

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Freeman, Robin. 1987. 'Darmstadt 1986'. *Contact*, 31. pp. 35-38. ISSN 0308-5066.

Robin Freeman

## Darmstadt 1986

33rd Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, Darmstadt, 13–30 July 1986

The 1986 Darmstadt Ferienkurse were larger than any of their predecessors, both in the number of participants and in the number of guest performers and composers. The opening day was, however, marked by two significant absences: none of the invited Rumanian musicians actually living in Rumania was present – their government would not grant them exit visas; and Michaël Lévinas, the French pianist-composer who was to have directed the piano seminar, had cancelled because of 'organisational difficulties'. Consequently, Miryam Marbé, Calin Ioachimescu, the Bucharest String Quartet and Anatol Vieru – the last of whom was to have lectured on 'La nouvelle technique modale' – had to stay at home; Lévinas's non-appearance left the dilemma of the post-Kontarsky period unresolved for another two years.

Vieru's lecture had been scheduled for the opening day of the Ferienkurse. The other scheduled lecture was by Helmut Lachenmann, whose presence brought a spirit of detachment and an enviable professionalism to private and public Darmstadt alike. His subject was 'Über das Komponieren' (On composing) and, typically, he was one of the few composers who talked about composing in general, rather than just about his own. For Lachenmann, music – true music – is born of an act of self-awareness in which the composer takes a radical view of his art: surveying the field, as it were, to see where a new campaign might be useful or necessary. Lachenmann's essentially anti-expressionist musical thought – for him 'the composer himself has nothing to say' – is worked out in the midst of allusions to poetry, philosophy and the music of the past. Of one thing he is certain: that discipline is all important, that the flight from structure and the richness it makes possible leads to a false Utopia.

In the first evening concert of the Ferienkurse, given by the Ensemble Modern under Bernhard Kontarsky, Lachenmann's *Mouvement (vor der Erstarrung)* was played, as was Brian Ferneyhough's *Carceri d'Invenzione I*: both must stand among the truly successful ensemble works of recent years. Ensemble Modern's programme was also to have included the first performance of the opening three scenes of Robert HP Platz's *Verkommenes Ufer*, but the indisposition of the soprano Sarah Leonard – well replaced at short notice by Nicole Tibbels – meant that less than ten minutes of this could be presented. These were enough to show that however much he may avoid the word in print – a 'scenic composition' is how it was styled in the programme book – Platz's version of Heiner Müller's play is a real opera. The musical language is his own, but the grain is reminiscent of the Strauss of *Capriccio* and *Intermezzo*, in which the voice is heard through a complex and diversified musical texture. Platz returned later in the Ferienkurse to conduct his *Flötenstücke*, with Pierre-Yves Artaud as the flute soloist, in a midnight studio concert before an audience so enthusiastic that the piece had to be repeated.

Darmstadt's first day to be devoted officially to the activities of IRCAM came hard on Artaud's birthday and the Fête Nationale. This co-operation between the Internationales Musikinstitut and IRCAM fits

neatly into the context of the Franco-German Friendship Treaty, although IRCAM represents only one aspect of French music: something that the absence of Lévinas, a founder member of the group L'Itinéraire, served to underline. Artaud is the director of IRCAM's Atelier de Recherche Instrumentale, and the morning session drew heavily on the Atelier's Quatrième Stage, held at IRCAM the preceding December, with presentations based on published dossiers by Artaud himself (flute), Jean-Luc Mas (guitar) and Benny Sluchin (trombone). In addition, Claudy Malherbe, with Michèle Castellengo and Gerard Assayang, described new computer techniques. All those concerned spoke in French, but unfortunately no-one in either Paris or Darmstadt seemed to have thought about the problem of communicating with the considerable majority at the Ferienkurse who could not follow spoken French, and what was potentially one of the most interesting sessions faded away without a question. The absence of simultaneous translation is undoubtedly part of Darmstadt's philosophy of informality, but in the case of the very formal reports of the IRCAM personnel an exception perhaps should have been made.

The afternoon was given over to Emmanuel Nunes' composing workshop, another transplant from the Quatrième Stage. Nunes is fast establishing himself not only as one of Europe's leading composers but as one of its leading composition teachers as well. The evening concert included music by Nunes himself (*Grund* for flute and tape), Philippe Manoury (the 'pocket' version of *Aleph* for bass flute), an exceptional performance of Giacinto Scelsi's *Three Pieces* for saxophone by Pierre-Stephane Meugé, and Malherbe's *Nonsun*, a piece which demonstrates his research on the rational integration of multiphonics into complex harmonic sequences. And Mas was able to show us what an electric guitar can do when it is placed in imaginative hands, though some of the German contingent seemed more shocked than impressed. Alessandro Melchiorre's *A Wave* received an exquisite performance by the young German viola player Barbara Maurer.

An entire day at the Ferienkurse was dedicated to Scelsi, an act that amounted to official consecration of his rôle in the development of music in this century, although the results fell short in performance and programming of those achieved that summer in London at the Almeida Festival and at the Holland Festival. It was originally planned to present Scelsi's complete piano music with the composer there to comment and direct; what actually happened was rather less systematic and, due to a regrettable choice of soloist, probably led to the composer's decision to stay at home. Things got under way with a lecture by Martin Zenck, author of an article on Scelsi's string quartets in *Musik Konzepte*<sup>1</sup> and a man who has done much to make his music known in Germany. Zenck followed up Hans Rudolf Zeller's thesis that Scelsi's early music can be seen both as a preparation for his later, revolutionary style and also as an important contribution to the avant garde of its time. He also discussed the connection between Skryabin and Scelsi, though without venturing into the crucial field of aesthetic theory. Most interesting was his demonstration of the influence of Berg on the young Scelsi – the last of the *Quattro Poemi* is dedicated to Berg – and this affinity holds good for more than just his early music (one need only think of Berg's 'Invention on one note' in *Wozzeck* and Scelsi's more recent orchestral work *Four Pieces on a Single Note*, dating from 1959). Zenck's attempted comparison with Stefan Wolpe seemed more dubious: Wolpe's music from the 1930s strikes me as a kind of frenzied neo-classicism (witness

the Passacaglia presented some while ago by Bayan Northcott on Radio 3), while Scelsi's ostinati have nothing to do with the baroque and (except for the early futurist ballet *Rotative*) little to do with the 'machine age'. This point seems especially appropriate in the light of the day's first concert, a piano recital by Geoffrey Douglas Madge. Madge played two of the *Quattro Poemi*, two of the suites (nos. 6 and 8), the almost familiar *Cinque Incantesimi*, and a piece by Wolpe – a chaconne, of all things, and as such impressively irrelevant. The problem is that Madge's consistent *martellato* style of playing, so well suited to the Russian futurist music of Mossolov and the young Prokofiev, is wholly unsuited to Scelsi's piano writing. In particular, the distant murmurs and bell tones that permeate the Eighth Suite 'Bot-ba' and help give it its contemplative atmosphere were simply not to be heard.

The early evening concert included the composer's *Hyxos* for alto flute and percussion, *Ixor* for solo clarinet and *Xnoybis* for solo violin. Aldo Brizzi conducted the ensemble piece *Pranam II*, which was repeated by popular demand, and *Riti per i funerali di Carlo Magno* for cello and two percussionists, in which the cello drifts in and out of the percussion textures. Then came *To the Master*, a piece for cello and piano beautifully misinterpreted by Friedrich Gauwerky, who took it for Scelsi's version of Fauré's *Après un rêve*. (The solo line is actually a transcription of an improvisation by an amateur cellist, Virginia Parr; something Rohan de Saram had understood and projected with artful naivety at the Almeida Festival.) The concert ended with *Rucke di Guck* for piccolo and oboe, outstandingly played by Laura Chislett and Dominique Voisin.

At this point Yvar Mikhashoff made a welcome appearance to introduce two more Scelsi piano works, the *Four Illustrations from the Life of Vishnu* and the Fourth Sonata – the latter a revelation in this day of revelations. In this early work, one sees more clearly than elsewhere how an art of subtle melodic inflection and a calculated use of overtones can suggest a sound world apparently beyond the piano's limited articulation and tuning. It was midnight before the German pianist Marianne Schroeder had her go at a Scelsi suite: no. 10. After all the fireworks which had gone before, I found a welcome transparency about her playing: a refusal of dramatic gesture, as if the music passed through her unresisted. The very best Scelsi performance of the Ferienkurse, however, had been given three days before by the cellist Frances-Marie Uitti, who devoted her seminar recital to the *Trilogia*: a work whose third movement, 'UGGHUR' – in which progressive *scordatura* helps suggest the flight of the soul as its ties with the body are loosed – is surely one of the great moments for her instrument. But six o'clock was not the right time for such an evocation, and not a few of those present drifted out to dinner apparently unaware of what they were hearing.

Of the three works by Morton Feldman played at Darmstadt this time, one – the recent piano piece *For Bunita Marcus* – suffered, like Scelsi's *Trilogia*, the accompaniment of rumbling stomachs and shuffling feet; another, the early *Durations II* for cello and piano, came so late at night that even the composer slept through it. Little did it matter. *For Christian Wolff* for flautist, percussionist and keyboard player (all with doubling), a piece lasting three-and-a-half hours and given its first performance by Eberhard Blum and Nils Vigeland, was the Feldman event that year and something not to be forgotten. It filled the Orangerie, and though instructions were given to those with normal attention spans to sit by the door and leave quietly, most people were still there at the finish. The

four-hour-long Second String Quartet of 1984 had given the Darmstadt public an idea of what to expect, and the edge of scandal was blunted. My own experience was that the first 45 minutes were the very hell for settling down to listen with the proper sense of scale, but after that I could easily have stayed another hour. Some people felt refreshed and relaxed when it was all over and, though this is not of itself an argument in favour of the music, neither is it an argument against it. *For Christian Wolff* makes special demands on the players as well, demands that Feldman clearly understands; during the rare pauses, Blum would stretch out his arms and flex his fingers before taking up the flute again, a sight that gave an extra dimension to the music-making.

On a purely musical plane, the scale of the piece affects the way we hear each detail. Obviously a tiny flourish on the celeste with an hour of well-spaced single notes on either side of it will be an event, but Feldman doesn't try to make his material suitable to the length of the piece by making the usual effects last longer. There is nothing here that resembles the long melodic or harmonic constructions at the outset of Reger's Third String Quartet or the Piano Quintet of Florent Schmitt, which help us estimate the length of a piece from the way it begins. Ultimately Feldman's recent music is exploring not time but duration: he has simplified all other parameters to make more evident the effect that epic duration has on musical detail. Thus he insists that there is no point in introducing fine metrical distinctions until at least one hour has gone by; only then can we hear the changes as something that matters. In the interests of this new and 'other' complexity, the material must be simple, or must at least appear to be so; yet it has nothing to do with that minimalism which is the simplification of all aspects of music, with only the mechanism of repetition to serve as scansion. And a word about Feldman as 'wild talker'. The day before his new piece he announced that 'All these European composers are able to do is follow models'; the day after he said, 'Did you notice something about *For Christian Wolff*? I used Berg's Chamber Concerto as a model. Take the ending, for example': a sophisticated ingenuousness which is wholly in character.

British music was much in evidence at the 1986 Ferienkurse and was impressive both in conception and performance. An unfortunate programme change put James Dillon's *East 11th St. NY 10003* for six percussionists last on a late-night concert by the Freiburger Schlagzeug Ensemble, but listeners who stayed on through three German pieces full of 1960s nostalgia and little else were amply rewarded by this encounter with a musical space not only in which but also across which events take place. The first concert by Exposé included more Dillon (*Come live with me*), and music by Roger Redgate (. . . *of torn pathways*) and Chris Dench (*Shunga*). The last two composers were perhaps better represented in other concerts: Dench by his new string quartet *Strangeness*, which, now the Arditti Quartet is at home with it, reveals its full measure of Shandian wit; Redgate by *Ausgangspunkte* (for oboe) and *Ecart* (for cello), both brilliant and rigorous pieces well written for their instruments.

By contrast, Richard Barrett's *Coïgitum*, which Exposé also played, is a crucible from which much of his recent music seems to have emerged. His musical world has something to do with that of Jean Barraqué, and it is possibly this atmosphere of relentless, heroic pessimism which provoked the impression that Barrett gave, almost alone among his generation at Darmstadt, of hurdling rather than sidestepping the official avant garde. *Anatomy* for nine amplified instruments, given

during Ensemble Modern's second concert at the Orangerie, confirms the gifts revealed in *Coigitum* and is particularly striking for the way in which its thick oppressive textures achieve such effects of colour and shape: not unlike a painting of Jackson Pollock, in which each square inch looks like a cross-section of chaos but yields an overall impression which is uncannily serene.

On the same programme was *Olimpia* by Dario Maggi: connoisseur's music, both in its musical content and in its treatment of text, a lyric by the Italian existentialist poet Dino Campana. Maggi treats it phonetically at the beginning, introducing us first to the sound world of Campana's text – a functional rather than decorative use of phonetic reduction like an unmeasured prelude in a French baroque keyboard suite – and only then allowing the words to emerge in all their syntactic complexity. There is much subtle instrumental detail, and the vocal part gave Brenda Mitchell the chance to show off her art of dramatic declamation. Maggi is a Milanese composer in his early forties, too little known even in Italy. His music has a reputation for technical difficulty, but in my view it is its uncompromisingly intimate character which holds up public acceptance.

After this concert most people went home or to dinner, but the hard core, including a large percentage of the British contingent, headed for the Aula and a midnight piano recital by Michael Finnissy. He began with four *Eirenicons* by Howard Skempton, *Father Murphy* by Cornelius Cardew and Chris Newman's Third Piano Sonata. This music, which can seem so weak in ordinary circumstances, had a certain fascination in a half-empty room after a day of sophisticated activity. (Mice that come out to play when everyone else in the house is asleep . . .). Finnissy ended with his own *English Country Tunes*, played with a dazzling variety of touch and enormous amounts of energy – so much so that he damaged a finger. Friedrich Hommel, director of the Ferienkurse, said afterwards that for him the concert was one of the most memorable piano events in the Summer School's history, comparable with the first Darmstadt recitals of Aloys Kontarsky and David Tudor and the first performance of Book I of Boulez' *Structures* for two pianos.

The Composers' Forum is a Darmstadt institution, a kind of musical Speakers' Corner during which a composer may describe what he is doing and why, and get any number of things off his chest. Kevin Volans spoke on 'dancing in the dark' – what composers do when they stay home composing – and 'dancing with the lights on', which is what they do when they arrive in a place like Darmstadt. He compared the grace of an African woman carrying water from the well with the stiffness of the percussionist Christoph Caskell giving a Stockhausen première, spoke of Ireland as the last refuge of pre-lexical English and of the inventiveness and spontaneity that this implies, and addressed himself to the problem of transitions in minimalist music. For Volans, Steve Reich sidesteps the issue by changing one note at a time, Philip Glass papers it over with a burst of energy, and John McGuire throws up his hands and writes a perfect cadence. The only composer to find a convincing solution, he feels, is LaMonte Young in his *Composition 1960 No. 7* (the piece with the sustained B and F sharp): weak beginning, weak ending, but the rest couldn't be better.

Kaija Saariaho, a Finnish composer in her thirties living in Paris, spoke of her admiration for what she calls the great hierarchical forms of the 19th century and her unwillingness to imitate them. To do so would mean alienation and recourse to the banal. In her music, much of it for orchestra, she uses contrasts of

bright/dark, clear/opaque, with lots of noise to colour and contain the pitch structures. Her style takes off from Friedrich Cerha and the 'Swedish' period of Ligeti, and it links up in a distant way with the Sibelius of the late tone poems. We heard her *Verblendungen* and *Lichtbogen* on tape, with characteristically scrupulous apologies for the quality of the reproduction. She also presented the structural model of one her pieces, worked out visually with all the elegance of a Feininger drawing. Saariaho talks of technique in the service of form and form in the service of an abstract monumental expression. Her use of computer programmes and of systems in general stops where they fail to clarify her artistic vision. She is very much the dedicated artist, the musician who lives for her art because nothing less will do, and as such she was one of the most impressive presences at Darmstadt.

Aurel Stroe was not given the Hörsaal for his forum session, and as a consequence few people turned out for it: a shame, because it was a high point in the midst of much that was routine. Stroe is a Rumanian in his late fifties, now teaching in Mannheim after a year at the University of Illinois. He is an extraordinary representative of what has become, since the Second World War, an extraordinary musical nation. In his forum, Stroe spoke at length of various systems of intonation and their appropriateness to different kinds of music – a notion that has led him to use different temperaments in successive sections of the same piece. This might make things more difficult for the musicians, but it definitely makes them more interesting for the listeners. As an example, he played music from his opera *Oresteia III*, in which the vocal soloists are accompanied by solo saxophonist and electronically manipulated saxophone sound.

Klaus K. Hübler spoke largely of notational problems and of how to write in 'der Nähe des Daseins eines Instruments': that is, of how to control the largest number of instrumental parameters (including breathing, something that some wind players evidently view as an invasion of privacy). Hübler's music is controversial partly because he is such a brilliant theorist, describing things not everyone finds in the music: my guess is that we are dealing with a talented and ambitious composer who is taking his time to mature. A case of a different kind is Yann Diederichs, who felt little need to talk about his music except in terms of strategy and was content to let it speak for itself. I was particularly taken with his *Fractales*, a chamber piece with a timbral finesse reminiscent of Maderna. One deserving young composer who was not asked to give a forum – despite the fact that two of her compositions were played in the studio concerts – was Suzanne Giraud. It is to be hoped that we will be able to hear more from her in the 1988 Ferienkurse.

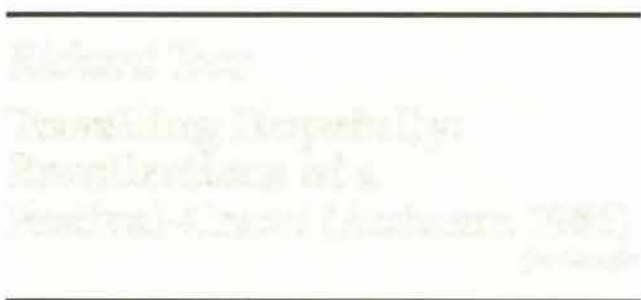
There were excellent lecture recitals by Siegfried Mauser, Brenda Mitchell and Alexandre Ouzounoff to name but a few. Among the interesting pieces in the studio concerts were those by Yoko Kubo, Bernfried Prove, Uros Rojko, Rod Sharman and Mari Takano. Among the instrumental staff, special mention should be made of the rôle of James Wood, present as composer, performer and indefatigable teacher, and of the Arditti Quartet, whose taste, dedication and profound musicianship were one of the abidingly positive aspects of the 1986 Ferienkurse. Coming at a difficult time for these players (their studio concert marked the first appearance of the 'new' Arditti Quartet, an occasion they marked significantly with a performance of Ferneyhough's *Adagissimo*), they were nevertheless

involved, both as an ensemble and as individuals, in an impressive array of music, much of it played virtually at sight.

The closing rites of the Ferienkurse – the awarding of the year's prizes and stipendia – were preceded by a recital in which Artaud played Ferneyhough's *Unity Capsule* and Varèse's *Density 21.5*. This was followed by Bunita Marcus's *Corpse and Mirror* (the title refers to the act of holding a mirror up to a person's mouth to see if he is still breathing), a new piece, written for solo violin and the gongs of the Ferienkurse Gong-Studio. The piece has, as a fixed element, a gong motif that is repeated in a fevered hush by the solo violin, which is situated in the balcony. Though the violin echo is dynamically constant, its actual audibility depends on the volume of sound produced at any given time by the gongs: on one occasion, at least, it is scarcely to be heard. Marcus, a former Feldman pupil, went on to be a joint recipient of the Kranichsteiner Prize but, for some reason, *Corpse and Mirror* provoked a scandal. One German newspaper suggested that the audience booed because of the music's 'naive predictability'. For me, the piece called to mind Feldman's dictum that composers should learn from painters: the gong background was like the vast expanse of a single colour we see in a mature Rothko picture; the gong motif with its violin echo was like a pattern etched into this background.

Looking back on it all in the midst of packing and goodbyes almost gave one a sense of vertigo, especially the closing burst of activity in which we heard over a hundred pieces in only three days. The vitality, resourcefulness and spontaneity of Darmstadt, qualities that few outsiders ever seem to associate with the place, had overcome all obstacles, or all but a few. Perhaps Darmstadt's one serious problem is that as the Ferienkurse become more open to tendencies hitherto excluded, and as more countries seek to participate, programming difficulties have inevitably increased. There were consequently some events which, however well intentioned, fell below what most Darmstadt veterans would consider an acceptable level of musical inventiveness. It is not that these events lacked interest, only that one kept asking oneself the question: why here, why at Darmstadt? One possible solution would be a Darmstadt Fringe, to be mounted in a tent on the lawn of the George Büchner School where the Ferienkurse are held. I am sure I would find time to visit that tent should it ever be pitched.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Zenck, 'Das Irreduktible als Criterium des Avantgarde', *Musik Konzepte*, no.31 (May 1983), pp.10–23.



*[The following text is extremely faded and illegible, appearing to be a document or poster with multiple lines of text.]*