

## Alexander Schubert

**T**wenty-five years ago Alexander Schubert might have been labelled a 'postmodern' composer. Actually, scrap that: back in 1992 his work couldn't have existed in the same way that it does now. That's not to deny that many of the elements that are called into play in Schubert's pieces – video, text, lighting effects – have been part of contemporary music's toolbox for decades. There's nothing new about making soloists deliver awkward PowerPoint presentations (replacing 'PowerPoint' with slides or index cards if you want to go back even further). But the temperament and concerns of the Bremen-born, Hamburg-resident composer place him in the company of several peers whose work engages with how music today rarely reaches our collective awareness in isolation, but as part of a constant, captivating, contradictory stream of sound, images and ideas.

In a blog written for last year's Borealis Festival, Jennifer Walshe identified what she named 'The New Discipline' among compositions. Not an aesthetically united school so much as a way of working that included her own practice alongside others such as James Saunders and Matthew Shlomowitz, these are 'pieces which often invoke the extra-musical, which activate the non-cochlear. In performance, these are works in which the ear, the eye and the brain are expected to be active and engaged.' For Walshe, the 'discipline' refers to the rigour of finding new compositional and performative tools within this, in a world in which Dada and Fluxus are established heritage and YouTube rules supreme.

Although Schubert wasn't mentioned, he certainly fits Walshe's description. Nervy, fast-moving and inquisitive, his work takes the multimedia world as an all-pervading fact of life, not something to be gingerly picked up between finger and thumb and scrutinised before the composer retreats back behind piled-up manuscripts. Neither is the

distinction made between academic and 'popular' culture – surely a redundant term in today's super-fragmented world. For Schubert, IRCAM and clubland, pop songs and intense improvisation, TV shows and scientific research are all there to be quoted, questioned and synthesised into works where the exacting coordination required from their performers echoes the constant synaptic juggling we carry out every day.

Indeed, for all of the screens and smoke and flashing lights that feature in Schubert's arsenal, it's worthwhile returning to Walshe and her assertion in the same piece that key to The New Discipline are 'Works in which we understand that there are people on the stage, and that these people are/have bodies.' With his background in neurobiological research, it's little surprise to find a fascination in Schubert's work with gesture and sensory perception. Having premiered at **hcmf//** 2014, *Sensate Focus* – inspired by experiments in which kittens were raised under strobe lighting – could easily lend its title to a whole strand of his pieces exploring and deconstructing the links between movement and sound. While his 2011 piece *Your Fox's a Dirty Gold* used motion sensors to simulate a guitar solo, *HELLO* (2014) used videoed gestures as a score and *Star Me Kitten* (2016) wreaked havoc with a set of musical 'cues' triggered by a narration that veered into increasingly dark territory.

Recently, Schubert's work has taken a more immersive turn, centring audience more than performer and drawing them in to increasingly participatory experiences. While *Black Mirror* (2016), in which the audience donned capes and identity-erasing cat masks to be led around an abandoned hotel, represents a nightmarish apogee of Schubert's current practice, *Supramodal Parser* (2015), with its dreamlike states evoking an all-night techno event, offers a more welcoming, if still at times characteristically challenging, opportunity to submit to Schubert's unique brand of discipline.

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