

Discrete Music – On Ernstalbrecht Stiebler’s Discovery of Slowness

The goal of my music is a rest, an internal reflection.

The question “How are you?” is far from easy to answer. The answers “good” or even “bad” are more nonplussed attempts at a quick fix than commensurate descriptions of what is typically a more complex state of emotions. Things are hardly different when plying music with questions. Finding out the “mental state” of sounds, progressions or even just series of notes is as hard as ferreting out our own positively and negatively felt states. It defies descriptions and terms. Just what do thematic structures, intervals and chords reveal about the overall character of a work? What can an underlying meter or a certain tempo alone tell us? Are these not ancillary more than anything else, indicating at most a certain direction?

These sorts of basic questions have much to do with the music of Ernstalbrecht Stiebler. Clear-cut answers, however, are alien to his music. His works are pervaded by skepticism. The musical events within his architectonics of sound, while moving forward quietly, also proceed with utterly imperturbable, confident self-assurance despite frequent microtonal obfuscations in the form of eighth-, sixth- and quarter-tone alterations. Stiebler’s output of the past fifty years has almost exclusively encompassed purely instrumental works; the emotional “physicality” of “that which is called ‘art singing’” in a large portion of the music of our time often goes “too far” for Stiebler. “Discretion” and “distance”: Without a doubt, these two words approximate the most suitable terms that can be used in attempting to describe the expression inherent to the compositions written by Stiebler, born in 1934 in Berlin. And concentration and radical reduction are also part of this discretion. The musical events in *minimale harmonie* for ensemble (2008) almost exclusively encircle E-flat. This is, of course, also given nuanced shading with one, two or three ascending or descending sixth tones in the individual voices. There are also careful fade-ins and fade-outs, which, however – according to the score – are to be heard “never more than just barely perceptible crescendos or decrescendos.”

“Overly Simplistic Revolution”

“Just barely perceptible” – it is the fine differences to which Stiebler consistently draws our attention, and that with astonishingly dogged persistence. Already in his string trio *Extension I* from 1963, no single note stands in central focus as in *minimale harmonie*. Rather, Stiebler concentrates on the potential inherent to the sound color of two notes, a B and an F. His preference for the finest of details already in the early 60s did not just arise from nowhere. In a criticism of post-serial music, Stiebler cited as an “overly simplistic revolution” the mere extension of the twelve-tone system that was Schönberg’s crowning achievement. Stiebler’s focus was directed not backward in time but instead toward the east, the west and the south. He intensively explored the Zen Buddhism of the Far East, and this focus provides the basis of his thoughts regarding the abolishment of the classical European relationship between subject and object. His points of reference were and are Morton Feldman in the west and Giacinto Scelsi in the south, those proven creators of architecture as sensitive as it is daring. However, in contrast to these two discoverers of slowness, Stiebler builds according to plan, with numbers and lines playing the central role.

There is a certain animosity toward symmetries that are too clear-cut – and from that, a tendency toward prime numbers. In my music, there is typically a division into lines. The big question, then, is always: How long is the individual line, that is to say, the basic element? Are all the lines the same length, or do they grow? You really have to be able to properly assess the implications of these lines, because that also provides a certain sense of breathing. I always found it horrible to just compose until blue in the face, going on and on and on. I always wanted things to be set within a certain framework, to have a certain framework set inside my imagination. This framework does not have to be cast in stone.

Music as an “Impertinence”

Breathing and a (not necessarily hard-and-fast) framework: These words, chosen by Stiebler in 2002, point to a special characteristic within his music – its through-and-through organicism, more naturally grown than posing an achievement, distinctively more continuous in nature than laid out in blocks. Already the fragile structuralism of Morton Feldman and Giacinto Scelsi overturned “physical time” (Henri Bergson); and Stiebler, too, allows himself time. “A piece consisting of three quarters of an hour should not seem like a quarter of an hour; that would be annihilating time,” he also said, adding on the other hand that a quarter of an hour could quite easily effect three quarters of an hour. In times in which time is supposed to be used as efficiently as possible, such words sound just as wonderful as do the gloriously slow planes of sound in *ton in ton*, a piece for ensemble he wrote in 2010 and which was premiered by the Ensemble Modern in Berlin’s Nationalgalerie in 2011. Ernstalbrecht Stiebler once spoke of the “impertinence” of his introspective aesthetic being experienced in this age of event-centered culture. And rightly so; concentrated immersion in the very listening depths of one’s being is a capacity all too easily left to the forgotten recesses of oblivion amongst today’s email requests, ringing cell phones, and omnipresent scheduling pressure – all the more a pity since the question “How are you?” might well be returned with a more intelligent answer if we were to know ourselves better.

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