

A comment on the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival

Part One

Barbara Slaughter
22 March 2006

Pierre Boulez was once asked about the problems of presenting contemporary music to the public. He said that people have to be educated to understand new music and that it was necessary for musicians to go out and build an audience.

Just such a project was undertaken 28 years ago in Huddersfield, a small industrial town in the north of England. The Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (HCMF) was born in 1978, the brainchild of Richard Steinitz, professor of music at Huddersfield University, supported by an enlightened local authority and a regional arts organisation. It began as a modest weekend event, with a budget of £3,000, and has since grown to become perhaps the leading annual contemporary music festival in Europe.

From the outset, the organisers have made a point of drawing in people from the local area. Today, 50 percent of the audience comes from West Yorkshire, 45 percent from the rest of the UK and approximately 5 percent from overseas. Unlike the audiences for classical music generally, the audience at Huddersfield tends to fall between 25 and 55 years of age and includes university and college students and groups of school pupils who are involved in the festival.

Over the years, the festival has been visited by composers of international renown, such as Elliot Carter, John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Steve Reich, Arvo Part, Tan Dun, and Michael Torke. Most of them had new works being premiered and almost of all gave talks about their music or did workshops with young musicians.

The most recent festival, in late 2005, put on 50 separate concerts over 10 days, involving national and international performers and composers—including concerts devoted to the music of Scandinavia and Japan—as well as talks, film shows and workshops.

One of the musicians featured in the festival was the German composer, Helmut Lachenmann. Concerts over the last weekend celebrated his 70th birthday. He was not able to be in Huddersfield because he was attending a similar celebration elsewhere, which was a pity because it would have been very interesting to hear him speak about his work.

Lachenmann was born in Stuttgart in 1935. He studied at the Stuttgart School of Music from 1955 to 1958. In 1957, he attended the Darmstadt summer school in Germany, which since the end of the Second World War had become the centre of progressive and experimental musical thought. The school was dominated by people like Boulez and Stockhausen, who wanted to break from previous musical traditions and were looking for new forms of music making.

At Darmstadt Lachenmann met the Italian composer Luigi Nono, who was at that time a member of the Italian Communist Party. Nono had a great influence on Lachenmann, both politically and artistically, although Lachenmann himself never joined the CP. He has since explained that he “adhered to Luigi Nono, because whereas—so it seemed to me—the other

composers were all standing there more or less detached from tradition, turning their backs on it, Nono was the only one whose path consciously involved tradition, as redefined by him.”

Richard Steinitz recently wrote of Nono, that he was a composer for whom every note had to have “a political and structural purpose.” Recalling his apprenticeship with Nono, Lachenmann wrote, “I never dared to write a trill.... If I wrote two notes together, Nono would say, ‘This is a melodic cell,’ or he would demand, ‘Where is your political standpoint?’ ”

In the 1960s, Lachenmann went on to develop his own musical ideas. He rejected the *musique concrete* style, practiced by composers like Pierre Schaeffer, which brought together everyday sounds and combined them in a kind of aural collage. Instead, he developed what he called *musique concrete instrumentale*, which sought to discover new instrumental possibilities, playing instruments in new and unorthodox ways, rather than making what he called the “conventional beautiful philharmonic sound.”

His work often provoked controversy. In 1985, members of the Southwestern Radio Symphony Orchestra of Stuttgart refused to perform the premier of his composition *Staub*, based on material drawn from Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*—that they had commissioned—claiming it was unplayable.

However, according to Steinitz, such confrontations are mostly a thing of the past, musicians’ resistance having given way to respect. Lachenmann confounds those who say his music is unplayable by taking his own violin to rehearsals to demonstrate the fingering of obscure harmonies.

And he is willing to take risks. For example, in *Nun*, his double concerto for flute and trombone, the conductor is given *carte blanche* to add or remove instrumental groups as he or she pleases, whilst the music is driven forward by the insistent rhythm of the strings.

I knew nothing of this background when I attended Lachenmann concerts in Huddersfield. But listening to his music, performed by the Ensemble Modern, was the most exciting musical experience I have had for a long time—especially two of his major works, *Mouvement*, written in 1984, and *Concertini*, which was receiving its UK premier.

It is hard to describe the impact the music made. Some of the players produced extraordinary sounds with their instruments. Aficionados of contemporary music may have wanted to know how every sound was made, but I just closed my eyes and let the music flood over me. At times, the sound was terrifying; at others, it was atmospheric and mysterious. There seemed to be no fixed time signature, rather a free-flowing rhythm, with the piano providing a kind of echo effect. My body was vibrating with the sound. It was frightening, and suddenly there was a banal tap-tap-tapping. Then there was a clamour of brass from the back of the balcony; the sound swooped and rose. It had so much energy, it seemed to present a

challenge to the listener.

The young players of the Ensemble Modern performed with tremendous enthusiasm and consummate skill. The conductor was beating in 4/4, but within that there seemed to be almost total freedom for the players. It was an exhilarating musical experience.

Lachenmann's music has been described as "pointillistic." It is a term that he himself rejects, but it seemed to sum up my impression of the music on first hearing. There were no long phrases for any of the musicians, no opportunities for individuals to shine. But the whole orchestra shone together. They seemed to perform organically, as if, in a strange way, they were one instrument. The music was truly life-affirming.

The Lachenmann concert held on the previous night, also performed by Ensemble Modern, was much smaller in scale and very different in mood. One of the pieces was written for just two guitars. It was dedicated to Christopher Caudwell, Communist Party member, poet and author of the book *Illusion and Reality*, who was killed at the battle at Jarama in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. In the programme notes, Lachenmann explains that he had incorporated spoken words or thoughts, derived from the text of *Illusion and Reality*, into the work. I was looking forward to hearing it, but I was disappointed, partly because it seemed that to be effective it required a much smaller, more intimate space.

The *Contemporary Music Review* (CMR) recently devoted a whole issue to the work of Lachenmann. In an interview, he explained many of his ideas about his music. He said that he had rejected electronic music 35 years ago: "A loudspeaker is a totally sterile instrument. Even the most exciting sounds are no longer exciting when projected through a loudspeaker. There is no danger in it anymore.... With electronics, there is not ambivalence. There is no history there...."

"A composer is not a missionary. A composer is not a prophet. A composer is not John the Baptist, who made critiques to the people saying, 'You are all sinners.' This political aspect is an illusion. If I thought music was a higher message, then I think I must give some sort of political message, of freedom, of liberty. My teacher was Luigi Nono, a communist. He always had the hope of touching people and changing their consciousness. I think art does such things, but the composer who wants to manipulate the spirit or conscience of another will always fail. It is not possible...."

"Each fugue or invention of Johann Sebastian Bach was not done to make the world better, but it did make the world better...because it was one of the documents of totally concentrated, totally free human spirit. Not more, not less."

The composer's most profound outlook as an artist was, I think, demonstrated in an anecdote he related in the same interview. When challenged by the interviewer, Paul Steenhuis, that there was a view that his music was "negative," he replied:

"For me my music has as much beauty as any conventional music, maybe more. Beauty is a precious idea. I want to liberate this term from the standardised categories. I will give you an example. I used to teach children and I presented them with the music of Stockhausen, etc. They said it was not beautiful and they did not like it. I asked them what they liked, what they thought was beautiful, and they first hesitantly named some pop music. The next week, I went there and brought two pictures with me. One was an attractive photograph of the movie star Sophia Loren. The other was a drawing by Albrecht Dürer, who had drawn a picture of his mother: very old, with a long nose, a bitter-looking face. She had had a hard life and her face was full of wrinkles. I showed them the two pictures and asked, 'Who is more beautiful?' They were totally confused, and then came a wonderful answer I will never forget—it was the highlight of my life. A girl said, 'I think the ugly one is more beautiful.' This is the dialectical way. Looking at this picture, one feels the precise observation of her son. Not to make it more beautiful, not idealised, just

showing it. It was full of *intensity*. To me, as important as beauty is the word *intensity*. I search for this in my music."

The Japanese composer Jo Kondo was also featured at the festival. His music was very different from Lachenmann's. It was spare, cool, and seemed to be devoid of emotion.

Kondo was asked about his musical influences, growing up as a young man in Japan. He said, "You may have illusions about the Japanese musical life. But I grew up [in Japan] in a totally western environment. I discovered Japanese music in my twenties. It wasn't Beethoven who influenced me but Feldman and John Cage.... In Japan I am seen as totally western and in the west it is the opposite, but I don't care."

He described his style as one of "dynamic stasis," not goal-oriented, moving "from moment to moment but never organised in larger trends leading to a climax.... Eventually I find the end point so it seems that it is planned form but it is not. It is improvisation on paper, but it is completely intuitive."

In the programme notes, he stressed the importance of each individual sound. "I believe that each sound has its own entity and life.... This may explain one of the general characteristics of my music: a relatively sparse and transparent texture in which every single tone can be to some extent be laid bare...."

"In my compositions I do not try to achieve a 'meaningful whole' (in the traditional sense) by working on intertonal relationships.... It could be said that my compositions, rather than an integrated sound construction, are a collection of sounds, each with its own musical quality given by its intertonal relationships...."

Ensemble Nomad, a group that plays an important role in promoting contemporary music in Japan, devoted a whole programme to Kondo's music. *Ilex*, for violin and piano, is a contemplative piece. It begins with a violin obligato and the piano below, each instrument charting its own path, listening only to itself. At a certain point, they seem to begin moving in relation to each other, not together or even in the same direction, but in relation to each other. It ends with a beautiful sustained note.

Moments of silence and the breaking of silence are important in all music. But in each of Kondo's pieces there were so many huge spaces—such long pauses—that one became tired of waiting for the next sound. It was like listening to someone who in conversation speaks so slowly that his or her speech loses all coherence. Kondo stressed that each sound "has its own entity and life," and this is how he writes. Another Japanese composer gave a very interesting interview in which he likened his own music to Japanese calligraphy. He spoke about the relation between space and time, the way that silence hovers and sound goes back into silence. Bearing this in mind, I think that I, at least, still have to learn to listen to Kondo's music.

To be continued



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact