

## FIRST PERFORMANCES

### Darmstadt 2016: the ‘Universal Mouth’

In the preface to the 2016 International Summer Course for New Music programme booklet, the festival’s artistic director, Thomas Schäfer, repeated a question that Irvine Arditti had put to him when they were discussing the Arditti Quartet’s concerts: ‘shall we attack the future or dig up the past?’. This question, posed in order to establish some form of discursive framework for the course, became a subliminal trace throughout the festival. The participants’ bags, for instance, were imprinted with the slogan, ‘attack the future’ and Schäfer ended his preface by stating, ‘let me call out to everyone involved, and to our audience: let’s attack the future!’. The air of the festival itself, however, seemed slightly more reserved throughout its lengthy 17-day span. There were, of course, moments of theatrical flamboyance, such as *Fantasies of Downfall* (2015) by Johannes Kreidler, *metalized void* (2015/16) by Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2014/15) by Eva Reiter, *Sideshow* (2009/15) by Steven Kazuo Takasugi, *EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT* (2015/16) by Jennifer Walshe, and *Living Instruments* (2015) by Serge Vuille. Yet, overall the atmosphere of the festival seemed to be one of quiet vigilance as events unfolded.

The festival got off to rather a shaky start. Not only was there an obvious confusion over certain aspects of the ticket system, but staff and participants of the summer course were sometimes being turned away from programmed concerts because they were too full. It was on the second evening of the festival, however, that a most disconcerting experience occurred. Held in the Staatstheater Darmstadt, five composer finalists – Sivan Cohen Elias, Marta Gentilucci, Carsten Hennig, Patricia Martinez and Abel Paül showcased their entries for the International Music Theatre Competition Darmstadt, the jury’s prize being a full-length commission for a music theatre piece for 2018. An audience prize was awarded to Carsten Hennig’s *selbstversuch, Musik* but the official jury were instructed not to deliberate behind closed doors, but instead announce their vote, without discussion, straight after the final performance. The idea backfired

because no reliable criteria for assessing the performances had been established. The jury was soon in difficulty, and it became increasingly painful to witness the names of the potential winning composers being toyed with publicly. Awkwardly, the jury eventually announced they were postponing any official announcement until the following day (their eventual winner was Sivan Cohen Elias) a downbeat end to what had been a sometimes colourful and vibrant evening.

It was during the festival’s public lecture series that voice was given to some of the ideas entwined in the festival. Chaya Czernowin, for instance, spoke about her compositional interest in the process of ‘breath’ to ‘voice’, and how it is in the slowing down of such a process that particular hidden areas become unveiled, lending themselves to rigorous enquiry: ‘the breath is not an introduction to the singing, the breath is a place in itself. When we use the tongue to make noises, it is not a pre-cursor to speaking, but it is a whole place independent by itself. The audience listened intently to the unfolding of this particular process in *Adiantum Capillus-Veneris* I and III (2015/16), described by the composer as a series of ‘études’ – but also ‘pieces in their own right’ – that have been crucial to ‘test the water’ of her latest opera, *Infinite Now*. The lecture concluded with a highly insightful Q&A session, in which the composer elaborated on how ‘the mouth is this universe’, ‘an orchestra’, and that ‘every obvious space is what tells me there is something underneath that I have to try and figure out’. *Infinite Now* will be premiered on 18 April 2017 in Ghent, Belgium.

There were many fine performances throughout the festival. Morton Feldman’s *String Quartet no. 1* (1979) performed by the Arditti Quartet, Mark Andre’s *S2* (2015) performed by Christian Dierstein, and the world premiere of Ashley Fure’s *The Force of Things. An Opera for Objects* (2015/16), performed by the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), all offered a sense of grounded assurance. Rebecca Saunders’s open rehearsal on her piece *Fletch* (2012) with violinist Ashot Sarkissian, and *Quartet* (1988) with a selection of summer course

participants, as well as the piano class workshop concert performances of her *Mirror, mirror on the wall* (1994) by Mari Kawamura, and *Crimson* (2004/05) by Helga Karen, all demonstrated the same sense of an intense weight of sound. Georg Friedrich Haas's *Koma* (2015), a production by Staatstheater Darmstadt in co-production with the Schwetzingen Festspiele, and his *In iij. Noct.* (2001) performed in an open space classroom by Quartetto Maurice (this fine Italian quartet was awarded one of six fellowships for participation at the 2018 Darmstadt Summer Course, alongside Ine Vanoeveren, Nina Guo, Bethany Younge, Reiko Yamada, and Mikołaj Laskowski), also proved to be exceptional, especially in implementing the technique of 'echolocation'.

Toward the end of the festival, there was a sense of a new momentum. The GRID project (Gender Research in Darmstadt) established a commitment to improving the course's diversity and gender equality issues. Helmut Lachenmann made a brief appearance, in which he warned his audience to 'be careful please', 'don't only cultivate your garden, open and develop it. ... A musician has to learn how to learn. I hope with each piece the musician had the opportunity to learn again, to open his horizon'. Along with performances of Lachenmann's *Air* (1968/69, rev. 1994/2015), by Dierstein and the hr-Sinfonieorchester at the hr-Sendesaal (Frankfurt), and a choreographed version of Saunders's *Still* (2011/16), by the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie, Sasha Waltz, and Guests, in Darmstadt's Böllentorhalle, – a performance that was also programmed alongside the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1860) – it did seem that the festival's closing might also represent a new opening.

Stephanie Jones

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### Wet Hot Kranichstein Summer: Darmstadt 2016

#### *Thanks, and Sorry*

The 2016 Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik took place from 29 July to 14 August. That's more than two weeks of concerts and lectures. As anyone who has been to a New Music festival knows, you can't see everything, and you'll end up missing stuff that winds up being extremely important.

I'm offering this introduction because I didn't see everything, although I saw almost everything I talk about in detail below. I fill in the gaps with what people tell me, but what follows is necessarily

a considerably streamlined account. This entire review is just an attempt to communicate what I saw and heard in a way that points towards larger trends, currents, developments and trajectories occurring in the international New Music scene. My more philosophically minded friends tend to refer to this as going from the specific to the universal; I'd call it self-aggrandisement, or worse. So, I'm sorry. Sincerely. In fact, I don't think there is anything in this account that, if you asked me, I wouldn't apologise for. That's not to say that what follows isn't as honest, accurate, and, I guess, as good as I could possibly make it. But still. I didn't see everything.

#### *Overview: The Future Fights Back*

There is a colloquial term in American football that is applied to a team that has had a lacklustre season – not terrible, but not great either. This is called a 'rebuilding year'. 2016 was a rebuilding year for the Darmstädter Ferienkurse. The vast majority of the performances were perfectly acceptable, and most were enjoyable. Some displayed a vitality, musicianship, and joy in artistic creation that easily rivalled and often surpassed anything in any other New Music festival. But some seemed to represent a sort of creative malaise, a feeling of going through the motions, composing first and thinking later. One of my German colleagues in the Schreibwerkstatt termed this 'musikalische Bankrott' (musical bankruptcy). This is rather dramatic, and it did in fact generate drama, but I'm not convinced that the IMD needs to be bailed out just yet. The bankruptcy (if it can be called that) was mostly in the curatorial exercise of confusion, a sense that each successive evening showcase was simply throwing everything against an aesthetic wall to see what stuck. And some things did stick. That's what makes it a rebuilding year.

The slogan for the 2016 courses was 'Attack the Future'. It seemed like it was everywhere, like some sort of silently chanted motto. If you think about it for a second, it's a bizarre slogan, both polemical and vague; but it nevertheless framed the activities of the courses, pushing the participants towards a self-conscious newness: the future isn't going to attack itself. For better or worse, this put the focus on the youngest participants, and their activities were supported and overseen by older, more established and authoritative figures, who seemed genuinely more concerned to create a dialogue with these young participants than they did with their own premieres. In the following two sections, I'm going to describe two major things – or