

On the Music of Reinhard Febel

Reinhard Febel moves between generations, cultures, styles and boundaries. Whereas the representatives of “New Simplicity” in the 1970s rejected organized conceptions of structure and material as having been done to death by serialism, Febel sought to unite historical-critical considerations of material, and constructivist structuring, with sonic and formal processes that could be experienced and understood directly. That applies to his early works like the *Sextett* (1977), as well as later ones like the *Fünf Stücke* (Five Pieces) for string quartet (2000). In contrast to his contemporaries, who sought to revitalise tonality as a closed system or neo-romantic style, taking their orientation from Schubert, Mahler or Berg, Febel made his own discovery of Helmut Lachenmann’s dialectical structural thinking, and accordingly was concerned to deliberately create frictions between new sound structures and existing traditions, styles and forms. Moreover, he always regarded tonality just as neutral material, which should be available to be used equitably alongside other techniques from the repository of relatively ancient or recent music history.

Instead of the rigorous atonality of serialism, or regressive composing ‘within’ tonality, what he propagated was a post-modern approach to composing ‘with’ tonality, which moved beyond the avant-garde ideology of progress without lapsing back into traditional musical languages. Instead of the post-war avant-garde’s exclusivist concept of material, he put the case in many essays for inclusive composing. The supposedly objectively necessary tendency of material at the start of the 20th century to change irreversibly from tonality to atonality is something he rejected as arbitrary, along with its socio-philosophical legitimation; instead, he advocated a universal opening-up of narrow avant-garde concepts of history and material.

This pluralistic way of thinking was expounded in many of his pieces. For example, the musical process of *Charivari* (1979) was shaped as a temporal projection of actual music history, from Dufay’s vocal polyphony via baroque fugal technique, classical quartet writing, late romantic opulence and Anton Webern’s pointillist style, to the textural composition of Luciano Berio and György Ligeti. His chamber opera *Euridice* (1982/83) was related, with varying degrees of proximity and distance, to the eponymous key work in operatic history by Jacopo Peri, dating from 1600. In the *Variationen für Orchester* (Variations for Orchestra) (1980) he unfolded a tonal song as his model, and the *Konzert für Schlagzeug* (Concerto for Percussion) (1981), using exaggerated accelerations, he pushed sequences of falling fifths so far that the thoroughly tonal material gave rise to atonal structures. In the *Étude d’exécution transcendante* for fourteen instruments (1979), his subject matter – the emergence and disappearance of tonality and atonality – is expounded through an arch-formed sonic process that circles around an extended B major chord; in *Innere Stimmen* (Inner Voices) (1982) he quotes Robert Schumann’s Humoreske Op. 20, and in the third of the *Drei Lieder* (Three Songs) for female singer, female speaker, piano and tape (1982), using a montage of short excerpts from various works by J.S. Bach, W. A. Mozart and Johannes Brahms, he created a sequence of falling fifths starting from B minor, which descends treatment of the fingering hand and the bow hand leads to extended passages of rhythmic-melodic patterns. In the *Sinfonie* (1985/86), a shimmering, pointillist sound continuum arises from the fragmentary splitting-up of tonal chords throughout the whole orchestra.

However, in contrast to minimalism, Febel is always aiming at a wealth of spontaneous inspiration, emotionality, and the depiction of extra-musical, sometimes epic-dramatic content. It is for this reason that he sought new ways of dealing with language and text. In

Das Unendliche (1984) he handled two vocal parts quasi-instrumentally, whereas the orchestra was treated in a manner analogous to speech, with types of articulation corresponding to consonants and vowels. He did similar things in *Joker* for soprano and five instruments (1986) and *Auf der Galerie* for eleven strings (1985), where the formal, syntactical and semantic structures of the eponymous text by Kafka are transposed into a quasi-narrative sonic process, “like a film soundtrack”. Instead of making speech musical, music is to be turned into speech. Further instrumental and vocal works show Febel’s pronounced musico-dramatic interests; the programmatic scope of his pieces is sometimes supplemented by instructions concerning the handling of space, movement and lighting, as in *Winterreise* (1992), *Die vier Zeiten* (1993), *Capitaine Nemo* (1999) and *Wolkenstein* (2002).

Early on in his career, Febel was already looking at musico-dramatic conceptions. To date he has completed seven operas. Whereas his first stage works *Euridice* (1983), *David und Gollert* (1987) and *Nacht mit Gästen* (1987/88) were still largely orientated towards an epic-dramatic operatic aesthetic, in *Sekunden und Jahre des Caspar Hauser* (1991/92) and *Morels Erfindung* (1993/94) he works with various levels of reality, time and sound, and in *Beauty* (1995/96) with procedures involving epic alienation and distancing. For the ‘science fiction opera’ *Lichtung* (2000), inspired by the static cinematic language of Andrei Tarkovsky, he developed an unconventional dramaturgy involving unreal separated levels of music, song, text and plot. He is currently working on the ‘children’s opera’ *Herr Daunander und Glotze* (2002/03) and the ‘boxing opera’ *Die sieben Feen* (2003/04), which inhabit the boundaries between play, opera and musical.

At the beginning of the 1990s Febel became familiar with non-European music, and thought a lot about its rhythmic structures and their physical effect. His musical experiences during travels through Africa and South America were directly reflected in compositions like the finale of the *Vier Stücke* (Four Pieces) for violin and orchestra, as well as some pieces from *Piano Books I-III* (1986-94) and the *Percussion Book* (1994/95). By analogy to his composing “with” tonality, he now composed not “in” but “with” rhythm, metre, tempo and pitch. Instead of fixing the individual parameters for a whole composition, in the *Sonatas 1-7* for piano (2000-02) and *Maelstrom* for two pianos (2002), he subordinated them to dynamic processes. Continual processes affecting glissandi, time and tempo mean that even static structures and repetitive patterns – such as the model for the *Fantasie über ein Thema von Franz Schubert* (Fantasia on a theme by Franz Schubert) for orchestra (1997) – are constantly in motion, constantly changing. Whereas, in the first of the two pieces *Sculpture / Motion Picture* for nineteen strings (1998), isolated notes – analogous to observing a sculpture from all sides – are accelerated and projected onto the temporal process, in the second piece, increasingly accelerated movements fuse together into a generally polyphonic texture. This approach is further developed by Febel in *Sphinxes* for orchestra (2003).

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