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Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 (3/3)–Peter Ablinger: Wachstum und Massenmord

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I knew something was up when I saw the members of the JACK quartet fold their scores back to break bindings that had obviously still been intact a moment before. They started discussing rehearsal techniques for the piece. In the first moments the audience seemed not to know what to make of it. After a minute or so, we began to realize that what we were seeing and hearing was not a performance of the score, but a first rehearsal of the piece. The audience started to laugh. I don't remember laughing, myself. I was thinking about how appropriate it was that on this day of the festival that was all about the string quartet, this performance situation revealed a crucial aspect of the string quartet that is usually hidden onstage: how they work together. You can see in any performance how they play together, but how do they get there? To me, it's one of the most interesting aspects of such a tight ensemble. So while at first I was in a "where's the piece" frame of mind, I started to appreciate the listening opportunity for itself. But after about seven minutes, the audience turned, and it was no longer about the quartet or the piece or the performance situation, but about the audience. Some audience members started clapping, shouting "bravo!" and being otherwise disruptive to get the quartet to end the performance. In the first performance (each quartet, Arditti, Diotima, and JACK, performed their own program three times), the JACK quartet made an exit once they were drowned out by applause. The performance instructions indicate that they are to stop once they acknowledge the audience. In their second performance, they kept going, seemingly oblivious to the clapping, the "thank you" spoken condescendingly in English from the audience, and the overall atmosphere of contempt for the piece. They let the noise die down, played through some minutes longer, and then said something like, "Okay, let's wrap it up."

The fact that there is still so much to remember, say, discuss, and question about Peter Ablinger's Wachstum und Massenmord several weeks later is a sure sign of, at the least, an interesting piece. I'll try to at least present and amplify some of the many questions it raised for me.

Is this performance situation inherently theatrical? Can an instruction to make a rehearsal non-theatrical actually make

it less so? Does the quartet end up substituting a performance of a rehearsal for a performance of a piece?

Not long after this event, I met a friend at the Frankfurt Zoo. When we got to the primates building, I realized that I had stepped into a perfect analogy. The monkeys were with their families, and in something like their normal habitat. Their job was simply to go on being monkeys. The string quartet was assembled with their instruments, music stands, pencils, metronome, scores. They were to operate as a rehearsing string quartet. The elephant in the room (to confuse the analogy with another zoo-related image) is that behind an actual or virtual wall of glass were a bunch of people watching. They had no reason to trust those people. They are mostly strangers. Would they do the same things once the audience leaves and there is no one watching them? The Observer Effect compounds the whole situation all over again.

How much entitlement does an audience have to affect the performance? How much will they do that in one culture vs. another? Is it an issue of geographical location or the sub-culture of a festival like Donaueschingen?

I'm almost completely sure that this event would never play out this way in the US. It's also worth taking into account that the audience had a high proportion of composers in it, and that there is a further sub-culture that builds around many of the people who go to the festival year after year.

Normally I enjoy the idea of extending the performance space beyond the stage, extending the agency beyond the performers and into the audience. But in this case it became an outright power play. In an early performance of the piece, a few scattered individuals applauded or said "bravo" to tell the quartet, okay, the piece should be over now. In later performances, larger groups of the audience, I would guess ten people at minimum, began to clap in rhythm to drown out the sound of the quartet. Where will attention be focused? On the belligerent audience members, or on the understated rehearsal going on onstage? It's undeniable that the piece is provocative. But whose decision is it when to end? The composer's, or the quartet's, or the audience's? In this case it was up to the performers. So long as they did not acknowledge the audience, they could keep going. But certain members of the audience did virtually everything in their power, short of storming the stage, to bring the performance/piece/event/rehearsal to a close. What was going on? I can't speak for anyone else, but no one is keeping me from speculating. I don't think it was an outright lack of patience. I doubt that there was anyone present who had not sat through 20 minutes of rehearsal of one kind or another before. I think it was an objection to the premise. One

possible objection would be that the premise of the piece was artificial. Based on my zoo analogy, I'm not at all sure that I disagree. But ironically, the audience could have made the whole situation less artificial by making themselves less apparent. It is a theatrical act to ignore aggression directed at the stage.

How will one quartet treat the performance as compared to another? Is that a function of how they normally rehearse, or of how they relate to the audience? Is it okay for their performance to be impacted by their awareness of the audience? If it is inevitable, where is the line of demarcation between the performance of the piece and the performance for the audience? How much do they need to protect themselves?

It was fascinating to see what the Diotima Quartet did with the Ablinger piece, in contrast with the JACK quartet. They skipped through to different spots in the score, rather than going sequentially. They played up the comic potential of the situation, and had the audience laughing for quite some time. They came onstage for this piece in everyday clothes, rather than wearing the tuxes as in the rest of the concert. Pencils were dropped, and they spoke quite audibly, so that the audience could hear them. The performance was clearly a performance, and I suspect that it had very little to do with how they actually rehearse. This audience had already heard the JACK quartet's first performance, and it seemed that some people had decided how long they would 'let' it last. After a little while, there were one or two waves of a very aggressive effort to get the quartet to stop. The quartet's virtual bubble had been broken in the first place by their self-protective measure of making the situation more performative, rather than giving the audience insight into an actual rehearsal experience. But to be fair, I'm not sure that I would have wanted this audience to see an actual working process either. It is a very vulnerable situation, under these circumstances. I was quite pleased to see that they did not stop playing on command, but ended more or less on their own terms.

Is it a good piece? Do I like the piece? Is it, in fact, a piece?

Normally, an ensemble will put hours, days, months into the rehearsal of a piece. A performance can be likened to the surface area of the ensemble's experience of the work. In IEAOV, Ablinger has written about the verticalization of time, "by which a succession of sounds as input become timbre as output." In this piece, he turns the performative situation inside out. There is no longer any clean surface or linearity. I'd like to be able to talk more about the work itself, but I find myself coming back to the question of what was actually

so offensive to much of the audience. Was it the simple fact that we were not offered a performance of a score? Or maybe it was the idea that not much work went into composing the piece. But did we know that? The material sounded promising to me. But the insistence on rehearsing rather than performing the score took away from the audience's perception of the linearity of the work. That, combined with the audience's strong reaction, made it nearly impossible to take in much of what was in the score, despite a strong effort. The forces at play in environment were just too strong. I heard the most in the first moments of the first performance, when the audience was disoriented and still docile.

Why have I taken so long to go over this post in particular?

Every time I think about this experience, new questions comes up. Here is the latest set:

Did the piece implicitly give the audience the power to influence it, and did they abuse that power? Did the audience members who made their presences known augment or obstruct the performance? Is the piece intentionally revealing not only aspects of the quartet itself, but of the cultural dynamic at play in the room? Does intention matter, or is all about how it plays out?