integrated summa of human knowledge.

Global ambitions of this kind are no part of Zimmermann's thinking. But looking back at the past 15 years, one might surmise that in future we may regard the more than twenty projects to date, each consisting of two or more compositions, as components of just two or three major projects, which in turn are directed towards an even 'higher' unity. As minor proof of this, one might mention that the boundaries between projects often turn out to be rather slippery, rather permeable. That is, a work that is initially conceived and composed as part of Project X is subsequently appropriated into Project Y. So Zimmermann as fox or hedgehog? It's an open question.

### 3rd Theme: Musical Particulars

In the article mentioned above, Christopher Fox draws attention to two essential notions in Zimmermann's work: 'introverted virtuosity' and 'non-centred tonality' (the terms are the composer's own). 'Introverted virtuosity' means that although the highest demands are placed on the performer, only the performer (and perhaps other professional musicians in the audience) realise just how great these demands are. Far from offering an opportunity for crass virtuoso display, they constitute a sort of spiritual exercise. What is important here is that such difficulties are not fortuitous ones, such as might arise from negligence; they are clearly perceptible as a component of the basic compositional concept. I shall say more about this later.

'Non-centred tonality' is a particularly important notion for Zimmermann. The idea of a new kind of harmony - not 'functional' but focused - has long been a preoccupation of his, and in earlier years he was particularly impressed by Henri Pousseur's theoretical essay *L'Apothéose de Rameau*[7], which has analogous aims. Even today, he doesn't accept that 'the tonal question' is necessarily to be viewed as the province of conservative, historically regressively orientated musicians. He regards the virtual ban on tonality in every discussion of new music more as the sign of a 'cul de sac', which in turn is the result of a "chain reaction of avoidance strategies"[8]. So since the beginning of the 1980s he has been dedicated to cultivating this non-centred tonality, which is produced "by projecting two matrices over one another at different angles ... one of them is a number network, the other a pitch network". This "produces a constant fluctuation between tonalities: a kind of wandering through pitch fields which are tonally anchored (through overtone series and cycles of fifths). This wandering is determined by a magic square, which is uninfluenced by the decisions of the composing individual, but moves through the prescribed pitch field following the laws of chance. The superimposition of several paths creates pitch relations that constantly fluctuate between tonality and atonality"[9].

At the end of an early work, *In Understanding the Music Dies*, there is an extended unison melody. In that context, it represents the final coalescence of a gradual process of syntactic assemblage influenced by the theories of both Noam Chomsky and Otto Laske. But seen in retrospect, it has a broader significance: in later works the whole notion of

'unison' acquires a symbolic quality with emphatic social connotations that we shall return to. But earlier on, unisons were suspect in New Music, and had been for while: they implied the possibility of a togetherness, an affirmation, that back then hardly any representative of the European avant-garde wanted anything to do with. From Americans that sort of thing could maybe be tolerated - especially as 'naivety' - but from Europeans, absolutely not. That's exactly why Stockhausen's works were so heavily criticized in West Germany from the late sixties. But this was all the more so because they proclaimed the Will to Affirmation in such an apocalyptic manner (as in Hymnen).

There was never anything apocalyptic about Zimmermann's music. On the contrary, we are dealing with a notably ascetic music, whose inclination to affirmation is never expressed through pompous means, but on the contrary, through means that we would be more inclined to regard as disconcertingly fragile. For me, it's a music that says something like: we have to hope, even and especially when the world's dealings offer precious little encouragement to the principle of hope. It is, so to speak, a whispered conversation about hope.

#### 4th Theme: "Who's forbidding me to feel?"

The quotation comes from a conversation with the composer that took place a year and a half ago in Berlin[10]. It's not possible here to extrapolate substantial consequences from what this little sentence invokes, but at least a brief commentary is necessary.

Just a few years after Zimmermann's first works - that is, in the mid-seventies - a new group of German composers emerged: the one commonly associated with terms like 'New Romanticism' and 'New Simplicity'. Curiously, the latter was actually a term coined jointly by Walter Zimmermann and Wolfgang Becker to describe Zimmermann's own music at the time in the context of Cage's Cheap Imitation. The phrase was then appropriated by other people to describe a quite different kind of music[11]. Be that as it may, this historical situation had some strange consequences. I can readily imagine that if there had been no New Romanticism at that time - so no Rihm, no von Bose etc. - one would have judged the expressive traits in Zimmermann's music differently; by this I mean that in comparison to the music of the older Stockhausen generation, they would



have been more apparent. But precisely because this expressivity is mostly so restrained, in comparison to that of the New Romantics, this music was judged to be relatively abstract.

Here, as so often with Zimmermann, there is a paradox. In the course of the 1980s he often claimed that he wanted to 'depersonalise' his music; this in sharp contrast to the total subjectivity demanded by the New Romantics. Hence the matrices, and other processes one might describe as quasi-cabbalistic. But the result is a highly personal music, not just in terms of sound, but also because it creates an expressive domain of its own, whereas most of the Young Subjectivists' products - always excepting Wolfgang Rihm - were basically anonymous, precisely because they were based on inherited emotional clichés.

## 5th Theme: Shadows of Ideas

It's particularly appropriate, perhaps, that the last concert of the Weingartener Tage included one of a series of pieces called *Schatten der Ideen* (Shadows of Ideas). The title is drawn from the book *De umbris idearum* by Giordano Bruno, of whom we shall have more to say later. But the notion of music as "shadows of ideas" could, in my view, serve as a motto for almost all of Zimmermann's works of the last 15 years. What is so special about this? After all, one could argue that all the music with extra-musical influences that has come about over the centuries is somehow the "shadow of ideas". With Zimmermann, however, the relationship is very particular. The ideas, for the most part, come from the kernels of Western thinking: from philosophy and theology. That means, almost axiomatically, that as 'pure thought' (more or less) they resist quasi-pictorial, programmatic illustration: they have to be conveyed by some other means. By what means? There is no single answer, but many; and several of the works performed in Weingarten point towards them.

Even in making a first attempt to analyse Zimmermann's titles and inspirations, certain patterns, certain consistent features begin to emerge. At first - i.e. in the early works - the points of reference are notably 'modern': the economist Keith Gilbreth, and the grammarians (loosely defined) Chomsky and Laske. Then comes a crisis: an obsession

with the Orgon Theory of Wilhelm Reich, initiating what Zimmermann calls a "self-destructive phase", whose few compositional outcomes have never been performed. Provisional escape comes through an engagement with Zen Buddhism, surely stimulated by Cage, and especially the book *Beginner's Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki, which becomes the subject of a 50-minute work for piano. The crucial notion here is the eradication of all past philosophical, cultural and musical impositions, so as to start afresh. A *tabula rasa*, but one that is effected without external drama. In the cycle of piano pieces, this is depicted not as a state that has already been achieved, but as a sort of evolution. There are 3 'books', 1) Leave the Old, 2) Clean the Mind, 3) Change the Consciousness, containing several 'chapters' (there are forty in all), each of which in turn represents a stage of the desired leaving, cleaning or changing. So even here, one is dealing with the musical representation of ideas, not objects.

In the course of the following years a sort of Franco-German polarity emerges, in which the French are always contemporaries - Levi-Strauss, Deleuze, Barthes, and Daniel Charles - whereas the Germans are never amongst the living: Meister Eckhardt, Angelus Silesius, Novalis, Jean Paul Richter, und Nietzsche. Equally notably, the selected Frenchman are always philosophers, whereas the Germans are always poets or theologians (in this context, Nietzsche is emphatically to be seen as a poet). No doubt there is a nice thesis to be derived from this, but I shall not pursue it here.

Then from the late 1980s to the present - that is, the part of Zimmermann's work which is the main focus of the *Weingartener Tage* - there is increasing (though by no means exclusive) reference to antiquity, thanks not least to stimulus gained from his friend, the philosopher Hannes Bshringer. At first sight, one might think that the selection of thinkers invoked - Plato, Eratosphenes, Pythagoras, Epicurus, St. Augustine, Plotinus, Huygin, Porphyry and Lucretius (this listing follows the order in which they figure in Zimmermann's work) - looks a little arbitrary.

But if one then jumps forward many centuries, and takes as a starting point the "shadows of ideas", the *umbræ idearum* of the my title, a pattern starts to emerge. *De umbris idearum* is the title of an early book by Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600. He was burnt, not for his contribution to the *ars memoriae*, the Art of Memory (which is a conscious point of connection for Zimmermann), but

primarily because of his heretical insistence on the superiority of ancient Egyptian knowledge and magic to Christian doctrines. Yet his ideas on memory had the same roots: as Frances Yates showed nearly 40 years ago (in a celebrated book, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*[12], which Zimmermann too prized highly), Bruno was an extreme example of the late Renaissance Magus - a neoplatonist attached to the hermetic tradition arising from the fictitious Hermes Trismegistus. To whom did the neoplatonists refer?: naturally to Plato, to the 3rd-century Plotinus, the first of the neoplatonists, and to his early biographer and disciple Porphyry. They also attach importance to the ideas of Epicurus, as conveyed by Lucretius. In all this, number has a significant role to play, above all when it has mystical implications comparable to or compatible with cabala. The significant figure here from antiquity is, of course, Pythagoras. But one may also include Eratosthenes, third Librarian of the Library of Alexandria - surely a repository of endless ancient arcana - who wrote about the mathematics underlying Plato's theories.

Of the less familiar figures, Huygin was a 2nd century Pope of Greek origin whose *Fabulae* and *De Astronomia* were also known to the Hermetics. And from their own work, one should mention another source that has played a major role for Zimmermann, namely the late-15th century *Hypnerptomachia Poliphilii* of Francesco Colonna, whose illustrations are full of alchemically orientated images. In this company, it's St. Augustine who looks like the heretic! Indeed, there is a certain irony here, in that Augustine's hostile reaction to the early hermetic tradition and all forms of magic would surely have contributed to the downfall, 1200 years later, of Giordano Bruno, the author of *Shadows of Ideas*.

What is one to make of all this? On the face of it, I can scarcely think of any contemporary composer who seems less likely than Walter Zimmermann to want to assume the role of a latter-day Magus. And if, perhaps perversely, one were looking to associate him with a leading figure from Renaissance hermeticism, then surely not - despite an inner restlessness - with the fiery Giordano Bruno, but with the much more restrained and refined Marsilius Ficino, who didn't regard the ancient knowledge as an opportunity to conjure up demons, but as pathway to ecstasy and even redemption of the soul. Be that as it may, it would be hard to overestimate the influence of neoplatonism on Zimmermann. And this reveals an unexpected, even improbable connection with certain

composers of the so-called 'New Complexity'! One instance here must stand for many: the pseudo-Renaissance woodcut (actually a 19th century pastiche) that inspired Zimmermann's composition *Ursache und Vorwitz* is the very one that served 30 years earlier as a model for Brian Ferneyhough's *Transit*!

Leaving such speculation aside, what are the practical implications, in terms of both composing and performing? In terms of composition technique, one could point to Zimmermann's frequent use since 1984 of the sieve of Eratosthenes, which yields a 12th order matrix with only prime numbers. The musical dimensions of Pythagoras's mathematical thinking also have implications for various pieces which investigate non-tempered tunings, or the conflict between tempered and non-tempered tunings.

But above all, various ideas gleaned from these ancient thinkers serve as a source for their transference - one might be tempted to think of alchemical transmutation - into the musical construction. This occurs in many different ways, which are not necessarily audible, but are partly so, and even visible too. That is, the basic ideas are sometimes conveyed through physical actions. As a first example, let's take the 2nd movement of *Geduld und Gelegenheit* for cello and piano, composed in 1987. The movement is called *Sala della pazienza*; the title refers to a hall in Ferrara, where depictions of patience and opportunity are placed opposite one another. To quote the composer: "what happens there is that pizzicato and arco must be attempted simultaneously, which doesn't actually work. Or a pizz. and arco together as double stops ... leading to an interplay of reciprocal blocking and stumbling ... just as patience and opportunity get in each other's way"[13].

Even more striking examples can be found in the string trio *Distentio*, composed in 1991. Here ideas from the XIth book of St. Augustine's *Confessiones*, which deals primarily with time, are partly conveyed through physical movements that an audience can perceive both visually and acoustically. One is dealing here with four meanings of the term 'distentio'- namely extension, tension, disunity and distraction - which then become the principal ideas underlying four of the trio's five movements. In the first movement, for instance, each entry consists of two notes: a held harmonic and a glissando, with the glissando always stretching "from the given note to the maximum spread of the hand"; on the violin and viola this mainly produces an octave, and on the cello a sixth. In addition, there are sometimes pizzicatos. Moreover, in this context these three kinds of sound -

held note, glissando and pizzicato - acquire a meaning relating to St. Augustine's text: the held note as memoria, pizzicato as contuitus, and glissando as expectatio. What this means is that each main sound innately contains both past (memoria) and future (expectatio). These sounds are of various lengths, whereas the present (contuitus - i.e. the instant) can only be short. In the middle movement, entitled "Potter's Wheel", the representation is even more literal. St. Augustine wonders whether, "if all the lights of the sky ceased to move but the potter's wheel continued to turn, would there not still be time by which we could measure its rotations?"[14]. In this middle movement, and again in the short final movement, a potter's wheel (actually a lathe) is set in motion, and then very gently bowed and stopped with the string players' bows.

It is not just ideas from antiquity that are handled in this way. For instance, in *Fragmente der Liebe*, for tenor saxophone and string trio, Zimmermann takes as his starting point the 80 'figures' that Roland Barthes lists in alphabetical order at the beginning of his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: "s'abîmer", "absence", "adorable" etc.. These, along with their translation into German, are transformed into musical figures. This is done by representing the letters A - H with the corresponding pitches, just as Bach, Schumann etc. did, but here with each letter as a semiquaver. Where this doesn't work (apart from S, from I - Z), each letter is treated as a semiquaver extension of the previous pitch, so that figures are formed. In the course of his preface, Barthes often refers to music; sometimes he actually presents the basic figures of his *discours amoureux* as if they were already music. By way of example (the quotation is abbreviated): "Each figure explodes, vibrates in and of itself like a sound severed from any tune - or is repeated in satiety, like the motif of a hovering music. No logic links the figures, determines their contiguity: the figures are non-syntagmatic, non-narrative ... Such sentences are matrices of figures precisely because they remain suspended; they utter the effect, then break off"[15]. It's not hard to imagine how these sentences of Barthes' found an immediate resonance in Zimmermann. Especially the last sentence: "matrices of figures ... remain suspended ... utter the affect, then break off" - that already sounds like a description of the music Zimmermann was writing at the time.

I hope it is clear, even from these few examples, that with Zimmermann there is no single, transparent and lasting relationship between concept and work. What always binds them together is the composer's persona. He alone determines their consistency or

inconsistency. And behind this lie all kinds of reactions to entirely personal circumstances, which are not, however, the listener's concern. Yet it's exactly because of this, though for other reasons too, that in retrospect the composer takes a very critical view of some of his own works, but this doesn't oblige us to share his opinion. For example, he often has the idea that a work must have failed, because it doesn't match his original intentions. We can certainly take note of such opinions; but in a way, they too are none of our business.

It will have struck many of you, perhaps, that the titles of Zimmermann's works inhabit a particular domain. They are not pictorial or programmatic, nor do they describe what the piece, or the composer, is supposed to have achieved. Sometimes quite the opposite: Zimmermann has described his titles as "the places I am not at"[16]. This does not mean that they are irrelevant, but rather that they point to ideal goals that are currently inaccessible to him. Towards the end of his essay on Zimmermann's Saitenspiel, Dieter Rexroth tellingly observes that "On the one hand, one recognises here the typical representative of the modern world, the kind of person who restlessly travels the world, and is at home everywhere and nowhere; on the other hand, this restlessness constantly conveys the need for a fixed place, for attachment to a salving and sheltering structure that represents an objective truth independent of human determinations, and, as part of nature, embodies something whole and all-embracing"[17].

There are certain themes that seem to run throughout Zimmermann's output, and are also apparent in the titles of works. But they may change in significance over the years. As examples, let's take the concepts 'desert' and 'unison'. The desert has, for Zimmermann as earlier for Varèse (in *Déserts*), both physical and metaphysical significance. In 1975 he interviewed several American experimental composers, and the results were published in the collection *Desert Plants*[18]: here the desert is a metaphor, with positive connotations: the idea that even in a hostile environment, beautiful things can emerge. The next year, the desert became a physical reality; Zimmermann travelled to the Siwah Oasis, in the middle of the Egyptian desert, to make ethnomusicological field recordings. Then, a decade later, he moved from Cologne to Berlin, in a state of considerable emotional depression; this is partly documented in the essay *Morton Feldman - "...to be lonely"*[19]. Here the desert is an inner one, that of the 'hollow man' who, however, can sometimes also produce his 'desert plants': in this case the *Lied im Wÿsten-Vogel-Ton* for bass flute

and piano (described by Zimmermann as "deadly sad"), whose title comes from a poem by Nietzsche, und Wÿstenwanderung for piano. The latter work, in the composer's words, "depicts the creation of the world soul according to Plato's Timaeus, getting increasingly complicated, and collapsing from its own complexity, which has become machine-like"[20]. The demands here on the pianist deliberately verge on the impossible. Zimmermann says: "These excessive demands match the described path: a path that goes astray, into the desert that one has to overcome"[21].

With the idea of 'unison', which admittedly never figures as the title of a piece, but is a recurrent basic element in Zimmermann's works, the situation is no less complex. In contrast to the 'conventional' unison, such as the one to be heard at the end of In Understanding Music, the Sound Dies, here unison is mainly regarded as an unattainable goal, or at least as a state that can't be maintained for long. In The Echoing Green for violin and piano, for example, the unison the players sometimes seem to be striving for can never really come about, because of the violinist's Pythagorean intonation. In the string quartet Festina lente, it sometimes happens that two or more players are supposed to constantly execute unison glissandi. Inevitably, the attempt fails, but this is aesthetically productive: something emerges that sounds much richer than what was notated.

The situation is similar in the four pieces entitled Shadows of Cold Mountain. Cold Mountain is the title of a group of drawings by Brice Marden, which in turn were inspired by the calligraphy of a Tang dynasty Chinese poet, Han Shan (whose name means 'cold mountain'). Parts of these drawings are 'transcribed' for various instruments as unison glissandi that, once again, are scarcely sustainable as pure unisons: they are constantly fractured. Yet in constantly evoking an ideal that may be unrealisable, they produce fragile 'borderline phenomena' of exceptional subtlety. One could regard this as yet another instance of 'introverted virtuosity', in this case implying a dialectical interpretation: where there is no capacity for imperfection, there's probably no music either.

The latter has to do with process - long familiar to composers in the electronic studio - of 'phase shifting'. If one, for example, one has a large number of sine tones perfectly in phase, and then starts to shift them out of phase, what happens is that one immediately

plunges from apparent simplicity into the utmost complexity, which then resolves somewhat as the process continues. What fascinates Zimmermann is the insight that in this situation, order and chaos are not opposites lying at the two poles of a linear process, but immediate neighbours: one transmutes immediately into the other.

Since reference has now been made to electro-acoustic music, I'll ask you to indulge a little digression concerning it. For decades, electro-acoustic music has been represented as an emblem of technology-driven progress. It will be no surprise that Zimmermann has not generally subscribed to this view. In the early seventies he briefly studied electronic music at Colgate University. He didn't produce any electronic works as such, but he did produce several individual sounds, which were partly deployed in the early work *Akkordarbeit*. But until very recently, these sounds had no successors. Over the decades they occasionally showed up [in *Ursache und Vorwitz*, for example], sounding ever more ancient and decrepit, until they ultimately became anything but 'progressive': in fact, more like an 'arte povera'.

## 6th Theme: Germany

Finally, I should undoubtedly try, still as an outsider, to locate Zimmermann's work within the general context of German music. This is no easy undertaking, partly because of the unique character of his compositions, which scarcely resemble those of any other German composer, but also because, in the last few years, the defining rules have changed. Many years ago, I would have considered Zimmermann's work in relation to West German music in general, and Cologne in particular; later also in relation to Berlin as an isolated outpost of West Germany within Eastern territory. But in the last decade, it has become far from clear what is currently implied by the term 'German music' - whether the term still has strong aesthetic connotations, or only geographical ones. Here, naturally, I am referring primarily to the consequences of German reunification.

Perhaps I can explain some of my difficulties more concretely by referring to two series of recordings published by the Deutsches Musikrat. Up to 1983 the Musikrat published a series of discs called "Contemporary Music in West Germany"; there were 10 albums each with 3 discs. On the 8th album there was an extended excerpt from Zimmermann's



Lokale Musik (1979), along with works from the same period by Hamel, Henze, Hespos, Huber, Kagel, Riedl, Spahlinger and Yun. This didn't seek to imply that all these composers were going down the same path! But it did occur to me that, with the possible exception of Henze and Riedl, these were all composers whose names could easily have come up in conversations with Zimmermann, even if only to clarify differences of opinion. And that was typical of the whole series. The situation of music in West German may have been pluralistic, but - Habermas notwithstanding - it was scarcely obscure or unintelligible.

More recently, the Musikrat has been producing a set of 150 CDs entitled "Music in Germany 1950-2000". This time, I must confess, I'm puzzled. Since Helmut Lachenmann's Staub and Gunter Kochan's 5th Symphony appear on the CD, I assume they must have something in common (apart from being orchestral compositions), but I have no idea what it might be. The same thing happens when, for example, I hear Johannes Fritsch's Akroasis in company with symphonic works by former East Germans Ernst Hermann Meyer and Fritz Geißler. Using an atlas, I can see the proximity; but using my ears, I can't hear it. Now the situation does indeed seem unintelligible.

Curiously, in this new CD context, Walter Zimmermann fares rather better. Excerpts from Lokale Musik (once again) and Saitenspiel are found on CDs with the titles "A New World Music" and "Free Ensembles", and this time the company (i.e. the other composers) doesn't seem too incongruous. Maybe it's because these are 'genres' that were not much cultivated in East Germany. But in fact, are they genres at all? They seem more like the kinds of categories one invents for things that don't fit anywhere else.

Maybe this is the key to 'locating' Zimmermann's work. Where does it 'fit'? Perhaps it simply doesn't. I have often wondered why his compositions seemed to be neglected in favour of works by undeniably less talented and individual German composers. And increasingly, I believe the answer is that his work has always been too independent - that it has never been easy to accommodate within current cultural agendas. But this is precisely one of the things about his music that I treasure: it shows that nonconformism does not always have to mean protest, and that one can be affirmative without resorting to trumpets and drums. This, for me, is 'free music' in the truest sense - may it ever remain so!

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- [1] Introductory lecture, XVI. Weingartener Tage für Neue Musik, 15 November 2002. English translation by the author.
- [2] K. Stockhausen: Texte zur Musik, Bd. 3 (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1971), opposite 117.
- [3] I. Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1953/1993).
- [4] Cf. W. Zimmermann, *Insel Musik* (Cologne: Beginner Press, 1981), 222ff.
- [5] Conversation with the author, Berlin, February 2001.
- [6] C. Fox, "Cage-Eckhart-Zimmermann", in *Tempo* 159, 1986.
- [7] H. Pousseur, "L'Apothéose de Rameau", in *Revue d'Esthétique* (special number), 1968.
- [8] Conversation; cf. note 4.
- [9] Composer's note to *Sternwanderung*.
- [10] Conversation.
- [11] Cf. O. Kolleritsch (Ed.), *Zur "Neuen Einfachheit" in der Musik* (Vienna - Graz: Universal, 1981).
- [12] F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition* (London : Routledge & K. Paul, 1964).
- [13] Conversation.
- [14] St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 271.
- [15] R. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. English edition, *A Lover's Discourse*, trans. R. Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 6-7.
- [16] Conversation.
- [17] D. Rexroth, "Gedacht - mit beiden Beinen auf der Erde", in *Melos*, 1/1985.
- [18] In *Insel Musik*; cf. note 3.
- [19] In H.-K. Metzger and R. Riehn (eds.), *Morton Feldman, Musik-Konzepte* 48/9, 95-104.
- [20] Composer's programme note.
- [21] *Ibid.*