

The Experience of Complexity: The Critical Discussion Concerning Brian Ferneyhough

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For a composer as established as Brian Ferneyhough, there is still relatively little written about him. Although a new book has just appeared in French,¹ most of what has been done in English has been in dissertation form,² plus some articles, including a number of exemplary careful analyses by Richard Toop, the coiner of the term New Complexity. Ferneyhough's own dense and opaquely written essays are hardly written to popularize him through any easy slogans, either:³ they must be read repeatedly for comprehension, just as his music requires repeated hearings. Yet this is a composer whose work needs interpretation to be understood: there is nothing self-evident about Ferneyhough, and one wonders at times if the monicker of New Complexity has not done as much harm as good, by distracting listeners from the music's *Gehalt*.⁴ One of the paradoxes of Ferneyhough is precisely that the extreme reflexivity of his work—its multiple masks and ironies—makes it recalcitrant to the old avant-gardist stance of "isms" or manifestos, and yet the very complexity of that work cannot but have a polemical and thus "critical" aspect (although the term "critical" cannot be understood in the old sense, say, of "ideology criticism," much less of engaged art).

Some of the extant literature, especially Toop's detailed look at *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*,⁵ has already given a sense of the elaborate workings of Ferneyhough's compositional method, his simultaneous use of detailed formal grids and plans and frequent ironic departures from them, leading to a kind of meta-music, or music about the compositional process itself. What still needs to be discussed is his aesthetic. The first two essays in Ulrich Tadday's edited volume of *Musik-Konzepte* address just this.

¹ Francis Courtot, *Brian Ferneyhough: Figures et dialogues* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009).

² Ross Feller, *Multicursal Labyrinths in the Work of Brian Ferneyhough* (DMA, University of Illinois, 1994); Peter Reynolds, *The music of Brian Ferneyhough* (MA, University College of Wales, Cardiff, 1983). In German, see Cordula Paetzold, *Carceri d'Invenzione von Brian Ferneyhough: Kompositionstechnische und Höranalytische Aspekte* (Ph.D., Freiburg, 2002); Pietro Cavallotti, *Differenzen: Poststrukturalistische Aspekte in der Musik der 1980er Jahre am Beispiel von Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough und Gérard Grisey* (Schliengen: Argos, 2006); and the discussion of both by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, "Ins Detail: Zwei Dissertationen zu Brian Ferneyhough," *Musik & Ästhetik*, vol. 11, no.42 (Apr 2007). pp. 110-113. In French, see the special issues no. 8 of *Contrechamps* (1988) and *Entretiens* no. 3 (February 1987).

³ *Collected Writings*, ed. James Borwood and Richard Toop (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1995).

⁴ On *Gehalt* as distinct from "content" (and form), see Harry Lehmann, "Avant-Garde Today. A Theoretical Model of Aesthetic Modernity," Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf et al., eds., *Critical Composition Today* (Hofheim: Wolke, 2006), p. 31, n. 28. *Gehalt*—an important term already in Adorno—translates into "content as mediated by experience."

⁵ "Brian Ferneyhough's *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*," *Perspectives of New Music*, 28, no. 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 52-101.

Ferdinand Zehenreiter's article takes some time to get to its main point, reviewing Adorno's and Lévi-Strauss' critiques of post-1945 musical modernism in order to extract what he sees as their common objection, namely post-Webernism's loss of the dimension of musical *Erfahrung* or experience. *Erfahrung* is, for Adorno, tied to music's linguistic character, something lost in the total rationality of Darmstadt; yet Adorno's own tactical retreat to Mahler and Berg—in reaction against post-Webernism—was unable to make fruitful use of this insight. Zehenreiter contends that Ferneyhough's aesthetic, in a metacritique of Darmstadt, is an attempt to do better justice to experience, in particular its temporal dimension. To this end, Ferneyhough's essay "The Tactility of Time" is cited. "When we listen intensively to a piece of music there are moments when our consciousness detaches itself from the immediate flow of events and comes to stand apart, measuring, scanning, aware of itself operating in a 'speculative time space' of dimensions different from those appropriate to the musical discourse in and of itself."⁶ Is Ferneyhough referring to the experience of what Adorno called "schöne Stellen" or beautiful passages, where listening seems to transcend time? Not quite, for he goes on to add—with his characteristic "metaphysics of positivism"⁷—that "we become aware of the passing of time as something closely approaching a physical, objectivized *presence*."

It is not hard to think of passages in Ferneyhough's own work where that happens, whether the mysterious "Intervention IV" in the *String Trio* (bars 221-231), or that piece's conclusion, or many passages in *Mnemosyne*, or in the *Sonatas for String Quartet*. Zehenreiter makes the interesting suggestion that complexity itself may be a means to *Erfahrung*: "In the context of his theory of expressivity the 'excessive demands' [on the listener] may be read contrarily as the fulfilment of a restless, boundary-dissolving hunger for experience" (p. 16). "Hunger for experience" is the title of a famous book by Michael Rutschky defining the stance of the 1968 generation in Germany after the failure of political revolt.⁸ This could apply to Ferneyhough as well, who belonged to the same age group.

Zehenreiter then goes on to discuss Ferneyhough's central concept of "figure," as something both produced from the resistance of larger systems or schemes and also sedimented with meaning. "Figure," for Ferneyhough, thus takes the place of Adorno's category of the *Einfall* or idea: rather than being, as in Adorno, a trace of spontaneous subjective impulse, the figure is already mediated by language, must become expressive through change. Thus for Ferneyhough, expression is itself a matter of transition from one state to another (p. 15). The "figure" becomes less a monad than a kind of vector of energy.

Lois Fitch's article discusses the influence of Deleuze, in particular his book on Francis Bacon, on Ferneyhough's aesthetic, centering on his concept of gesture. Fitch wants to define this on the one hand through Ferneyhough's critique of New Romanticism (with its use of borrowed "gestures") and on the other through an impetus "to capture both a certain transparency and directness of expression as well as a less transparent presence, which resists immediate interpretation" (p. 21). This latter is a presence of force, as in Deleuze's famous idea that art is not a question of "inventing forms" but of

⁶ *Collected Writings*, p. 43.

⁷ Clytus Gottwald, "Brian F. oder Von der Metaphysik des Positivismus," *Melos/Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 3, no. 4 (1977), pp. 299-308.

⁸ *Erfahrungshunger: Ein Essay über die siebziger Jahre* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1980).

"capturing forces."⁹ Gesture and figure relate in Ferneyhough as body and figure in Deleuze (p. 27). As the "deformed bodies" of Bacon's paintings "escape from themselves" through the tension of spasms, so Ferneyhough's figures seek to escape their gestural origins (pp. 27-29). Again, Ferneyhough's own writing is cited, wherein gesture is "throwing its shadow beyond the limits set by its physical borders."¹⁰ Fitch is clearly correct that Deleuze has been important for Bacon, and her intuitions make sense: one would like to see them eventually backed up with more evidence from musical material.

After two translations from Ferneyhough's own work ("Il Tempo della Figura" and "Parallel Universes"), Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf gives a brief snapshot of *La Terre est un homme*, Ferneyhough's most ambitious work for orchestra. That this piece has never been released on a recording impedes our understanding of the composer to this day: other than an LP of *Transit* that has been long out of print, there is no recording of any of Ferneyhough's orchestral work available (not *Firecycle Beta* either). Until these pieces are recorded, the public cannot properly evaluate Ferneyhough's larger status as composer. (To give a comparable example, one would have to imagine never having heard *Gruppen* or Carter's *Variations for Orchestra*.) Especially valuable here is that Mahnkopf describes the *experience* of hearing *La Terre est un homme*, its fiercely dense polyphony (up to 42 voices at one point!), its audible points of formal articulation (pp. 57-59). One remembers Stravinsky's comment that he only tried to listen to one line of *Le marteau sans maître* at a time; so Ferneyhough himself recommends that a proper performance of *La Terre est un homme* is one which gives its distinct strata or layers most independence. As Mahnkopf notes, the aesthetic of this piece is that of a late-modernist sublime (p. 59), and not of beauty. It was also apparently the end-point of a particular phase in the composer's development, for his next works were already simpler, less "telluric" or "cosmological" (p. 61). If Ferneyhough's "late style" began in the 1990s (p. 61), one wonders where he has gone since then (what remains "after" a late style)? The essay also contains interesting material on the painting of Roberto Matta, a Chilean Surrealist and friend of André Breton's, from which Ferneyhough borrowed his title. Mahnkopf argues that the micro-macro conceit of the title means also that Ferneyhough's "ideal of subjectivity in art was never a private, escapist one (and not at all that which was propagated in the 1970s, especially in Germany, where he was active and was, so to speak, philosophically assimilated); the personal, private or intimate are for him largely not capable of being made into art [*kunstfähig*]" (p. 63). This would condition the earlier suggestion that Ferneyhough's music is driven by a "hunger for experience;" if this is true, that experience is not the merely private one of 1970s New Subjectivity, for Ferneyhough's work has often referred to a larger, metaphysical domain that was alien to the likes of Peter Handke (although not so alien to Handke's friend Wim Wenders).

Cordula Pätzold's article is drawn from her lengthy dissertation on *Carceri d'invenzione*, and is the most structurally detailed of all the contributions in the volume, replete with graphs and series. However, the bulk of her piece is devoted to large, overall structures of *Carceri*, to its planning of time, underpinned by the thesis that the work as a whole is defined by the contrast between music generated by automatic formal schemes and more freely composed passages. This is indeed correct, and Pätzold's survey of the sketches for the piece at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel is philologically helpful. As

⁹ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1981), p. 39.

¹⁰ *Collected Writings*, p. 27.

she points out, the cycle combines both pieces composed "top-down" (in the manner of Carter or Stockhausen) and those built up from detail (in the manner of Boulez' compositional technique). As in Carter, segments of the compositional plan allowed the composer to choose freely from a set of available pitches to create lines. These melodic lines are often condensations of multiple serial strata (as in Boulez' idea of "virtual" or "latent polyphony").¹¹ One would only want to know more than Pätzold tells us about what specific decisions Ferneyhough made in the freer passages, and on what compositional grounds. What is it that gives Ferneyhough's linear writing its energy and vivacity, even beyond the unity of underlying systematic grids and plans?

The last article in the volume is devoted to *Shadowtime*, a piece than can be difficult even for some of Ferneyhough's admirers, due not—as some reviewers assumed—to its complexity but to its subject matter and libretto. Difficult, in particular, not to feel unease at the hero-worship that has improbably but inexorably grown up around Benjamin (initiated, in the English-speaking world, by Susan Sontag's essay on him in *Under the Sign of Saturn*): at the strange conflation of Benjamin's idiosyncratic thought with his biography, the uncritical adulation that overlooks the problematic aspects of the later Benjamin, such as his deliberate simplifications, if not downright crudenesses, in the "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," an essay in which nearly every prognosis or prediction has been proven wrong (which has never troubled Benjamin's camp followers in the slightest), or his misguidedly classicizing interpretation of Brecht's poetry. As with Celan (or, decades earlier, Rilke), the identification with Benjamin as "Holy Man" permits no critical distance. This odd fixation on Benjamin's person even permeates some of Derrida's work on him, down to an excruciatingly inappropriate pun on "Walter" and Heidegger's *Walten* (to reign or govern).¹² Poor Benjamin, one suspects, would not have been comfortable with this—much less with being the subject of an opera (an art form he never liked).

That *Shadowtime* calls itself a "thought opera" does not solve the problem. Benjamin's life and his thought were *not* one and the same thing: to treat them as such is academic trivialization. Is History not being aestheticized in this libretto (precisely the aspect of Fascism Benjamin himself famously attacked at the end of the "Artwork" essay)? Clearly any substantial engagement with *Shadowtime* would have to deal with the problematic aspects of institutionalized memory, particularly of the Holocaust—the topic of many a book and article already in the 1990s.¹³ Beyond this, however, Bernstein's libretto seems often frankly academic, so that Ferneyhough, in effect, has to set professorial literary theory to music—hardly an inspiring prospect. One example will suffice:

Benjamin: Language as such, that is the text / That we interpret / And that interprets us
Gershom Scholem: Are you ready to be the new Rashi / Raising commentary to new heights / So that the art of criticism / Becomes a sacred process / Releasing the sparks inside the words?
Benjamin: Critique cannot confine itself to letters / But must also confront / That which animates the letters

¹¹ *Boulez on Music Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 137.

¹² Derrida, "Force of Law," in *Acts of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 292.

¹³ See for instance Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Scholem: And how can we grasp / What animates the letters?
Benjamin: It is never enough to grasp / But also to grapple
Scholem: Do you mean to put divinity on trial?¹⁴

The attempt at infusing a rabbinical dispute with a Hollywood-like melodramatic heightening at the end is particularly painful. Must music, too, become nothing more than "raising commentary to new heights"...? And how to compose music for a libretto that tries to depict Hitler as a comical figure? (It is hard to imagine Ferneyhough writing film music for Chaplin's *Great Dictator*.) Questions like these directly concern the opera's *Gehalt*.¹⁵ One would have to look at the music in more detail to see how such problems are played out or dealt with there. How does the setting of Bernstein's text compare with Ferneyhough's earlier vocal music (*Transit, Carceri, On Stellar Magnitudes*)? Above all, a troubling suspicion would have to be refuted—namely that this opera's conception may have suffered from the specialized isolation Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf has criticized in his writings about contemporary music's neutralized social status.¹⁶

These are all questions a review can only raise and not answer; an entire book would be needed to analyze *Shadowtime*. Frieder Reininghaus' essay also approaches the opera from some critical distance, rather than analyzing its detail. His argument for this is a witty one: "Descriptions of Ferneyhough's score that are directed to technical detail relate to the problematic situation it raises rather the way a respectful presentation of a circuitry diagram would to the security of nuclear reactors" (p. 97). The heart of Reininghaus' fairly sharp criticisms of the opera relate to its status as music theater. To note that Ferneyhough's reference to *Ars nova* in the "Motetus absconditus" is not perceived in the theater (p. 99) is perhaps not pertinent—how many listeners to *Lulu* are aware of Berg's sonata form? More serious is the reproach of untheatricality: "The score behaves in a downright autistic fashion. One cannot avoid the suspicion that a theater director or festival programmer—which happens more often—was looking to score points with originality and thus commissioned a work from a composer and theoretician who had earned his spurs elsewhere, and who had hardly concerned himself with opera as a living art form and not sought for or caught up on the corresponding experience [*Erfahrungen*]" (p. 100). Here we find Mahnkopf's critique of the "festival system" again: because there are festivals, including operatic ones, therefore we must have works to fill them out.

To return to the central point of this review: Benjamin himself distinguished between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, which both mean experience in German; *Erlebnis*,

¹⁴ *Shadowtime* (Copenhagen: Green Integer Books, 2005), pp. 50-51; Scene One in the opera. Bernstein's case is not helped by the feeble arguments of some of his advocates, such as Joel Bettridge, who makes the astonishing claim that "Adorno's attempt to ground thought on differentiation, paradox, and ruse rather than on the mastery of the object of inquiry aimed at undercutting a dialectical understanding of history, for Adorno, the centre of fascism and other totalitarian ideologies" ("Charles Bernstein's *Shadowtime* and Faithful Interpretation," *Textual Practice*, Volume 21, Issue 4 December 2007, 737–760, p.754). Bettridge obviously understands nothing of Adorno if he thinks the latter believed "dialectical understanding" lay at the root of fascism!

¹⁵ This also holds true of Elliott Carter's lone opera, whose librettist Paul Griffiths—a fine music critic, but hardly a major literary writer—himself confessed to being taken aback at Carter's request that he author the text.

¹⁶ Mahnkopf, *Kritik der neuen Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998).

however, refers to a singular, individual event of experience—like a mystical *nunc stans*—whereas *Erfahrung* implies experience's extension into ethos, wisdom, or knowledge. One of the problems of modernity, musical or otherwise, is that the pursuit of sublimely incomparable and incommunicable *Erlebnis* has become abstract, indigestible through the richer, more mediated forms of *Erfahrung*. To listen to a composer repeatedly so as to understand his or her work is to move from the immanent, punctual surface of *Erlebnis* to a more reflective one of *Erfahrung*. It is also to move from the level of mere shock or novelty to that of aesthetics.

Against Reininghaus, it could be argued that even a composer with as little experience (*Erfahrung*) of opera may produce a more interesting work than composers with routine in the genre. The exceptional case of novels written by poets, such as Hölderlin's *Hyperion*, would confirm this. Yet Reininghaus has an interesting further point: he suggests (with a reference to Adorno's *Ohne Leitbild*) (p. 100) that Ferneyhough would have done better to take the genre of opera more into consideration than he did. To extend Reininghaus' idea with another passage from Adorno: "axiomatic for a reoriented aesthetics is the insight, developed by the later Nietzsche, that that which has become [*das Gewordene*] may also be true."¹⁷ Genres and forms like opera are Hegel's "objective spirit," and they may still contain moments of truth even in an age of aesthetic nominalism. If *Shadowtime* is a "thought opera" by a composer who sees his work as a form of knowledge, it must still somehow *appear* as act on stage. It is because of this tension between infinite concept and finite realization, dating back to the Romantic poetics of the fragment, that anti-theatricality was so central a part of modernity.¹⁸ No operatic composer after 1945 has ever managed to resolve the resulting aporia.

Reininghaus' essay concludes with a historical excursus on Ferneyhough's relation to the generation of 1968 and its subsequent vagaries in the 1970s (another recurring topic in the volume and this review). He concludes that one can only understand "new" complexity as a reaction against the *terribles simplifications* of the 1960s. In a sense, then, "New Complexity" would have to be—to borrow Adorno's formulation about the 1920s—a paradoxical *rappel à l'ordre* after the neo-Dadaism, happenings, and chance music that preceded it. "New Complexity" meant an end to the old avant-garde challenges to the institution of art (in this, it is part of what Harry Lehmann and others have described as "second modernity").¹⁹ Precisely in its "attitudes of learnedness, in its reflexive quality and thus convolutedness [*Vertracktheit*]" (p. 103), it was a counter-attack as much as a mere continuation of tradition. This, too, is a topic that will need further elaboration. Here as elsewhere throughout the volume, the name of Adorno occurs, and it is suggested that Ferneyhough is indebted to him. Ferneyhough's own statements on Adorno are however frequently guarded: although he admires Adorno's writing, he wants nothing to do with any Hegelian philosophy of history, nor with the idea of modern art as a "message in a bottle."²⁰ Certainly the eclecticism and esoterism of Ferneyhough's reading—kabbalah, John Dee, even Jung—would put him slightly outside

¹⁷ *Ästhetische Theorie, Gesammelte Schriften* 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997), p. 12.

¹⁸ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2002).

¹⁹ *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst: Ästhetik nach Luhmann* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2006).

²⁰ *Collected Writings*, pp. 76, 424 (on philosophy of history), 243 (on *Flaschenpost*), 455 (on Adorno's writing).

the pale of academic theoretical respectability: as indeed he should be, in order to remain productive. Like Boulez, Ferneyhough was himself aware of the dangers of academic domestication of musical modernity in the American university.²¹ Has his own work been affected by his move to that environment in San Diego and now Stanford since the 1980s? As with the theatricality of *Shadowtime*, this will be an inevitable question for future exegetes of Ferneyhough's music.

²¹ *Collected Writings*, p. 470.