



Review of “The Beginnings of Serial Music,” Berlin, Germany, June 20–25 1996

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ABSTRACT: The *Institut für neue Musik* in Berlin hosted a three-day series of lectures and concerts on “The Beginnings of Serial Music.” Music of four composers central to serial music, Barraqué, Boulez, Goeyvaerts, and Stockhausen, was performed and discussed in depth.

[1] Less than a year after a conference covering the work of that other icon of the 50’s *avant garde*, John Cage,⁽¹⁾ the Institute for New Music in Berlin hosted a series of lectures and concerts with the stated goal of discussing the “beginnings of serial music.” This year’s event was obviously intended to be a bit different from a more conventional conference or symposium. Only four papers were presented, although their length (one-and-a-half hours apiece) compensated for the small number. Each paper was to focus on one particular composition taken from the serial repertoire, and each composition thus discussed would also be performed in concert, together with other works chosen to round out the program. The compositions chosen as points of focus (and the four composers represented) were apparently intended to provide, in some way, an insight into “what serialism was all about.”

[2] Attractive as this idea may be in theory, two problems arose in practice. The first problem was clear before the series began: the planned performance of Goeyvaert’s *Composition No. 2* had to be canceled because the instrumentalists required to perform the piece could not be found among the students of the Berlin *Hochschule der Künste* (HdK). Similarly, a closing concert that would have included Webern’s *Concerto for Nine Instruments*, Nono’s *Polifonica-Monodia-Ritmica*, and Stockhausen’s *Kreuzspiel* was canceled. This is a disturbing state of affairs, particularly since there are doubtless students at the HdK technically capable of playing the music, and comparable programs have been executed successfully in the past.

[3] A second problem relates more directly to the central idea of the series: is it possible to adequately represent the “beginnings of serial music” (or, for that matter, anything about serial music) through four compositions, or even through four composers? The question at hand, of course, is the extent to which the following four presentations succeeded in this enterprise.

Pascal Decroupet on Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück VI*

[4] Decroupet reiterated several points about Stockhausen's approach to serial composition that ought to be well-known: Stockhausen's liberties with "pure" serial technique (perhaps best-documented in *Gruppen*, but also to be found in the *Klavierstücke*); his departure from a pointillist approach to more "statistical" methods (although study of his writings in *Texte* leave some doubt as to how well he understood Meyer-Eppler's lectures on information theory at Bonn University); and that his studies of Webern, which he cites as the prime source of his own serialist ideas, postdate his first contacts with Boulez, which were crucial for the development of Stockhausen's serial composition. Decroupet's suggestion that Stockhausen may have been aware of Cage's *Music of Changes* immediately after its first performance, and that this may have influenced his ideas on group form, is perhaps less well-known.

[5] A discussion of *Klavierstück VI* played only a small part of Decroupet's presentation, which provided a rambling summary of a variety of Stockhausenian compositional techniques, occasionally showing how one or another may have found use in the cycle of *Klavierstücke V–X*.

Marc Delaere on Karel Goeyvaerts' *Composition No. 2*

[6] Delaere adds Goeyvaerts to the list of composers who influenced Stockhausen, citing Stockhausen's correspondence with both Goeyvaerts and Nono, to the latter of whom Stockhausen confided great admiration for Goeyvaerts' work. It is thus somewhat surprising (at least to the naive) that Goeyvaerts' letters to Stockhausen are no longer available and that Stockhausen may have played some role (albeit a minor one) in the program scheduling at the '52 Darmstadt summer courses, which resulted in a performance of Goeyvaerts relatively conventional 2nd Violin Concerto instead of his more radically serial *Composition No. 2* (arguably the first "serial" composition, predating *Kreuzspiel* by several months).⁽²⁾

[7] The discussion of the composition in question was coupled with a presentation of Goeyvaerts' *Composition No. 1*, a sonata for two pianos. Comparison of the techniques used in these two works is enlightening. The earlier piece shows clear influences from *Mode de valeur et d'intensité*. (Goeyvaerts, like many of his contemporaries, took part in Messiaen's analysis class.) It uses two unordered representatives of set class 7-22 as the basis for his harmonic and registral ordering of pitch class material. Values for duration, articulation, and dynamics for every note are determined by a set of arithmetic dependencies between the various parameters.⁽³⁾ *Composition No. 2* uses a similar but more complex strategy, involving the parameters pitch, duration, dynamic, timbre, and articulation.

Heribert Henrich on Jean Barraqué's *Sonate pour piano*

[8] Barraqué is considered by many to be an unjustly neglected composer. The reasons for neglect include his untimely death in 1973, a relatively small oeuvre, and a publication list consisting of one essay (compare this with Stockhausen's *Texte* or Boulez' collections of essays and *Penser* monographs). Henrich notes a certain ambivalence in Barraqué's approach to serialism as well as an awareness of contradictions in the technique, describing his attitude as "distanced" (quoting Barraqué as saying that to all serial rules there are exceptions). This manifests itself in the *Sonate pour piano* (dated 1950–52) through an alternation of "rigorous" and more freely composed sections. Barraqué's serialism extends from the use of a twelve-tone row to related structures determining tempo, dynamics, and register.

[9] Henrich pointed out a striking contradiction between the voice leading intended by the serial composition and that which is perceived.⁽⁴⁾ As was pointed out in the discussion after the paper, Barraqué's counterpoint could extend to immediate juxtapositions of the same pitch in two different voices, giving the impression of a single voice with a repeated tone.

Thomas Bösche on Pierre Boulez' *Deuxième Sonate pour piano*

[10] Bösche's presentation focused more on clearing up some perennial misconceptions surrounding serial technique than on Boulez' piano sonata *per se*. One source of these misconceptions may well have been Ligeti's famous analysis of Boulez' *Structures Ia*, which Bösche credited with "devastating effects" on the reception of serial music. Indeed, any claim (as suggested by Ligeti's essay) that there were a single, coherent, serial aesthetic is belied by the minute sample of serial music covered in these four lectures. The myth that serial music (and, as a special case, twelve-tone music) literally requires the performance of all the other eleven pitch classes between occurrences of any given pitch class was discredited yet again; to

counter the claim that serial music is mechanistic or lacks emotion and feeling, Bösche proceeded to read a list of performance directions from Boulez' 2nd Sonata: *extrêmement rapide; très marqué, sec percuté, bien donner une impression de groupe; cedez; très sec et très arraché ...* (a complete enumeration continues considerably longer).

[11] Bösche did point out one difficulty of serial music, which he referred to as the dichotomy (not to say discrepancy) between the aesthetics of production and reception. In light of the previous discussion of Barraqué's counterpoint, Boulez is hardly a solitary case, but the 2nd Sonata is certainly a case in point.

Concerts

[12] As mentioned in the introduction, the ensemble performances had been canceled, leaving a series of piano recitals performed by Pi-Hsien Chen, Frank Gutschmidt, Herbert Henck, Jens Kaiser, and Catherine Vickers, with one concert dedicated to each of the composers whose works had been discussed.

[13] The opening concert presented Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke I–V* (Gutschmidt) followed by *Klavierstück VI* (Chen). This grouping of the piano pieces (which, on the surface, runs counter to Stockhausen's grouping into *Werkenummern*) is justified historically (the premier performances occurred in the same grouping) and, in light of the length of the sixth piano piece (well over twenty minutes, whereas the other five pieces together are not quite as long), makes sense. Both performers played excellently, although the pieces seemed (to this auditor) in some way less fresh, less exciting, less *radical* than the first time they were heard. Boulez' criticism of the first four, that the pieces were in themselves too uniform (and which Stockhausen seems to have taken to heart through his three revisions of *Klavierstück VI*), seemed apt.

[14] The Goeyvaerts concert, a matinee, featured the Composition No. 2 (Chen and Vickers) and, as a substitute for the canceled *Composition No. 1*, his 1974 composition *Litanei 1* (Vickers). The performance of the 1952 piano duo confirmed several hypotheses made during the morning's discussion of the work: the large-scale structuring of the piece through sections of slower and faster tempi (an important compositional principle for Goeyvaerts in this work) seemed less apparent than a small-scale additive concatenation of individual sections and gestures. The later composition was refreshing, partially simply because it was so very different from the rest of the music played. It had been remarked that Goeyvaerts had been influenced by minimalism in this work, which, indeed, is built from the overlapping of repeated rhythmically distinct phrases. Nevertheless, the language used is clearly different from that of *Reich and Riley*; the repetition and rhythmic clarity still retain a certain affinity with Goeyvaerts earlier music.

[15] Herbert Henck played Barraqué's Sonata for piano the evening of the same day. Oddly enough, it was in this piece that the rather harsh bass of the Kawai grand used in all the concerts was most evident and less than complimentary towards Barraqué's use of sforzandi in the lowest octave. Another, somewhat odd point, is that the "dichotomy between aesthetics of production and reception" discussed in the context of Boulez, were, if anything, more in evidence in the performance of Barraqué's music. Some sections may be more rigorously serially composed than others, but which ones are which escaped this listener. This is not to deny that the music carries considerable beauty, but it is disappointing not to be able to audibly follow the intended formal disposition of the piece.

[16] In contrast, the formal structure of Boulez' 2nd Piano Sonata (Kaiser, final concert) seemed readily apparent. The first movement, with its exposition (of two contrasting sections), repeat of the exposition, development section, and recapitulation, is practically a textbook Sonata Allegro, albeit with Boulez' characteristic manipulation of small rhythmic cells and his uncompromisingly atonal harmonic language. The overall structure of the four movements (*Extrêmement rapide*—*Lent*—*modéré, presque vif*—*Vif*) also follows a familiar model, with the second and third movements each capturing a certain atmosphere unmistakably reminiscent of Beethovenesque archetypes. The final movement cannot be so readily classified, although studies of the work also turn up an historical model. Kaiser's performance gave the piece a patently expressive, almost romantic, quality, without abating the aggressiveness of the acoustic tone intended by the composer.

Closing Discussion

[17] Diether Schnebel commenced the closing discussion by thanking the participants for helping "make the music of the

50's come to life." One cannot help but wonder at the irony of an Institute for New Music that seems more concerned with music written nearly half a century ago than with the music of the current decade. (In fairness, it should be added that the Institute does host other, more contemporaneous events.)

[18] What is even more surprising to this correspondent is that the focus of these three days should be so exceedingly narrow. It was as if the only serial music ever written was within an imaginary Franco-Germanic border, with Darmstadt its official capital and Cologne and Paris the effective sites of business. Nono was mentioned but once in passing, other Italian serialists not at all. That Blacher was not mentioned is perhaps excusable (his serial metrics are relatively primitive and more peripheral to serial thought); that no mention was made of Babbitt or other American serialists is simply incomprehensible. In reviewing serial music at the end of the 20th century, it should be possible to present a broader historical context.

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Footnotes

1. Reviewed in Peter Castine, "Review of John Cage Symposium, Berlin, Germany, Nov. 23–25," *Music Theory Online* 2.3 (1996).

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2. This music historical footnote provides an object lesson worth study by young composers—the performance referred to seems to have effectively been the kiss of death for the Belgian composer among the European avant garde of the 50s.

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3. Every value used for each parameter is assigned a numeric value from 0 to 3; the sum of values, for all four parameters, equals 7 on every note.

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4. One is reminded of work by Bregman and McAdams, neither of whom was mentioned in this context.

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