Binary Composition

In this article, I wish to outline and elucidate the methods used in, the motivation for, and background of my compositional work. In the attempt to present these in a concise manner, I often find it impossible to limit my compositorial approach to core theorems and describe them succinctly. My procedure and methodology often comprise of opposing poles. As I have found multi-polarity to be a decisive criterion of my work, this specific dichotomy of methods and motivations is to be the overriding subject matter of this text. These characteristics also constitute my temperament, which is why I often perceive my pieces as very personal. This is not-at least primarily - meant emotionally or subjectively but in the way tasks, situations, musical works, or life itself are approached.

I will subsequently examine numerous contradictory couplings within my work and explain their personal significance, focussing therefore on the following relationships: Seriousness vs. Humour/ Irony, Organism vs. Virtuality, Pop Music vs. New Music, Conception vs. Intuition, Expressivity vs. Introversion, and Technology vs. Romance. Obviously no human being or work is mono-thematic; nonetheless, these items are quintessential to my work.

Pop Aesthetic

Perhaps the most obvious contradiction is the combination and confrontation of pop elements with contemporary music. Explicitly apparent in all my pieces is the combination of new music with other genres, that are–in a broad sense–related to experimental pop and electronic music. A number of approaches are used to merge contents and languages. Relevant factors from popular music are for me the production techniques, immediacy, performative codec devices, and tonal language. Although beginning to play musical instruments when relatively young, my true instrument is and has always been the computer. The creation of sound collages and writing pieces with MIDI Sequencers and tracker software began as a teenager. My working method and composition style, as well as production processes, have therefore always had a constructed, artificial aspect. All of my pieces being fully amplified and operating with electronics and playbacks, my aim is always to relocate this approach to live situations. This naturally means questioning how to expediently combine electronics with live instruments: the advantages or possibilities of this aesthetic contain some risks; differentiated chamber musicality, dynamic range, the complexity of tonal languages, the relationships between performers, the resulting sound and staging. It is in the nature of things that no procedure can achieve everything, and so too with this approach, one must bargain for possibilities by a reduction elsewhere. It is a major challenge despite this to open doors to an aesthetic with an added value not already covered by pop music. There is no point in recreating something other genres do better. A new music concert does not have to fulfill the expectations one might have of a pop show, a rave or a punk concert - but certain elements can be isolated and harnessed for an art music context. Sonically, this could be exemplified by the reduction of material or the specific production technology. Another aim could be analytical, abstract and the associated search for universality.

Last year my piece "The Password Disco" was one of several released on record by the Nadar Ensemble. Its timbre fully inclines to that of electronic dance music; its production being exclusively pop–completely clean, digital, and artificial. It additionally uses genre-specific elements such as choruses, build-ups, and an even groove which tempts foot-tapping. The rhythms of the piece have however been formed algorithmically with the help of a polyrhythm-generator. Despite having a constant feeling that sounds come at the right moment, one can rarely predict the timing. The surface is very approachable, but the generators and the polyrhythms beneath are complex. Artificiality is also an explicit theme: my intention was to construct a seemingly empty soundscape from specific samples – combined with utterly inhuman MIDI-choirs and tinned electric guitars. The clinical world of studio aesthetics titillated me and this is tangibly picked up at the end of the piece, when the producer/composer pipes up and explains the work´s progression towards its conclusion. It is a purely electronic work that does not use musicians on stage.

As soon as a musician is on stage, the aspect of staging/presentation is added."Your Fox's, A Dirty Gold" exemplifies this, using the musical language of a pop song and the gestural repertoire

of a rock concert. In addition to the technical components of the piece–a singer uses sensors to control the electronics–the goal was to make the artificiality of the musical language one of its themes. Beginning with a violent and massive soundscape, the song develops into an increasingly unreal scenario, in which the performer bows down in slow motion like a robot or puppet whilst playing an electric guitar solo consisting merely of triggered samples. The solo has nothing to do with actual guitar sound genesis. In another section, the performer steers supposed guitar feedback-but, in fact, the musician's rebellious posturing controls and modulates a computer patch with feedback generators. In this piece, as well as in others, I use pop elements in order to reflect them, to exaggerate them and to put them in a new context.

This, however, is where the aforementioned ambivalence takes hold: These pieces are not pure commentary or theoretical discourse-they use such elements not only to showcase or dissect them but are intrinsically motivated. I don't wish to look down on these genres from the "serious music" perspective, but apply their attributes without completely falling for and imitating them. It is my conviction that there is musically something to gain here.

Domination

Similar intent leads me to use non-classical forms of presentation as well as genre-specific production techniques, This often results for example in a confrontational situation which is very direct, loud, and immediate; bearing in mind possible negative connotations one might speak of an aesthetic of domination. Indeed, the physical and immersive momentum of such concert experiences is important to me. Such an approach needs to be carefully questioned against the backdrop of the aforementioned (not entirely unwarranted) reservations concerning forcefulness. The special sensual/sensory immediacy of the chance to tear down an inner border in the observer attracts me - I seek a kind of leap. Even Inner walls need heavy machinery sometimes to break through defence mechanisms and expose what lies behind them. I myself oscillate between a rational, analytical side and an excessive, unrestrained opposite, this brisk fluctuation always being the means to find something honest. It isn´t about pompous display but about experiencing and perceiving something immediate and intense. Confrontation does not interest me, but penetration. On occasion, the audience can and will naturally perceive this differently and view it as exuberant, simplistic or even militant. I am aware of this possibility, but think that it can be used artistically and violence used profitably.

Besides the aforementioned penetration, the intensity functions in a mechanical sense also as alienation, such as in "Sensate Focus" or "Scanners". In both pieces, the performers operate in strictly synchronized, almost machine-like movements, becoming part of an apparatus. "Scanners" is explicitly about the string quintet "performing machine". But even the clear-cut application of overloading/overpowering as exercised in "Lucky Dip" and "Supramodal Parser" seems legitimate seems legitimate, in my view even almost necessary, at least if this is the thematic state that the piece is intended to depict. It is about slipping way, about rapture, and exuberance. A hypnotically tumbling, introvert section follows in both pieces in order to contrast and problematise and illustrate precisely this effect: it is the ambivalence between intensity and its opposite–the emptiness. Diverse interpretations, from joyous energy to escapism or powerlessness, bear out for me the potential of this approach. Different readings of this overflowing condition fascinate me and I think it has in its multi-layered-ness earned itself a place in art music.

Intuition

In the preceding account, I have quite palpably forced the contrasting pair of Romance vs. Technology. In this case one could break it down as such: despite the vehemence of means, my concern is with something very tender. Technical realisation stands in contrast to textual motivation. This contrast can certainly be a little further comprehended, in that the use of technical means, running through all my work, is always proportional to something quite intuitive, human and emotional. Technical aspects take up an obviously prominent role in my work, but I never actually try to make them the main criterion of a piece. In spite of the buzz, technology is always merely the means to an end. Ideally, for example, when a software setup has been developed, I can simply utilise it as a tool without worrying about its actual workings.

The development process is additionally subject to opposite poles quite apart from the selection of materials. My process is extremely intuitive yet rooted in the parameters of the contextual and technical framework.

The work mostly begins with a self-defined setup or scenario. This setting can be of a technical nature (for example as with the sensor-supported pieces "Point Ones" and "Laplace Tiger"), motivated by the content (as was the lecture „Star Me Kitten"), or have a spatial starting point (such as the concert installation "Black Mirror"). Often it is an interplay of these factors. This "environment" always has visual, scenic aspects and an interactive dimension. Just as in the selection of instruments when one begins a purely acoustic instrumental piece, it makes sense to define the (extended) instrumentation at the beginning of multimedia work. This may concern hardware, software, lights, video, stage setting and much more.

In the next step, the possibilities of the selected scenario are sounded out, creating a defined repertoire of elements that I wish to utilise in the composition. In addition to musical considerations, this may involve software snippets, forms of interaction, an idea/metaphor/question, a spatial and/or performative concept. A large pool of ideas and different strategies with which to tackle the piece's subject matter results early on. Proceeding in the next phase very pragmatically, these strategies are tried out, tested and documented as thoroughly as possible, in order to deduce which of the theoretical ideas hold true in practice. A collection of concrete implementations of the original ideas is hereby established to then use as compositional material. It is conceptually productive for me to develop from the very outset a clear image of how the resulting sections could look. This could mean recording short scenes for sensor-based interactions, checking and appraising light setups in a room or always making test-videos for video-based works.

What comes next is quite similar to "Automatic Writing": a process of drifting and working very intuitively. I use the existing material– and create new content–but rely on a very immediate, direct style of writing, since the parameters are set and there is a lot of content to be used. Last but not least: this is probably the reason for the intoxicating effect (intended, if not palpable) of some pieces: they result from a very flowing process. A definite characteristic of personal importance is also the concurrent adjustment of the different medial aspects of a piece, always working simultaneously on content to prevent one medium from only underlining or accompanying the other.

Humour

The opposing practices of intuition and strict planning are perhaps related to the contrast of humour with irony, seeming at first glance trivial or irrelevant in classically artistic music, which is surely the case with basic, corny jokes. I have observed that some good music can, even without extra-musical elements, make me laugh. The trigger might be the surprising handling of material, the collapse of a previously stable system, or the rigorous escalation of an idea. Moments of surprise or of a radical nature can have something humorous. But within this characteristic often lies a quality extending beyond the funny. It can either be manically excessive or stoic and irritating. What these points have in common is that they refer to an existing set of rules and associated expectations. Their rupture is stimulating and can, in addition to amusement, be a gamble to use in some works. These elements are most present in "HELLO," "f1" and "Star Me Kitten". All three works establish a setting with inherent expectations which are then broken–primarily through disclosure of the pieces' production process, making it the content of the piece itself. In my eyes, the dichotomy continues here - because the underlying themes of the pieces are meant quite seriously.

In "fr" and "Star Me Kitten," breaking up the setting leads to an opening up of the presentation, to gliding off onto a narrative strand, hidden behind the facade. A clear conceptual approach (the relationship of gesture/symbol/content to music) is confronted with an unsettling, psychological subtext. Behind the facade, there still is always "the other".

Fractures within these pieces are always accompanied by the error principle: faulty programming, collapsing presentation and misconduct. The glitch-aesthetic is often used within this context. This method makes precise implementation of these cracks in coherence possible and is thus a helpful tool, not only in sound design but also relating to the content. Characteristically, the error always includes the capabilities of the underlying system.

Body

A mistake showing up, a loop skipping, a sound or image freezing, a simulated program-crash, or bit-crushing instruments are some of the audio-visual elements representing a common thread in my pieces: the contrast with an acoustic instrument, a fissure in the video presentation, the crack in the work's logic. This approach surpasses musical content, encompassing and including the perception of the on-stage musician.

An explicit focus often lies on the performer's relationship to the media content, in addition to the performance's framework, Many of my theatrical works contain gestural or performative elements in which the performer's body enters into a direct relationship with music, electronics, computer, or video.

In the sensor-based pieces, performers actually control the processing and the electronics through their movements via motion sensors attached to their arms. In the first works of this kind ("Weapon of Choice" and "Laplace Tiger"), expanding the possibilities of control and expressivity was paramount. The goal was to create a setup allowing the musician to guide the parameters of the electronics intuitively, individually, and in performing, as an expansion of the acoustic instrument. From "Point Ones," in which the conductor is equipped with sensors, the focus has slowly moved towards the machine-like and virtuality of the body image. These pieces were not only about virtuosically steering electronics but about spotlighting interaction and communication through gestures and movement. In sections of "Point Ones," the conductor is unable to control the electronics as predicted. Communication between conductor and ensemble stutters and the conductor transforms from masterful instrumentalist into a lapsing, digital, human metronome. The duality of dealing with the body is made apparent and is further deepened in following works, in which expressive components supporting performers exist, drawn from my own experience as a musician in a more improvisational context; a context in which enhancing performers via technical setup isn't questioned but accepted and integrated. From the moment the system is interrupted, the body's functionality is central; the virtuality of sound control changes from being a tool to becoming the core issue. In "Scanners" and "Sensate Focus," the image of the on-stage performer is incorporated especially intensively and the musician's mechanical and virtual facets are centred in the limelight. In both works, the interpreters are only spotlit for brief moments, whilst executing a gesture or a specific playing movement. The room being completely dark, audiences see the musicians only in spasmodic flashes, emphasising the players' edgy movements and resulting in a mechanical appearance. The performing interpreters appear to be robotic particularly in "Scanners," perceived as short video-clips, layered and played back side by side. The onstage human is transformed into tiny, multitudinous virtual clips in real time. The continuous presence of expressive performance yields to a series of isolated mechanical image sequences.

Some of the aforementioned ambiguities can be gathered into an image: On the one hand, the interplay of direct and immediate performance and corporeal intensity, on the other, the likeness of a human-machine, transported into virtuality by production technology. This procedure is to be understood as aesthetically motivated, by one especially drawn to the hyperactive cut-and-paste style. I do however appreciate that this can be understood as referring to the transformation of the human image, as our identity is increasingly being reduced to clips, avatars, and digital representations.

In Private

In a similarly ambivalent role I make an appearance in some of my pieces ("f1," "HELLO," "Star Me Kitten"). This mostly happens in the abstract-usually transmitted through new media such as Skype, cellphone, Green Screen or in costume. It is a meta-form, commenting on or running parallel to events, using myself as material, composed and dealt with exactly as with other elements of the piece. Doing so is less about it being me illustrated in these images but about using myself as material, not least for pragmatic reasons. But in the compositional process-which is close to "automatic writing" - I realise that these pieces have more to do with self-reflection than actually planned: not autobiographically- and consisting of moveable set pieces-but they reveal more about me than I would have thought at first glance.

A dichotomy of intention and presentation runs through these pieces: and more generally through most of my works. As described, numerous contrasts form a significant part of my work. It may be banal, but I encounter composition with the exact same methods as my daily routine, my surroundings, and my life in general. I haven´t consciously made this my motto; rather observed it as fact.