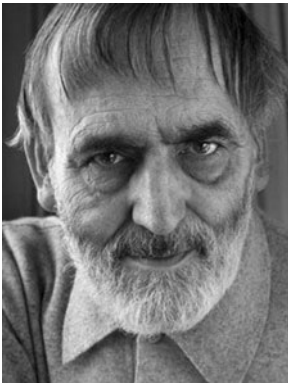

SPECTRES OF DARMSTADT

Martin Iddon

Abstract: The word ‘Darmstadt’ has come to stand for a broad set of discursive tropes: whether positive or negative, the word is often used as a convenient shorthand for organising ways of thinking about music in the post-war era. I suggest that, after the many symbolic deaths of the avant-garde, the word Darmstadt has come to function, too, as a sort of Lacanian Name-of-the-Father, an idea which need have little to do with the father ‘proper’: rather it is a structuring principle, one which authorises and delimits the boundaries of the known, the prescribed and proscribed world. I argue, too, that the death of that symbolic father, however it becomes extended and perpetuated, surely presages rupture and collapse within the symbolic order. From this position, I examine the ways in which various spectres of Darmstadt – borrowing from Derrida’s Marxian *hauntologie* – return, both within the world of New Music and beyond.

Helmut Lachenmann (photo courtesy of Breitkopf & Härtel)



I

Two quotations frame what follows, one written from within the crumbling edifice of the citadel of the avant-garde, and one from a perspective from which the towers and ramparts of Darmstadt may always have appeared a folly. As one encircled by the ruined landscape of a post-war faith in the possibility of some future promised land, Helmut Lachenmann opines that ‘we are all – more or less consciously – parricidal children of Darmstadt’ (Lachenmann 2004 [1987], 342). Speaking of Lachenmann, an ocean away, Alex Ross, though signalling that the thrill of novelty has hardly eroded entirely, claims that

much contemporary music in Austria and Germany seems constricted in emotional range – trapped behind the modernist plate-glass window of Adorno’s ‘Grand Hotel Abyss’. The great German tradition, with all its grand-ears and sorrows, is cordoned off, like a crime scene under investigation. (Ross 2009 [2007], 575)

The juxtaposition of the parricidal impulses of the post-Stockhausen generation with the police line Ross places around the still-flickering embers of the Austro-German tradition might lead one to suspect that the story of the post-avant-garde era begins, like so many, with a murder, a symbolic one at least.

If the murder of the Father is symbolic, the many deaths of the founding fathers of the post-war musical avant-garde are real enough. Over the past 20 years, a certain spirit of avant-gardism has, both metaphorically and literally, left the world. Following the deaths of Maderna, Feldman, Cage, Nono, and Goeyvaerts, in very recent years Brown, Ligeti, Kagel, Stockhausen, and Pousseur have been added to the roll call of passed masters. Only Boulez remains, now more distant from Schoenberg than ever, not dead. Little surprise, then, that Rancière claims that

'aesthetics' has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning. (Rancière 2009 [2004], 9)

It may seem curious to be arguing, as I am (implicitly at any rate), that it is the word 'Darmstadt' itself that operates as a Lacanian 'Name-of-the-Father', rather than the proper names of, say, Stockhausen, or Boulez, or Nono. Yet, when Darmstadt is spoken of, whether in affirmation or negation, it seems more often than not to refer to something other than, *sensu stricto*, the events of the new music courses held there, but rather to a broader set of discursive tropes, suggesting a certain avant-garde trajectory. In short, 'Darmstadt' is often a convenient shorthand for organizing ways of thinking about music in the post-war era. As Stavrakakis puts it

what is supposed to confer a (relative) stability to our discursive constructions of reality is the function of the *points de capiton*, signifiers which work as points of reference for the articulation of networks of meaning. At the level of subjective structuration, such is the role of what Lacan calls the Name-of-the-Father. (Stavrakakis 2007, 81)

Lacan himself, in describing the functioning of the Name-of-the-Father, claims that

there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father. Not the natural father, but what is called the father. The order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole is founded on the existence of this name of the father. (Lacan 1993 [1981], 96)

The Name-of-the-Father, then, need have little to do with (need, at the very least *not only*, refer to) the father 'proper'; rather it is a structuring principle, one which authorizes and delimits the boundaries of the known, the prescribed and proscribed world.

In a more literal reading of his own theoretical frame, in which the father's name is more clearly that of the (or, at least, a) 'natural' father, Lacan opines that

the fact that a gentleman has been Mr. So-and-so in the social order requires that this be indicated on his headstone. The fact that he was called Mr. So-and-so extends beyond his living existence. This doesn't presuppose belief in the immortality of the soul, but simply that his name has nothing to do with his living existence, that it extends and perpetuates itself beyond it. (Lacan 1993 [1981], 96)

If, as Barzalai claims '[t]he symbolic father designates an invariant, unconscious feature of the social groups or community that elevates human subjects above mere brute, instinctual existence and simultaneously subjugates them to its signifying structures' (Barzalai 1999, 72) then the death of that symbolic father, however it becomes extended and perpetuated, surely presages rupture and collapse within the symbolic order. Unsurprisingly, the death of the symbolic father foreshadows trauma and, as Derrida reflects, '[m]ourning always follows a trauma' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 97). To go further, the act of mourning has this at least in common with the avant-garde positions of post-war Europe: 'mourning also wants to get rid of the past, to exorcize it, albeit under the guise of respectful commemoration. To forget the dead altogether is impious in ways that prepare their own retribution, but to remember the dead is neurotic and obsessive and merely feeds a sterile repetition' (Jameson 2008 [1999], 58). Yet, mourning (even symbolic mourning) has its own directionalities, which are distinct. As Laclau observes, '[s]ome filling of the void – of a special kind which requires theoretical description – becomes

necessary' (Laclau 2004, 125). A starting point for this theoretical description of the sorts of things that might fill the void can be found in Jameson's remark, following Derrida, that 'only mourning, and its peculiar failures and dissatisfactions [...] opens a vulnerable space and entry-point through which ghosts might make their appearance' (Jameson 2008 [1999], 43).

II

What could it mean, then, to begin to speak of the ghosts, the sorts of spectres, that might haunt contemporary discourses surrounding new music? How might it be possible to describe the particular and peculiar logic of that which comes back, that which returns, after the end of Darmstadt, after the final close of avant-gardism? Derrida, albeit outlining the multiplicitous returns of Marx after the fall of various stripes of world communism, coins the term 'hauntology' to describe a logic that

would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. How to *comprehend* in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? (Derrida 1994 [1993], 10)

Thus, even if the project of modernity is just as unfinished as Habermas has claimed (Habermas 1992 [1981], 158–69), that is not to say that the deferred *telos* of that project will not resurface within the discourse of the seemingly present end. For Jameson, such spectres of the past might be thought of as 'moments in which the present – and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world system of late capitalism – unexpectedly betrays us' (Jameson 2008 [1999], 39).

It is, no doubt, as Derrida suggests, '[a] question of repetition: a specter is always a *revenant*, One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 11). Derrida's own text, indeed, is haunted by figures who, too, begin by coming back. The appearance, at the beginning of the play, of Hamlet's dead father finds its analogue at the opening of Derrida's text where King Hamlet 'comes back, so to speak, for the first time' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 4).¹ This is where *Hamlet*, and Derrida, begin: '[a]fter the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back*, it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself again and again' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 10).

If it is necessary, as Derrida claims, 'to speak of *the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable' (Derrida 1994 [1993], xiv), which is, in part at least, to say from the juncture that it becomes unthinkable to construe any position as an *avant-garde*

¹ This is hardly the first 'return' of Hamlet, it must be said. As Wolf Lepenies observes: 'At the time of the First World War, Paul Valéry had already spoken of Europe as Hamlet's continent. [In 1949] Thomas Mann went even further: "The future belongs to the man of the day, whose mind and 'common sense' are directed toward the nearest, most useful matters; it belongs to him whose energy is not tainted by the pallor of thought. Not only Germany, all of Europe is Hamlet, and Fortinbras is America". Hamlet, the Danish prince, is the doubter and brooder who fails to act when it is necessary and therefore is later forced to commit deeds that make bad things worse. Fortinbras, the young son of the Norwegian king, however, is not at all tainted by the "pallor of thought". He acts forcefully and swiftly, convinced that perhaps not always the law, but certainly the law of the strongest, will be on his side' (Lepenies 2006, 191–92)

one (since it is no longer possible to say with any certainty which direction is forward and which is back), then the spectre's injunctions carry weight. Those who, like Hamlet, are 'bound to hear' (*Hamlet*, I: v), if not necessarily bound also to revenge, are bound to 'the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead' (Derrida 1994 [1993], xiv). The spectre, in Bernardo's words at the beginning of *Hamlet*, 'would be spoke to' (*Hamlet*, I: i).

What, then, might the spectres say? If they demand, like King Hamlet, that those who they haunt 'swear', for what oath do they call? This sort of inheritance commands that 'one must', which is to say that 'one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 16). The injunction, then, is unified in a way in which the inheritance is not, since it certainly is, as Machery claims, 'a question here of an inheritance, in the strict sense, that is, of that which can, in every sense of the word, "return" from someone who is dead or, as one says, has disappeared [*disparu*]' (Machery 2008 [1999], 17). Indeed, it is a necessary corollary of the oaths the spectres demand that '[t]he injunction itself [...] can only be one by dividing itself, tearing itself apart, differing/deferring itself, by speaking at the same time several times – and in several voices' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 16).

With Derrida, with Hamlet, with Shakespeare, perhaps it might be possible to say again: "The time is out of joint": time is *disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down [*traqué et détraqué*], *deranged*, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 18). If '[t]he time is out of joint', if the sorts of Hegelian directionalities implicit in the path the *avant-garde* cut between past and future seem no longer to hold, then the dictum of the spectres of Darmstadt may too be 'to set it right' (*Hamlet*, I: v). Yet, more precisely expressed, this hardly means necessarily to 'repair injustice', but rather 'to rearticulate *as must be* the disjuncture of the present time' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 25).

III

Even if, as I have already suggested, the historical directionalities implicit in notions of what it might mean to be of the *avant-garde* have, seemingly at least, disappeared, this hardly connotes that those trajectories have lost their power entirely. The shadow of their former presence recurs with almost monotonous regularity, although, as should hardly be surprising, the spectral trace is not identical to what those particular lines of flight may once have implied. It is not for nothing, in this context, that the quotation from Lachenmann with which I began is drawn from an essay entitled 'Komponieren im Schatten von Darmstadt'. Literally, to be sure, this need mean nothing more than 'composing in the shadow of Darmstadt'. Yet, behind that shadow lies another resonance, albeit a figurative one, since 'die Schatten der Vergangenheit' are, too, 'the ghosts of the past' and, for Lachenmann, to speak of Darmstadt means, for the most part at least, to speak of the generation of the 1950s (Lachenmann 2004 [1987], 342). Reviewing the events of the Darmstadt courses in 2008, Alexander Sigman, too identifies both the composition of contemporary music as 'an

ostensibly dying art' (Sigman 2009, 1–2) and that, in response to this,

[i]n the coming years, it would be of interest to witness a return to the emphasis upon concept and experimentation that typified the first few decades at Darmstadt ... and not simply the regurgitation of material associated with this era. (Sigman 2009, 7)

Even within the cordoned-off world of the continuing traces of what is still called Darmstadt, then, the talk is not only of death, but also of the return of the dead.

From outside the police barricades erected around the crime scene, that ghostly residue manifests itself in the form of an often unspoken (post-) serial bogeyman, a figure which may be absent at the scene of writing, but the ramifications of whose surprisingly extended existence allow a point of comparison for what remains to be done. It is hardly my intention, as I hope should already be clear, to offer any critique on aesthetic grounds of any of the various statements of musical value, or its lack, that follow. What is more important, it seems to me, are the ways in which the musical *avant-garde* – especially, though not exclusively, in the form of the multiply *avant-garde* trends of Darmstadt – re-appears, seemingly unbidden, as a phantom presence.

Alfred Hickling, for one, exhibits an unspoken fear of the possible return of the shadow of the past when he claims that 'James MacMillan is a rare example of a contemporary composer who writes complex, intensely spiritual music without frightening audiences away' (Hickling 2009). For Richard Taruskin, too, it is a question of an 'other face of serious modern music' (Taruskin 2009 [1999], 144). The similarity of Hickling's description of the BBC Philharmonic's performance of MacMillan's *The World's Ransoming* and *Silence* to Taruskin's assertion that the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, under Simon Rattle, perform Adès's *Asyla* '*con amore*, as one rarely hears contemporary orchestral music done' (Taruskin 2009 [1999], 145) is arresting. More pertinent, though, is Taruskin's suggestion that a piece like *Asyla* belongs to 'the alternative current that has always shadowed the severely abstract variety of modernism that hogged the headlines until it ran out of gas' (Taruskin 2009 [1999], 144). Already, Taruskin's talk is of shadows, of the ghostly presence of another brand of modernism haunting that 'severely abstract variety' which might equally well be placed under the sign of Princeton serialism as that of Darmstadt.

The idea that a form of contemporary music define itself by what it is not is hardly a new one. The caricature of the proto-typical post-serial composer offered by Julian Johnson shows how similar in terms of strategy, if not of content, these two refusals are: '[e]ven the technical language describes it in terms of what it lacks: it is atonal and unmelodic and often seeks to avoid a clear sense of beat, line, chord, phrase structure, form, and so on' (Johnson 2002, 105). Yet, in the course of Taruskin's discussion of Adès, he effects a reversal. By the postscript to his review of *Asyla*, that alternative current is no longer shadowy. Indeed, the spectre of the past can now be found somewhere else entirely. In response to Ivan Hewett's assessment that 'a facile cleverness and an emotional chilliness [...] can sometimes be the aftertaste of Adès's undeniable brilliance and magic', Taruskin tellingly retorts '[s]hades of the fifties again! Just what the Darmstadters were saying about Britten' (Taruskin 2009 [1999], 151). Leaving aside the question of whether the Darmstadters – whoever they may have been – were really saying

anything very much about Britten at all, again it is a question of a spectral revenant, the fifties returning and, yet more strikingly, speaking in the tongues of Darmstadt's dead. A similar reversal can be found in Fineberg's description of the emergence of the more or less, according to one's perspective, literally spectral in contemporary music:

The real content of music is not mathematics, quantum physics, or even aesthetic philosophy, but sound, the way sound changes in time and the affects it produces in the human mind.

This may seem like an obvious idea to anyone who was not a composer in the twentieth century, but to those of us who were, this was a major breakthrough. (Fineberg 2006, 113)

Phasmophobia, a seemingly justifiable fear of ghosts, or at least of what they might say, recurs again and again.

Elsewhere, Hewett returns to this topic. Alarmed by the notion that classical music – which in the context of his remarks *means* contemporary music – might become 'invisible and ubiquitous at the same moment', Hewett posits a choice: 'either to keep faith with classical music, and reanimate it so that it stays a living art; or be faced always with its ghost, murmuring at us from restaurant loudspeakers and CD shops and TV screens' (Hewett 2003, 254). Yet both of Hewett's options, thus, demand a spectral presence: on the one hand stands the literally expressed 'ghost' – a virtual shadow of the music that was – but his alternative is one of re-animation. Again, the word chosen is vital. To re-animate is certainly to restore to life something which was dead, but its separate particles suggest something else. Addressing Mercury, Horace's tenth ode states 'you lead the spirits of the dead to the place of their rest' ('*tu pias laetis animas reponis/sedibus*'). *Anima*, then, in a more literal reading, bespeaks a spectral haunting too. 'Re-animate', the word that is, is itself haunted by the ghost of a ghost. In short, the choices Hewett offers in the wake of the death of avant-gardism involve ghosts to the left or to the right.

IV

The spectres of the *avant-garde*, then, are all around. From one side, they are to be feared and avoided, as Horatio is fearful of the ghost of King Hamlet; from the other they are to be invoked, re-conjured and attended to. In any case, they are unavoidable. Grudgingly or not, those actively engaged with new music are inheritors of Darmstadt and, as Derrida puts it '[i]nheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task' (Derrida 1994 [1993], 54). What, then, is the nature of this task? The injunction of the ghosts of Darmstadt might be that those who, like Prince Hamlet, will listen ought to restore the bloodline, to set aright the falling away of the centrality of *avant-gardiste* mentalities. This sort of restitution is precisely that which Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf identifies in his claim that not only is a 'second modernity' desirable, but that it is already underway, with the rightful heirs to the thrones of Darmstadt marked out as, principally, 'Mark André, Richard Barrett, Pierluigi Billone, Chaya Czernowin, Sebastian Claren, Frank Cox, Liza Lim, Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Chris Mercer, Brice Pauset, Enno Poppe, Wolfram Schurig, Steven Kazuo Takasugi, [and] Franck Yeznikian' (Mahnkopf 2009, 8). Yet those who would follow such demands might be well advised to remember that the consequences of the oath Hamlet swore to his father's ghost left the corpses of the royal household scattered across the floors of Elsinore.

The charge of the ghosts creates another space, which ‘makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage’ (Jameson 2008 [1999], 38). If *Hamlet* is any guide, it might be a reminder that ghosts appear not only at the end, but also at the beginning of things. The inheritance of the *avant-garde*, whatever form it may take, will hardly dictate the ending of this task of mourning. There is no reason not to suspect that, in the final act of a narrative that begins with the demands of the spectres of Darmstadt, a Fortinbras might not appear, a minor character, an outsider, no blood relative, to take centre stage.

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