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A Berlin Diary

1987 was Berlin's 750th birthday, an anniversary that provoked a spectacular year-long programme of cultural activity. I was there for the latter part of the festivities as a guest of the DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm (German Academic Exchange Berlin Artists' Programme) which asked only that I 'contribute to the cultural life of the city'. Of that contribution just my concert-going is recorded here: *Contact* has no room for an account of the splendours of the city's cake-shops, of my son's experience of its pre-school educational provision, or of the disturbingly abundant evidence of canine incontinence on its streets. Nor can I present a complete picture of the city's new-music scene: I didn't go to any concerts in the East, not because there weren't any (the GDR's celebration of 750 years of its *administrative* capital were as lavish as the West's), but because crossing the Wall is still sufficiently irksome for my visits to be restricted to a few day-time tourist trips. So what follows is a reflection of the way my curiosity led me to explore an unfamiliar cultural-landscape rather than a representative record of that landscape.

29 September

My first excursion into Berlin's concert life takes me to Kreuzberg, one of the city's more radical districts (its inhabitants were labelled 'anti-Berliners' by the city fathers after riots in the area earlier in the year), to see Rhys Chatham and his massed electric guitarists play in an old *Palais de Danse*. Chatham (b.1952) I know only as a reputation – a proponent of something described as 'art-rock' and a leading light in the New York downtown music scene for the past two decades – and so I seize the chance to add him to my collection of Living Legends of Experimentalism. The reality is rather less impressive than the reputation: the music is brutally over-amplified (my ears ring for the next 36 hours), but not beyond the point where it is possible to tell that Chatham has had only one idea and is sticking to it. His group – six electric guitarists, electric bass and rock drummer – play works covering the last ten years, all using open-tuned guitars and lots of harmonics, articulated in rock-orientated rhythms. The influence of punk rock is unmistakable, but whereas punk at its best coupled acoustic savagery with humour and a certain rough sensuality, Chatham's music is arid and charmless.

1 October

German opera-houses are funded with a generosity appropriate to a country that takes the arts seriously, and they commission new work with an enviable regularity. Tonight it is Berlin's turn, the Deutsche Oper making up for rather a long spell without a new operatic work (although only six years without a commissioned première, Covent Garden!) with the first performance of *Oedipus* by Wolfgang Rihm (b.1952). This is a *big* event, with broadcasts on radio and television, and Rihm's music-theatre (his designation for yet another opera that dare not speak its name) struggles to meet the demands of the occasion.

Rihm has assembled his own libretto from Hölderlin's translation of the Sophocles play and Oedipus-related texts by Nietzsche and Heiner Müller but, apart from a visit to a Freudian psycho-analyst's couch for Oedipus in the latter stages of the work, he stays close to the familiar outline of the story.

As usual with Rihm, the orchestral writing is brilliantly imagined, full of vivid and frequently violent gestures over which the solo voices and an all-male chorus make heroic attempts to project, but its near-constant, neo-Modernist battering of the listener's senses lacks the variety of pace that would give *Oedipus* real momentum. Consequently, one feels none of the awful inexorability of Oedipus' tragedy that makes Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* such a gripping and moving experience, and Rihm's final scene, with the blinded Oedipus tapping his way into the distance and into exile, came rather more as relief than as nemesis.

15 October

To the Literatur Haus to hear simultaneous performances of Cage's *45' for a speaker* (1954) and *34' 46.776" for a pianist* (1954). The Literatur Haus is usually a venue for literary events – readings, seminars, lectures and the like – and is perfectly suited to Cage's lecture/recital hybrid. The text is spoken (in Ernst Jandl's German translation) by Eberhard Blum; the piano is played by Marianne Schroeder. Both perform totally idiomatically: that is, they do exactly what Cage requires, making no attempt to project anything of themselves except their commitment to the work. The result is a highly entertaining three-quarters of an hour in which my attention switches, quite arbitrarily it seems, between the text's careful exposition of Cage's aesthetic and the delightfully haphazard juxtaposition of different speeds of vocal delivery and a marvellously rich gamut of piano sounds. I'm reminded of Herbert Henck's authoritative performances of Cage's *Music of Changes*¹ and the thought occurs that perhaps there is something in the German temperament that is particularly suited to the interpretation of Cage – a seriousness and a respect for authentic performance, perhaps; at any rate something quite different from the English tendency to treat Cage's work as an opportunity for winsome sloppiness.

17 October

At first sight it seems that Berlin's 750th birthday present from Stockhausen is a new instalment of *LICHT*: certainly, the posters are proclaiming that *Luzifers Tanz* for piccolo flute, piccolo trumpet, euphonium and orchestra is going to be given its world première by the Radio Symphony Orchestra under the composer's direction. In fact, this is the same *Luzifers Tanz* for symphonic wind-band (1983), commissioned and first performed by the University of Michigan Symphony Band, that then formed the third scene of *SAMSTAG aus LICHT* in that opera's 1984 Milan première (with the Michigan players on tape!). Stockhausen's response to his Berliner Festspiele commission turns out to be no more than a re-arrangement of the piece, adding strings and reducing the wind forces to four representatives from each family (except the trumpets, of which there are six).

The solo parts are taken by regular members of the *LICHT* circus – Markus Stockhausen (trumpet), Kathinka Pasveer (piccolo) and Michael Svoboda (euphonium) – and are, of course, superbly played.

The ability of Stockhausen *flits* to switch between air-noises and perfectly tuned and articulated high notes is awe-inspiring; equally remarkable is Ms Pasveer's seamless linking of a harmonic instrumental glissando with a vocalised glissando. Both have extended solos, the trumpet without, the flute with orchestral accompaniment. Michael Svoboda has a less interesting role, playing music that in the opera is given to the bass singing the part of Lucifer. He seems to be intended as a sort of master of ceremonies, although his personality is really closer to the bar-fly/pub-bore character (also a bass) in the later (1972) version of *Momente*.

The piece is well received but I find it turgid in the extreme. *LICHT* seems to require that Stockhausen spend twenty years of his life writing all the sorts of music he does least well. Development in his earlier work has always been most successfully achieved through timbral change or juxtaposition, in *LICHT* development is carried forward primarily through melodic counterpoint; Stockhausen's handling of periodic rhythms has always been rather awkward, and the melodies of *LICHT* are ploddingly regular; Stockhausen's 'theatre' has been most effective as a simple scenic manifestation of compositional processes, yet *LICHT* requires him to extend his pantomimic sense of theatre over more than 24 hours of stage action. The new ground that *Mantra* seemed to have broken is now looking very tired and infertile and I resolve to avoid *LICHT* in future, whether in weekly, daily or bleeding chunk form.

29 October

To the Deutsch Oper to see *Metamorphosen des Ovids* (1987) – subtitled, *Die Bewegung von den Rändern zur Mitte hin und umgekehrt* (The movement from the edges to the centre and back again) – a theatre-piece conceived for the Burg Theater of Vienna by Achim Freyer, with music by Dieter Schnebel (b.1930). Freyer is a German stage-designer/director out of the same mould as Robert Wilson, Philip Glass's first stage collaborator. (Freyer collaborated with Glass on his second opera, *Satyagraha*). As with Wilson, Freyer's primary concern in the theatre is with the stage as a vehicle for visual rather than dramatic images, and these *Metamorphosen* are a series of stage-pictures that, at snail's pace, transform one into another. At the same time a series of figures slowly crosses the stage – an aged jogger, a Viennese tart, a flock of businessmen whose briefcases magically open and close once on each stage-crossing. Once, about two-thirds of the way through, everything stops for an Italianate aria for soprano, Schnebel's most substantial contribution to the *Metamorphosen*. Otherwise he has been responsible for a few nebulous fragments of string music and a female vocal chorus and the most memorable music-event of the evening is the regular playing of *Putting on the Ritz*.

The whole show lasts two-and-a-half hours, without an interval, and is *slow*. The material itself isn't boring – many of the images are very beautiful, rich in pictorial reminiscences (de Chirico, Caspar David Friedrich, Matisse and Dali amongst a cast of thousands) and these stage-pictures are performed with great discipline both by the visible participants, the actors and singers, and their invisible assistants, the stage-hands – but the pacing of the evening is leaden. Freyer has been the prime mover in this project and has simply taken a normal dramatic structure – character exposition, character development, nemesis, apotheosis – stretched it and drained it of drama,

ignoring the example of Robert Wilson who has regularly demonstrated that minimalist, imagist theatre (like his four-and-a-half-hour long *Death, Destruction and Detroit II*, running at the Schaubuhne in Berlin at about the same time) can sustain interest over a long period of time, but only if it is structurally imaginative.

Yet for all their failings, these *Metamorphosen* provide much material for reflection. Freyer's visual imaginings are always interesting – his ability to achieve the most delicate transformations of light within his stage-pictures is especially pleasing – and, as always during such snail-like experiences, there is ample time for personal assessment. Is 1988 the year for a week or two of (Ovid-like) Mediterranean exile?

1 November

John King is an American composer/performer working in much the same territory as Laurie Anderson, creating lengthy, but episodic, pieces for solo performer – the pieces sustained by more or less direct allegiance to some central preoccupation, the performer sustained by a battery of electro-acoustic and visual aids. King has come to Berlin to play what ought to be the perfect Berliner show, a piece for slides, voice, guitar, violin and live electronics freely adapted from Brecht's *Das Verhör des Lukullus*² (The Trial of Lucullus). In fact his *Condemnation music* is far from perfect; King shifts between two sorts of writing – repetitive improvisations on either electric guitar or electric violin (mostly guitar) which rely heavily on short riffs stored on delay loops on the one hand, and quasi-folk songs on the other. Maybe King is having a bad night, but he just doesn't seem to play in time, the sound is crude and the music is still cruder. Nor do the slides (pictures of assorted military figures from both antiquity and the present, including everyone from Lucullus to Oliver North, and photographs documenting various 20th-century disasters), or King's spoken interjections add anything to the project. There seems to be a fundamental misconception here that if a musician is sufficiently committed to a cause, that commitment will, of itself, ensure success. This is compounded by King's decision to express that commitment through forms derived from rock music, since his attitude to rock music seems to be the classic, patronising approach of the avant garde, that since this music is apparently quite simple, it must be easy to do. Should John King ever buy a Bill Bragg record he might discover that this apparent simplicity is actually the product of considerable artifice.

2 November

Miles Davis passes through on his current tour, bringing his superb young group and playing a two-hour set predominantly based on his most recent album *Tutu*.³ The venue is one of a number of halls in the massive modern International Conference Centre, a sixties science-fiction film-set come to life. I am a relatively recent convert to Davis' work, but if I had any doubts, this concert dispels them all. Above all else Davis is the most marvellous leader of musicians: his band (saxophone, electric guitar, two keyboardists, bass guitar, drums and percussion) work very hard for him, particularly the sax-player, who carries the main melodic impetus in most of the quicker numbers, and in the ballads their magically sensitive ensemble-playing wraps itself around the silvery Davis sound. Davis spends a lot of the concert bent double, with his

back to the audience, playing to the floor, and yet still manages to dominate proceedings completely. As much as I fight it, I can't resist the temptation to compare Davis, at 61, with his near-contemporaries in so-called serious music – the crucial difference seems to be that Davis hasn't just got older; he's matured as well. But with ticket prices like tonight's, perhaps he can afford to mature.

16 November

Lichtknall (1987) by Erhard Grosskopf (b.1934) is virtually the last major event of Berlin's 750th birthday party. It's a commission for the Deutsche Oper, combining dance (choreography by Lucinda Childs) and stage-design (Achim Freyer again) with Grosskopf's music. *Lichtknall* is billed as a 'ballett', and the first night audience contains quite a few nonplussed balletomanes who complain vociferously at the absence of 'proper' dancing (although Lucinda Childs' choreography is actually very 'classical' in its preoccupations with cleanly articulated step-patterns and purity of line). There's also a fair amount of muttering to the effect that this 'apocalyptic odyssey', as its creators describe it, is neither a journey nor particularly apocalyptic. Certainly the three parts of the evening, individually entitled *Harmonien* (Harmonies), *Lichtknall* ('Lightbang') and *Erinnerungen* (Memories) are more like separate reflections on things eschatological than a single vision of the end of the world.

Grosskopf has initiated the project, developing the subject-matter and writing most of the music before inviting Freyer and Childs' collaboration, so the overall dramatic shape of the evening is his creation. While musically satisfactory – the work consists of three scenes of, respectively, 35, 10 and 45 minutes, with the interval before the last scene – this structure presents problems for the less open-minded members of the audience, since the most exciting moment of the stage-action occurs in the central scene. As the work starts, we are confronted with a stage bathed in soft white light. On it nine bloated figures are moving, their movements awkward, restricted and repetitive; some have extra legs, some extra heads, all are deformed in some way; from the pit we hear music for two pianos. After 35 minutes, the pianos stop, and the second scene starts; the figures on stage freeze and a high electronic cluster begins in the tape part. Slowly it descends and widens while two percussionists, a clarinetist and the two pianists play overlapping layers of repeated pitches which gradually shift into evermore consonant combinations. Meanwhile the nine figures slowly float off the stage, as do the ultra-violet strip-lights which in *Harmonien* had delineated the front and centre of the performing area, while banks of lights are lowered from above the stage to shine out into the audience. The scene ends with a resolution of the musical processes begun ten minutes earlier – the instrumental music comes into rhythmic and metric unison, tape and live instruments are all harmonically focussed on a low G; the auditorium is flooded with light. After the deliberately understated musical and theatrical action of the first scene, the effect of this 'lichtknall' – simple as it may sound in my description – is quite extraordinarily powerful, the whole scene flowing quite inevitably to its conclusion and creating one of those inexplicable and indelible memories that are the special preserve of music-theatre.

The third scene *Erinnerungen* makes no attempt to explain or develop this image – instead, the stage is clear and the dancers dance. Grosskopf's music for this scene is deceptively uneventful: it appears to undergo little change in density of texture, with the five instrumentalists heard in the previous scene playing most of the time, but it is obviously changing somehow, somewhere, since it is never repetitive. Rather than trying to unravel the mysteries of this fascinating music any further, I resolve to return to it at greater length in a future issue of *Contact*. It's perhaps enough to say here that *Erinnerungen* works, as much as a space for reflection on the calamitous events of 'Lichtknall' as for its own sake, and that *Lichtknall* as a whole is a marvellously brave and profound work (but one whose virtues make little impact on its first audience!)

19 November

To promote both a programme featuring my music in the 'Insel Musik' (Island Music) concert-series and a concert I am to give with the soprano Amanda Crawley in the British Centre, I appear on 'Die Audionauten', a late-night hour of new music on Radio 100, one of Berlin's two new independent-radio stations created in the last couple of years in the wake of changes in the German broadcasting regulations. Radio 100 is funded by various leftist political groups and one or two individuals ('Die Audionauten' must be one of the few new-music programmes that's owned by its producer/presenter) and, to be brutally honest, it's hard to see how it can survive. Indeed, within a week of my appearance, rumours (entirely unconnected) circulate that it's about to close. In the meantime 'Die Audionauten' provides a refreshing contrast to the donnish approach favoured by 'Music in Our Time': talk is kept to a minimum and a much wider range of music is played, from 'audio art', through the eccentric wing of electro-pop, to jazz, to avant-garde classical music (I share my hour with tapes of music by the British saxophonist Lol Coxhill, the Soviet composer Sofia Gubaidulina and a Berlin jazz-funk group).

20 November

From the fringe of broadcasting to the establishment: although the 'Insel Musik' concerts are organised independently under the direction of Erhard Grosskopf, they take place in the Small Concert Hall of Sender Freies Berlin (SFB), Berlin's main radio and television station, and SFB record the concerts for subsequent broadcast. The first of the three concerts in the series is devoted to music by a former DAAD guest, the Japanese composer and conductor Maki Ishii (b.1936). We hear four pieces: *Hiten-Seido II* (1983) for two marimbas, *Tango-Prism* (1987) for accordion; *Hiten-Seido III* (1987) for solo marimba and *Ro-ro no Hibiki* (1987) for three percussionists, accordion and tape. Of these, it is *Tango-Prism* that I enjoy least, in part because I am yet to be convinced that the accordion is suited to late-Modernist solo instrumental writing, in part because Ishii's attempts to extract new meanings from the tango rhythm seem to dilute the vitality of that rhythm beyond the point where it retains any interest. *Ro-ro no Hibiki* is the longest piece and also has the most exotic instrumentation, featuring 'stone' instruments made out of ancient volcanic rock which are, as far as I can discover, unique to this piece. Three different 'stone' instruments are used: a very pure-toned set of tubular bells and an equally clear-sounding xylophone, and a set of rough hewn 'stones'

into which slits have been cut so that a series of different inharmonic sounds can be produced by striking or stroking them in different places.

In this, as in the other pieces, Ishii manages transitions from one sonority to another very skilfully; indeed, it is his exploration of particular instrumental sonorities that I find most attractive. The marimba duo, for example, has a wonderful central section based around a tremolo on the C sharp below middle C, the players using a succession of mallets of varying hardness to achieve gradual changes in the resultant overtone spectrum. The performances are generally excellent and the two marimba players, Mutsuko Fujii and Nachiko Maekane, quite brilliant.

Nachiko Maekane returns the following evening to give the European première of my *Dead Fingers Talk* for solo percussionist. This is a superb performance, although the critic of the *Tagespiegel*, Berlin's quality daily paper, said of the music that 'originell ist das nicht.' (Who said anything about trying to be original?)

22 November

The final night of 'Insel Musik' is a concert by Trio Basso Koln. They play a programme of three solo pieces – one each for viola (*Bratschgeschloif* (1977) by Hans-Joachim Hespos, b.1938), cello (*AA-GA* (1984) by the Korean Younghi Pagh-Paan) and double-bass (*Theraps* (1976) by Xenakis) – and three trios, by Nikolaus A. Huber (b.1939), Grosskopf and Friedrich Goldmann. Concerts of new (or newish) pieces by prolific commissioners, like the Trio Basso or the Ardittis, are always interesting, if not always for the quality of the music played, then for the snapshot they give of *à la mode* writing for that particular ensemble. On tonight's evidence the current state-of-the-art view of the Trio Basso's chosen instruments is that they are, above all, generators of harmonics – all the trio pieces favour the upper end of the frequency range and are, as an inevitable consequence, also much concerned with micro-tonal tunings. The first half – Huber's trio *mit Stabpanderei* (1983) and the three solo pieces – is pretty-academic stuff, except for the Xenakis, which is despatched with great gusto by Wolfgang Güttler. The second half opens with Grosskopf's *Chaos* (1984), three contrasting movements, each of which is sub-divided into clearly characterised sections in which particular rhythms, textures or playing techniques predominate. Grosskopf is like the other composers in his extensive use of high natural harmonics, but otherwise the clarity of his musical thought is quite disorientating after so much obfuscation. As in *Lichtknall* his music is deceptively plain – periodic rhythms abound in *Chaos* – and maddeningly hard to categorise – it's not 'systemic' yet there's some sort of system at work; it's not 'tonal' yet tonal centres do seem to emerge at regular intervals. Finally, there's another trio, this one by the GDR-based composer and conductor Friedrich Goldmann. His *Trio* (1986) is a four-movement work, a little reminiscent of Kurtág perhaps in its clear and economical characterization of each movement and (blessed relief after the long-winded German music of the first half) in its terseness of expression.

30 November

The Michael Gordon Philharmonic come to Berlin on their first European visit (the Huddersfield Festival was an earlier venue on the same tour) playing, like Rhys Chatham, at the Naunynstrasse Ballhaus. Gordon's publicity boasts a Steve Reich quote,

'Michael Gordon . . . up to something real' (*what* came in that gap?), but the music is repetitive without being Reichian. Michael Gordon is a 31-year-old Yale graduate and his Philharmonic is a six-man band – percussion, clarinet, violin, viola, electric guitar, synthesizer – with a guitarist suffering from a bad attack of *rictus lead-guitaristicus*. They play four Gordon compositions, of which the oldest dates from 1981 and of which the two most recent – *Strange Quiet* (1985) and another piece so new it's still untitled – are much the best. Harmonically the music is quite fluid, closer to late Britten than to any of its minimalist forebears (and the new work has a string coda with a nagging but unplaceable similarity to something in, I think, Britten's Third Quartet). The pieces are sectional, *Strange Quiet* so much so that a pause in the middle provokes applause, but the good sections are very enjoyable. Towards the end of *Strange Quiet* there's an outbreak of polytemporal playing, high up on all the instruments' ranges, that works really well, and Gordon's musicians play well too, duly getting two encores. In the wake of the Chatham and King evenings it's good to hear new *American* music in the minimalist tradition that can bear comparison with pre-symphonic Reich, Glass and Adams or with current Nyman, Bryars and Man Jumping.

10 December

My last encounter of any significance with the Berlin music-scene is a lecture at the Technische Universität by Georg Katzer (b.1935). Katzer, widely regarded as one of the GDR's leading composers¹ is the star of a series of open lectures on electro-acoustic music, organised by the Technische Universität's studio director Folkemar Hein, and his lecture is witty and informative. Katzer's music is available on record, although none of his records was actually available in East Berlin when I tried to buy one, but his enthusiastic West Berliner audience seemed to know neither his music nor much about the new-music scene on the other side of the Wall. Facilities for electro-acoustic music in the GDR are available but are not particularly advanced, and Katzer has done most of his electro-acoustic work in other countries, in Stockholm, Bourges, Bratislava and Freiburg.

Katzer's tape music is strongly influenced by the 'hörstück' (radio piece) tradition: he makes pieces with a clear narrative and/or documentary purpose, rather than electro-acoustic abstractions. Indeed, his work seemed less interesting when it was most refinedly 'musical' – *Heiter, ma non troppo* (1987), a piece for guitar and the live-electronic wizardry of the Freiburg studio, was a disappointing, if colourful, ramble – and most engaging when it dealt with a clearly defined subject, whether that be the Cretan labyrinth *before* Ariadne interfered, or Francis Bacon's 17th-century evocation of sonic utopias. Most powerful of all was a new piece, *Aides memoires*, which takes as its primary source-material recordings of the Nazi leaders in full rhetorical flood. The piece is structured as a sequence of linked 'Alpträume' (nightmares) in which these voices are collaged, electronically modulated and juxtaposed with other sounds, mostly music of the thirties and forties, although perhaps the most arresting moment comes near the end when a brief extract from the slow movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is framed by wailing, child-like voices. Katzer's confrontation with what must remain a preoccupying question about Nazism, 'How German

is it?' (to borrow the title of Walter Abish's splendid novel), is uncompromising and by no means unequivocal – at the end there is no hopeful apotheosis, just the chilling voice of Goebbels.

* * *

And so back to England and an attempt to draw some sort of conclusion from three months of impressions. America, and especially New York, is evidently a strong influence in West Berlin's artistic life – a legacy of the thorough 'internationalisation' of German culture that the US authorities instituted in the post-war years (the foundation of both the Darmstadt Ferienkurse and, later, the Berlin Künstlerprogramm, were as much American as German initiatives). However, Americanism is always tempered by an authentically European sensibility, blunting its aggressive edge, deepening its range of cultural reference. But most striking of all was the impression of cultural well-being in West Berlin: the arts there are well supported, at the box-office and through proper state subsidy, so that instead of having to struggle continually for money artists can devote themselves to their real work. As a refugee from Great Britain plc, I found it enormously liberating to be in the sort of artistic climate where risks can be taken, instead of in one where most new music oozes the fear of failure and where philistinism is allowed to dress up respectably as 'market-consciousness'.

¹ John Cage, *Music of Changes*, played by Herbert Henck (piano), WERGO 60099.

² In 1949 GDR composer Paul Dessau also made a musical version of Brecht's piece with Brecht's collaboration, the opera *Die Verurteilung des Lucullus*. For King's version I sat next to a Dessau enthusiast who claimed to be unable to trace any but the most superficial resemblance to its supposed original.

³ Miles Davis, *Tutu* (1986), WEA 925 490-4

⁴ See Fritz Hennenberg, 'Who follows Eisler? Notes on Six Composers of the GDR', *Contact* 24 (Spring 1982), p8.

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