

## Darmstadt 2008—A Critical Review

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This review is conducted on the basis of my experience as a participant/observer at the three most recent Ferienkurse and as a composer-musicologist who has studied and engaged with the larger history of the Darmstadt phenomenon for fifteen years. There are several critical observations to be made regarding the current format and functioning of the Courses. While the Courses are a very specific type of learning environment, it is worth considering them in the wider context of creative pedagogy in the first instance, in order to try to better situate them from an educational perspective. In the UK and USA, the idea that practice-based and creative subjects can be higher order or research level areas of study has recently been accepted. This is not the case in Germany, though it is an area that is under review in other parts of central Europe. Of course, the Courses in Darmstadt do not have PhD awarding abilities; however, they are valid "research" experiences for those in other countries and they offer awards that can radically change the course of a composer or performer's career. As such, they have a pedagogical and nurturing significance.

It could be argued that the prime directive of composition teaching is to allow the student to develop an individual musical voice in a sympathetic, yet challenging, creative atmosphere. And there is no doubt that in many ways, the Courses in Darmstadt *are* an encouraging and inspiring environment: where else might one hear the complete string quartets of Ferneyhough, Xenakis' *Jonachaias*, new British piano music, alongside the haunting music of Klaus Lang, the detailed microcosmic structures of Kurtág and a superlative performance of Stockhausen's *Prozession*? While this kind of culture, i.e., a dissemination of creative process, is vital to support pedagogical aims, it is secondary to other forms of the learning environment; for example, lectures, seminars and one-to-one sessions.

### Exchange

One of the by-products after the instigation of a New Music Courses in the form of Darmstadt was that it facilitated the exchange of creative ideas, primarily between composers. While this opportunity still exists (and to and extent it is one of the key merits of the Courses in their current manifestation), it has been relegated to the privacy of the hotel bar and relies on the private motivation of the individual participant.<sup>1</sup> The "official" platforms for discussion of aesthetics, practice, creative approach and even business issues, are now dominated by a peculiar binary offering of lectures by experienced composers (for example, Ferneyhough and Rihm) who, despite focusing on their recent output, in the main refer to statements and ideas that dominate/proliferate in books articles and interviews that are often over twenty years old, and younger "fresher" composers who have not yet developed a sophisticated way of expressing themselves verbally and who would prefer to discuss abstract notions such as "craft" and "intuition"

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<sup>1</sup> And indeed, maybe it was always thus – see Christopher Fox, "Darmstadt 1982," in *Contact: A journal of contemporary music*, vol. 25 (Autumn 1982), pp. 49-52.

in the vaguest of ways. In many respects, the fact that participants need to initiate dialogue amongst themselves informally is a valid and fruitful by-product...however, it indicates a significant (not necessarily deliberate) shift in pedagogical focus of the Courses in recent times.

It was made apparent from the 2008 Courses that some of the most eloquent speakers about new music are performers. William Forman's lecture on recent music for trumpet (I was only able to attend the first of two) was a tour-de-force, partly in delivery and partly due to the surprising, yet refreshing approach he took to his subject. Rather than revelling in the advances in technical possibilities of new brass music, he delivered a cogent, reasoned and often amusing argument that focussed on how composers and performers might/should interact. He argues that players preferred to hear "What *do* you do" from composers rather than "What *can* you do?" and advocated the need for a diplomatic and carefully facilitated dialogue between the two creative artists. Similarly, Carin Levine was her usual ebullient self in her talk "Making the Impossible Possible." Levine's wealth of experience and technical mastery ensured that this was a perceptive and informing lecture. It was not only the performance faculty who made an impression. Some of the "impromptu" lectures delivered by students were highly enlightening. Yaron Deutsch, an Israeli guitarist who specialised in the electric variety was humorous, eloquent and, for the uninitiated, highly informative. A small, packed, and rather sweaty room gave him a four-minute ovation when he had finished showing technical examples and performing music for the electric guitar. Similarly, Eva Zöllner and Verenna Wüsthoff were equally lucid when performing and discussing new music for recorder and accordion. They led a workshop that investigated technical problems (for example, issues of balance) in a serious manner; the atmosphere was motivating, energetic, and friendly, designed to encourage composers to take up the challenge of writing for this fairly unusual duo.

### **Private Lessons**

To continue the discussion of pedagogy, the "private lesson" opportunities at Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik require some scrutiny. Just as no composition participant is guaranteed a performance, no one is guaranteed a lesson with the composition faculty.<sup>2</sup> The performance faculty allowed and in some cases actively encouraged *any* participant to sit in on lessons (which, to be fair, was also the practice of some of the composition faculty), but the situation for composition lessons was in the main very different. Here is an account of an individual performance session:

Having studied with Ernesto Molinari on a course previously (at IMPULS in Graz, 2007), I had some idea of what to expect of our master classes and lessons. But I had undoubtedly not fully remembered his incredible energy and vast knowledge of contemporary music. In the mornings, we studied various extended techniques, and with each one (circular breathing, quarter tones, multiphonics, slap tongue, the list goes on and on...) he turned it into a game; little improvisations followed in which we learned to play these often difficult techniques in a trusting, carefree and

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<sup>2</sup> This was of no relevance personally, but was to students of mine who have attended in 2006 and 2008.

often very silly environment. In the afternoons, we studied with him privately: at the time, I was just beginning to work with Kate Ledger on Jonathan Harvey's mammoth work for clarinet and piano, *Be(com)ing*. As the piece not only uses a variety of these aforementioned extended techniques, but also depends on an intense connection between the two musicians, these lessons provided an excellent opportunity for young composers studying at Darmstadt to come and listen. Generally in my almost daily lessons, I would have two to four composers present. As I'm rather obsessed with composer-performer collaboration, this was a great way to have lessons! And it provided for some great conversations in the pub later: as a result, I'm currently collaborating with one of the composers on a piece for bass clarinet and live electronics, to be premiered in Huddersfield in November.

In our second week at Darmstadt, the rules changed. On Monday of the second week, we at last had confirmation of what was to be performed in the student studio concerts. This is the big opportunity for young composers (and performers) to win prizes. And for me, as for many of the other performers (and certainly the clarinet class—although we can't really blame composers for writing so obsessively in this century for such a great instrument!) it meant many, many hours of rehearsal each day. So I said good-bye to lessons and composition lectures, and hello to the rehearsal hall. But this is what we come for as young interpreters of new music: this is the part where we get our hands dirty. In most cases, the rehearsal process went quite smoothly; I was probably very lucky in a limited number of problems with the pieces I'd been assigned. In particular, a young Canadian composer Alec Hall's *10 Small Pieces* was an incredible joy to rehearse. If I can offer any advice to composers, it would be to try to organize players before Darmstadt begins, especially if your score is at all complicated. Hall's piece would not have otherwise been performed, as they were all very difficult and needed a lot of work. But because we had it in advance, it was so much more enjoyable for us as performers!<sup>3</sup>

This is in stark contrast to composers who had to (literally!) fight and queue for a chance to have a session, usually of 20 minutes, often less than that as part of a three to four-member group tutorial, during which nothing can be digested or fed-back by the composition faculty member.

Lack of time also afflicted the Young Composers' Forum, where there was weak interaction by faculty if any at all. The "Open Space" sessions seemed unprepared and exhibited a general lack of focus and superficiality in terms of the way in which important issues such as notation and composition pedagogy were "forced" into them. While I appreciate that one might aim for spontaneity in a session like this, even the most senior academics prepare *some* form of organised and rational comments. It should be noted that some of the younger members of the composition faculty were unhappy with the concept and were "squeezed" in against their wishes, but this should not be an excuse

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Roche in a private email to the author, 09 September 2008.

to ignore the more pertinent social, political, and technical aspects of the role of the composer in the twenty-first century.

How can a biennial Courses like the Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik regulate the standards of pedagogy it offers? Perhaps the attraction of/uniqueness of/reactions against the inconsistency of the teaching on offer is an advantage, a key selling point that could be made more of? If the point is simply to offer a platform for the performance of the music of young composers, one welcome new opportunity this year was the inauguration of Der Staubach Preis, a competition enabling composers to write for the Arditti Quartet with optional electronics provided by the SWR Experimental Studio. As with any young composers' competition, the quality across the seven pieces was varied, but as a focussed opportunity to write for high quality performers, Harry and Alice Eiler's gift of this prize is an excellent addition to the Courses, and long may it continue.

## Music

In terms of programming, it is, of course, impossible to be objective about the music that is selected to be performed at the Courses. However, one problem that is clear in recent times, is that the lack of a specific aesthetic directive leaves the programming open to a challenge of being an "anything-goes" mentality, that may lead to a highly varied level in quality of pieces performed. In some cases, the high quality of performance elevates the piece to a level that is, at the very least, interesting to the listener, who is often wondering how the performer managed to make the meagre musical material interesting to them, and therefore stimulates a debate about the differentiation between what the composer has written on the page and the way in which the performer has interpreted the notation.

During the final three sessions of Studiokonzerte, the very high quality of performance by the young participants was in evidence: excellent performances of work by a wide range of composers. Particularly striking was the performance of Lachenmann's *Salut für Caudwell* and a stunning rendition of Ferneyhough's *Carceri d'Invenzione IIb* by the assured Italian flautist Matteo Cesari. There were also captivating concerts given by faculty although I might personally disagree with some of the choice of repertoire on display. What follows is a "review" of particular pieces from the opening concert—I made some spontaneous notes, which I reproduce verbatim here:

Robin Hoffman—*Schorf*

The piece features very good harmonic movement...some movement between blocks of sound—very effective. Lots of gestural aspects do not always seem to be going anywhere—perhaps this is the quirkiness to which the composer refers? Does the Beethoven quotation work, or is it simply quirky also? It is possible that there is a deeper structural significance of this reference, but on one listening it is difficult to say for certain<sup>4</sup>. Some very interesting timbral play as one might expect from this composer with a vivid imagination for sonic effects. Ending—typical and

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<sup>4</sup> Robin Hoffman's lecture later in the Courses did indeed seem to argue that there was a deeper structural significance for Beethoven's inclusion as a direct quotation.

in keeping with his "body" interests/interests in the physical. All in all, an interesting development from the chamber music of this composer that I already know...

James Clarke—*Untitled No.2*

Block-like, almost sustained throughout (is there a balance issue at the opening?)—a harmonic cocoon with Hodges' varied but repeated arpeggio figuration with chordal interjections in the middle of it. Like Dillon's *Überschreiten* with a more prominent solo piano part but perhaps less intriguing; that is, where Dillon tests the audience's expectations, there was a certain inevitability about Clarke's piece (albeit only after the opening 4-5 minutes). While the spectral/harmonic dimension is patently clear, the pacing seems odd—it is neither too long nor too short; perhaps an attempt to usurp listener expectations that is misjudged. The piece moves towards a somewhat Xenakis-style ending.

Isabel Mundry—*Zeichnungen*

This seems to engage with a more traditional "new music" approach (perhaps what Adorno meant by "Festival Music"?). The orchestration and instrumental combinations at times are quite striking, but it seems to me very difficult to fathom any concrete logical structure across the piece.

Iannis Xenakis—*Jonchaies*

A rather tame performance, and the acoustics in the hall do it no favours whatsoever. Despite this, it still has an impact, the stunning blocks of sound merging and re-emerging from each other, all the time interweaved with sprightly little micro-gestures that create a curious double impression of being binary opposites to the slabs of sound, and yet seeming to function as miniature pathways that connect them. It's an example of a large-scale dialectical process at a structural level that nothing else on the programme quite manages to realise in the final sonic impression.

Overall, one might argue that this is a balanced piece of programming; while the Mundry made little impression on me, the other pieces all had a variety of interesting approaches that I deemed worth mentioning in my stream-of-consciousness notes. I have reproduced them here not because I consider them especially critical, but rather to give the impression of what the saturation effect is at the Courses—it is difficult to consistently engage with the vast stylistic variance of the programmes at Darmstadt (and this was only the first concert), which results in one being cocooned in a web of new music. This is not an unpleasant experience (though at times one feels somewhat over-awed by the amount of music one is hearing); rather, it allows one to question one's own approaches to composition and creativity in a highly focused manner. And on each of the three occasions I have been to Darmstadt, it is perhaps this phenomenon that has been the most fruitful aspect for me. But perhaps that also means that, for me at least, it is simply another "new music festival."

