A First Assessment

> "I firmly believe that good music always lies in the area of tension between unguarded inspiration and controlled positing."
> (J. Widmann in M. Fein, *Im Sog der Klänge*, 74)

As the analyses of the compositions examined for this study show, the music of Jörg Widmann is characterized by great stylistic variety. Different styles are not so much associated with different biographical periods but occur more often in works written in immediate succession, or even in movements within a single work. Melodically intuitive passages may stand next to extremes in interval structure and register; rhythms rich in allusion give way to sections in unstable meter comprising measures in constantly changing duration and hierarchy; tonally anchored segments pass seamlessly into segments characterized by unpitched sounds. Such sounds may accompany music played by traditionally tuned instruments, join it as a self-assured partner, or replace it entirely.

The "tension between unguarded inspiration and controlled positing" that Widmann mentions can be observed particularly well in his attitude toward musical structures, in his creative bows to admired older masters, and in his conspicuous inclusion of self-quotations. From sonata allegro form to canons, vocal textures reminiscent of motets or chorales in baroque oratorios, palindromic frames and other mirroring effects all the way to the strophic structuring in instrumental, vocal, and stage works, he adopts construction principles known throughout the centuries only to transform them in creative and often contrasting ways. When explicitly requested to design a commissioned composition with reference to a classical composer (as was the case with Schubert, who inspired his *Lied für Orchester*, or with two of Beethoven's late symphonies, to which he responded in his concert overture *Con brio*), he savors individual aspects that fascinate him or what he perceives as the works' "spirit" and allows their essence to fertilize his imagination. In all this he moves with the apparent assurance of a tightrope walker between allusions that sound teasingly like quotations but can never be ascertained as such and entirely contemporary responses to familiar challenges, often flavoring his results with now jocular, now blunt contrasts.

Beginning around 2005, Widmann's compositional output is distinguished by the integration of an increasing proportion of self-quotations. Now Monteverdi, Bach, Handel, and Haydn—to name just four of the composers who have used the artistic device known to musicologist as "parody"[1] extensively and with results considered ingenious—are musical ancestors whom one can proudly invoke. Whenever these composers had written a work for a singular occasion that made further performances seem unlikely, they typically chose movements or sections they considered particularly fortuitous and reassigned them to or modified them for inclusion into a new work. The receiving work would be one that—be it because of its relation to annually recurring feast days, the regular spiritual admonition of the faithful in religious contexts, or the repertoire habits of theaters—promised multiple reiterations. Thus numerous movements in Monteverdi's *Selva morale e sprituale* are based on material from his madrigal books. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* derived roughly a third of its music from the congratulatory cantatas *Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen* and *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten*.[2] Similar adoptions enrich Bach's *B-minor Mass* as well as his *St Matthew Passion*, which shares several sections with the *Köthener Trauermusik* premiered only shortly before.[3] Handel was only able to complete his successful opera *Rinaldo* of 1711 within less than two weeks after his arrival in London because he reworked and integrated attractive numbers from works he had composed in the course of the years 1705-1709, among others from the cantatas *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* and *Arresta il passo*, the oratorios *Il rionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* and *La Resurrezione* as well as his earlier operas *Almira*

[1]Before the word "parody" came to be used to denote an imitative work created to mock, comment on, or trivialize an original work, its subject, author, style, or some other target by means of irony or satire, it was understood, particularly in the field of the creative arts, as a technical term referring to a reworking of one kind of composition or part thereof into another. (The Greek roots of the word are *par-*, meaning "beside, counter, or against," and *ōdía*, meaning "song, as in an ode.")

[2]Bach composed the cantata BWV 213 (*Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen*, also known as *Herkules auf dem Scheideweg*) for the birthday of Friedrich Christian, elector of Saxony. The cantata BWV 214 (*Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten*) was a commission for the birthday of Maria Josepha elector of Saxony and queen of Poland.

[3]Ludwig Finscher counts 186 movements in self-contained forms (e.g., arias or choirs) that Bach took over from one spiritual or secular context to integrate into a new work. In addition Finscher lists 22 recitatives, seven instrumental movements reworked as vocal movements and seven vocal movements converted into instrumental ones. ("Zum Parodieproblem bei Bach." In: Martin Geck, ed., *Bach-Interpretationen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1969), 94-105 [94].

and *Agrippina*.[4] Haydn's *Eszterházy Masses*, too, rely in essential segments on earlier works. To give just one example, he conceived the "Benedictus" of his *Marienzeller Messe* as a sacred "parody" of an originally secular model, in that he incorporated the aria "Qualque volta non fa male il contrasto ed il rigore" from his comic opera *Il mondo della luna*, expanding the solo part for a four-part choir. When these and other composers of the 17th and 18th centuries mounted felicitous movements or sections from their earlier compositions into a new context by adding a text or changing an existing one, adding parts, and perhaps adapting the melodic outline and/or the texture, the collages characteristically resulted in masterpieces of the quality found in the examples listed above—masterpieces that even skeptics would not wish to denounce as second-hand creations.[5]

In the 19th century, this practice changed fundamentally. Composers severely restricted the extent and number of snippets imported from earlier works into new ones, in the interest of stressing what was new and never heard before. To be sure, Schubert quotes the tunes of some of his songs in his instrumental works.[6] Bruckner laces several of his symphonies with reminiscences from his sacred compositions, as if he wanted to underline that even his absolute music is dedicated to the Dear Lord.[7] And in Mahler's work one finds an exceptionally large number of self-quotations.[8] But in all these cases from the 19th century and many comparable ones

[4]For the by now famous aria from *Rinaldo*, "Lascia ch'io pianga," he used music that had originated as an instrumental sarabande in the opera *Almira* of 1705 and had first been heard as an aria, albeit with different lyrics, in 1707 as part of the oratorio *Il Trionfo*.

[5]These days the consensus is geared in the opposite direction. When the well-known Bach scholar Christoph Wolff summed up the latest insights on musical self-quotations in the final report of the 1988 meeting of the International Bach Academy Stuttgart, he affirmed that they were generally considered as "an enhancement of quality" and that Bach "wanted to develop the works serving as models to a more elevated form." In: Renate Steiger, ed., *Parodie und Vorlage: Zum Bachschen Parodieverfahren und seiner Bedeutung für die Hermeneutik.*

[6]The three best-known examples are instrumental variations of song tunes; cf. the variations for flute and piano (D 802) on the song "Trockene Blumen" from the song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*, the string quartet no. 14 (D 810), in which the second movement presents an extensive play on the tune of "Death and the Maiden," and the piano quintet (D 667) with a cycle of variations on "Die Forelle" in its fourth movement.

[7]Bruckner's Second Symphony recalls his F-minor Mass, as the *Adagio* quotes motifs from its *Benedictus* and the finale, a chorale from its *Kyrie*. Similarly, the opening movement of his Third Symphony and the Adagio of the Ninth recall the beginning of the *Misere* from his D-minor Mass.

[8]These link, e.g., Mahler's Sixth Symphony to the Seventh and his First Symphony to some of his songs. His Third Symphony is a treasure trove of anticipations and reminiscences.

from the first two thirds of the 20th century, it is usually only *one* parameter that is being taken over: most often the melody, occasionally also a rhythm or a memorable harmonic progression.

The way in which composers of the 15th to the 18th centuries re-dedicated entire units or larger sections of their own music for a new context inspired an artistic strategy developed with the emergence of post-modernist aesthetics. In the course of the past fifty years, the various arts generated the notion of an œuvre the components of which are intrinsically related to and interwoven with one another. Composers who operate on this aesthetic premise include Luigi Dallapiccola and Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez and György Kurtág, Bernd Alois Zimmermann and Peter Ruzicka, as well as Widmann's teachers Hans Werner Henze and Wolfgang Rihm. For all of them, the interrelationship of diverse pieces is owed to an over-arching compositional process that allows to re-situate elements—rows, themes, passages, sections, movements—and thus endowing them with an additional signification. Scope and frequency of such re-dedications vary widely.

Boulez and Rihm in particular have also written analytically about their aesthetic foundations and beliefs. Boulez explains his compositional process with the image of a plasma-like space allowing him to continually change his perspective on the objects in it and to expand in ever new directions without ever completely leaving his previous work behind.[9] He does not regard his creative activity as aiming for individual works that are hermetically closed off against one another. Instead he seeks to embed every individual composition into an encompassing "work in progress," in which recalling earlier results is understood as an integral step in a continually changing, ideally interminable compositional process. What is newly generated at any given moment will often become the germ cell of creative processes suggesting themselves at a much later time. Boulez considers continuous development and redevelopment of existing material, variation and enrichment as his most important generative principle; he speaks of "excrescence" and "proliferation." Accordingly, his initial material often undergoes countless mutations. One of many examples is a chain of compositions that, at the point of its last development, had already been "in progress" for thirty years and whose latest stages to date are entitled "Dérive." The point of departure was a work for violoncello solo and six

[9]Pierre Boulez, *"Leitlinien": Gedankengänge eines Komponisten*. Aus dem Französischen von Josef Häusler (Kassel etc.: Bärenreiter/J. B. Metzler, 2000).

cellos, *Messagesquisse*, composed for Paul Sacher's 70th birthday in 1976. In 1981 this composition developed to *Répons* for six soloists, chamber ensemble, computer sounds, and live electronics. In 1984 it turned into *Dérive I* for six instruments and in 1988, into *Dérive II* for eleven instruments. But since this was in turn revised in 2006, one must assume that the process should still not be considered completed.

Wolfgang Rihm thinks along similar lines. He prefers to regard his compositions as provisional solutions that may at any time be modified or corrected by way of enlargement, supplementation, troping, cross-linking, and interleaving. Adopting metaphors from the visual arts, he describes these alterations as "retouching" or "sculpting": "I have the notion of a large block of music that resides within me. Each composition is at once a part of this block and a physiognomy chiseled into it.[10]

Widmann's technique of recontextualizing earlier material, which gained momentum in the last eight years, should be considered against this backdrop. The metamorphosis undergone by the March from *Dubairische Tänze* via *Souvenir bavarois* to *Bayerisch-babylonischer Marsch* recalls Berio's "derivations" from his *Sequenza* compositions.[11] And Widmann's integration of extensive sections from fourteen precursor works or movements into his opera *Babylon* finds its counterpart in Dallapiccola's opera *Ulisse*.[12]

Widmann's preferred instrumental combinations offer a characteristic of a very different kind. They include the pairing of clarinet and accordion (particularly in settings with microtonal arabesques meandering above sustained sonorities and clusters), the use of French horns for exceptionally intimate cantilenas, a kind of 'psychedelic gamelan' consisting of

[10]Wolfgang Rihm, *Ausgesprochen. Schriften und Gespräche* in two volumes (Mainz: Schott, 1998), vol. I, 114.

[11]The series of 14 *Sequenze* Luciano Berio composed between 1958 and 2002 for one solo instrument each constitutes the point of departure for a number of works entitled *Chemins*. Thus *Chemins II* for solo violin and eight instruments (1967) is an adaptation of *Sequenza II* for harp. By adding further instruments, Berio arrived at ever new derivations. Besides *chemin* (way) Berio also uses other titles for mutations attained in a similar manner: thus *Corale* (1981) is a development of *Sequenza VIII*.

[12]In the work of Luigi Dallapiccola, the development of composing with self-quotations also peaks in an opera. *Ulisse* (1968) integrates myriad passages from a great number of Dallapiccola's earlier compositions. Similarly to Widmann's self-quotations in his opera *Babylon*, these open up additional interpretative contexts insofar as they carry the precursor works' content or message into the new composition.

glockenspiel, celesta, and crotales[13] (often contrasted with very low nipple gongs) and the sound of specific violin harmonics used to symbolize timelessness.

The sum total of all these characteristics presents the image of a composer confident of his craft, polyglot with regard to tonal languages, blessed with abundant imagination but also enthusiastic about earlier fortuitous results, and uninhibited by ideology or fear of contact. Eleonore Büning recently summarized this in a feature published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*:

> Widmann is simply good at everything – and he tries everything out. His works always surprise with unmediated juxtapositions of the exalted and the inane, the complicated and the homespun, the sentimental and the ignoble, the borrowed and the unique. Most of it is defamiliarized, bent out of shape, but occasionally also pure. Whenever he is particularly pleased with something he has come up with, he repeats it once, twice, or three times. Deeply felt affects are sprinkled with saucy wit. Plain tone painting mushrooms into something that is haptic, physically subsumable.[14]

Jörg Widmann is without doubt one of the most versatile and thereby, one of the most exciting composers of our time. As his music does not privilege an obligation to the loftiness of an elitist definition of artistic modernism, it is often surprisingly accessible. Despite the considerable demands this composer, too, poses on his listeners in large parts of his music, his works have the potential to rekindle in a broad segment of the public the interest in contemporary concert and operatic music.

[13]The description of this trio of high idiophone, high metallophone and small antic cymbals as a "gamelan" was not coined by Widmann. It parallels Olivier Messiaen's by now famous expression for his similar (albeit much more agitated sounding) trio of glockenspiel, celesta, and vibraphone, prominently heard e.g. in his *Turangalîla-Symphonie* and in the bird concert of his opera *Saint François d'Assise*.

[14]"Oper 'Babylon' in München: Fette Zeiten in alten Städten." *FAZ* 29 October, 2012.