

Perpetual Revolt Against Immobilism A Portrait of Swiss Composer Gérard Zinsstag

Identifying the exact point at which the life path of exceedingly wayward composer Gérard Zinsstag began is simple: The 9th of May in the year 1941, in Geneva, Switzerland. The years to follow are also relatively straightforward and easy to understand. As a young man, his father imparted to him an understanding of music. Zinsstag's flute studies at the Geneva Conservatory already began simultaneous to his secondary school studies. Following some years in Paris and Italy, Zinsstag joined the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich as flutist in 1969.

So far, so good; an employed position with a famous orchestra in a beautiful city harboring numerous guest houses in which Zinsstag, to this very day, enjoys whiling away his time – this sounds more than tolerable. For Zinsstag, however, driven individualist that he is, something was still missing. In a radical move, Zinsstag quit his orchestral position in 1975. In looking back on his decision, Zinsstag describes it as a “break with everyone and everything.” His compositional career path – initially that of a “non-freelance composer,” to use his own words – began with instruction from Swiss colleague Hans Ulrich Lehmann. This was followed by a further adventure ten years later upon his founding of the new music festival entitled “Tage für Neue Musik” with friend Thomas Kessler – in Zürich, a city until that point less than regaled by new music. It was, in Zinsstag's own words, a “taciturn revolt against Helvetian immobilism.”

Conversance with Gérard Grisey and Helmut Lachenmann

And those words, uttered by Zinsstag, represent something only he himself may say – well traveled as he is, voraciously hungry both then and now for new influences, having intensively explored the modes of Turkish art music for his “oriental fantasy for viola, string orchestra and small percussion” entitled *Tahir* (1996), having investigated the Chechnyan sounds of Chaban singing in *Anaphores* for piano and orchestra. Zinsstag's interest in modes so far removed from the reaches of well-tempered intonation did not arise in a vacuum. He had already acquired the fine musical sense needed to accurately pinpoint pitch-based constructions from afar following his study with Lehmann – on the one hand with Helmut Lachenmann, on the other with the French-school spectral composers, among them Gérard Grisey, later to become a close friend of his.

Indeed, Lachenmann's influence was to be seen in Zinsstag's music over the long term. In his *Foris* for two orchestras, premiered in 1979 in the framework of the Donaueschingen Festival, Zinsstag centers his focus on “refraining from established patterns of sound and proffering new musical sounds” (Zinsstag). Whereas the “Musique concrete instrumentale” Lachenmann established is loaded with a critical evaluation of society eminently political in nature, however, Zinsstag's emphasis rests on the relationships between art and daily life as created through sound.

Zinsstag's most often-performed work is dedicated to Gérard Grisey, namely, his *Tempor* for flute, clarinet, piano and string trio, written between 1991 and 1992. The primary focus of the work rests on various musical means of shaping time as well as the compositional principles underlying spectral music. Above the first part of *Tempor* are the words “die befangene Zeit” (“Time Inhibited.”) Governing the course of the work are simultaneities – performative actions consistently separated by caesuras cognitively encompassing an immaterial echo of

what preceded. The second part, “die aufgehobene Zeit” (“Time Rescinded”), is marked by quick, rhythmic ostinato motion; and this second movement also remains compact. Its microtonal shifts in pitch effectuate musical causatum related to the sensitively shaped sound valeurs of the French Musique Spectrale. In the third and last part, “die manipulierte Zeit” (“Time Manipulated”), Zinsstag reverts to the use of various techniques such as the “eloquent” rests of the first part.

Zinsstag created many works after exchanging his orchestral position for the incomparably greater existential risks of life as a composer in 1975. His oeuvre encompasses numerous chamber music works, vocal works and large-scale orchestral works, among them the work *Empreintes* (2004) for mezzo soprano and orchestra, premiered to great acclaim in Stuttgart in 2004 and constituting a profound homage to his deceased friend Grisey, whose words also constitute the vocal text. The year 2001 marks his composition of the grotesquely sarcastic opera buffa *Ubu Cocu* to a text by French author Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), premiered at the Theater St. Gallen. Already in the 90s, Zinsstag sets the stage for its polystylism, bordering on the collage-like – as can be seen clearly in such works as his second and third string quartets. While his first string quartet (1982-83) still clearly attests to Lachenmann’s influence, his second string quartet (1994-95) is decidedly more autonomous and free in its expression. Its focus is directed on Béla Bartók on the occasion of the 50-year anniversary of the composer’s death. In its breathtaking *Furioso*, Zinsstag ultimately makes reference to Bartók’s bold, often ruthless expressivity. In Zinsstag’s third string quartet (2002-03), the complex, hectic figurations of the string players are followed by a quotation taken from the madrigal *Moro, lasso, al mio duolo* by Italian master Don Carlo Gesualdo, materializing as if from thin air. “After this quotation, telling of death and love, nothing can be as it was before,” writes Zinsstag. A dark veil hangs over the sounds from this point onwards. The quartet concludes at the most delicate of pianissimos, with the frailest of notes and caesuras.

A respectful earnestness and a clear anchoring within musical tradition are evidenced by all three string quartets, which are connected by an extraordinarily high level of artistry. Parallel to these superlatively expressive and complex compositions, Zinsstag’s body of works continuously expands starting in the 90s to encompass smaller, thoroughly charming occasional works – works that are “sensuous,” in which Zinsstag “travels other paths” but also “lets himself go.” Zinsstag’s 2008 *Cinq petites études sur les résonances* for piano flawlessly dovetails with a conceptual theory demarcating the calm self-possession of a late style. While this work often features well-placed triads, fifths and thirds, Zinsstag also traces out the quiet resonant phenomena of keys depressed without sound creation. The fifth and last etude, *Le jeu des tierces* (“Playing Thirds”), is in its construction “acrobatic” (Zinsstag) and can be placed somewhere between György Ligeti’s piano etudes and a prototypically late Romantic exhibition of pianistic virtuosity. Motoric figurations drive the music forward to the last fading rich resonances of sound marking its end.

Its characteristic preference for unusual techniques in the treatment of sound and resonance is the telltale attribute betraying what is currently one of Zinsstag’s main works: *Seul, l’écho* (2012) for mezzo soprano (or alto) and chamber ensemble, to be premiered by the Athelas Ensemble, conducted by Pierre-André Valade, in Copenhagen on June 1, 2013. The score directs the percussionist to play using special resonating instruments made available upon request by the composer for performances. The text of *Seul l’écho* was written specifically for this work by poet Joël-Claude Meffre, born in France in 1951. His poem also focuses on sound – sound voiced and sound echoing out from silence, from a distance, from memory.

Running its course to the end, the piece culminates in a great compositional “racket,” only to conclude by posing the anxious question, “Will an echo remain of all this?”

The unequivocally existential dimension of music to be seen in *Seul, l'écho* also permeates the second composition *Zinsstag* brought to completion in 2012 in a demonstration of the weighty content and forms of expression he continues to use to this day. Entitled *Eskatos* and scored for vocal ensemble, four brass players and two percussionists, the work was composed for the Musicatreize ensemble and its artistic director, Roland Hayrabedian. In it, *Zinsstag* combines excerpts from the Apocalypse of John with his own texts, taken in part from Günther Anders and touching on the fatal, indeed exploitative relationship of humanity with its home planet, Earth. The work also exists in an independent German version. *Eskatos* is some 25 minutes in length and will be given its world premiere in 2014 in Marseille.

Torsten Möller