

## Introduction

Whoever encounters the music of Jörg Widmann for the first time is astonished at its directness and intensity. Not infrequently, the music breaks like a raging torrent over the listener: it is excessive in its effervescent virtuosity or its infinite sadness. (Markus Fein)

Jörg Widmann's works comprise a wide range of textures, forms, and genres. His musical language, equally free of vanguard fixtures and a fearful avoidance of allegedly outmoded emotionality, plumbs myriad nuances. It spans from near-tonal passages via microtonal segments all the way to noises that involve the instruments' (and the instrumentalists') bodies.

The following analyses deliberately forgo any comparisons with the musical languages of immediate forerunners and contemporaries. Concert critics like to point out passages that remind them of Shostakovich, Strauss, Berio, Ligeti, Eötvös, or Lachenmann, along with Widmann's teachers, above all Henze and Rihm. It is, of course, in no way surprising that an open-minded and interested musician should take note of the idioms used by composer colleagues. But while music lovers may feel tempted after a first listening to declare a perceived similarity as a borrowing, thorough examination will usually prove such claims deceptive. Allusions to folk-music gestures or inflections can easily be detected, especially in contexts intended to capture a certain mood or a specific ambience. The inventions of other composers, however, were they can be found at all, invariably appear in a creatively altered form that blends them into Widmann's own musical language.

In view of the immense versatility characterizing Widmann's compositional idiom, it seems expedient to comment on the possibilities and limits of descriptive and interpreting language. Music, like visual art, poses a transmedial problem: accounts must verbally capture what is primarily non-linguistic. The larger the portion of phenomena for which generally familiar terms already exist, the greater the success at portraying musical developments in words. Descriptions of non-tonal segments are easily complicated if not outright thwarted by a terminology developed in the context of tonal music. To give an example from harmony: the term *tritone*

has the advantage of avoiding the distinction between an augmented fourth and a diminished fifth, thereby stressing the fact that these two intervals, notated differently only owing to their respective tonal surroundings, are basically equivalent especially in contemporary music. Unfortunately, terms for other coupled phenomena – enharmonic pairs or complementing intervals, to name just two – have not yet established themselves to a similar degree. The following analyses will occasionally make use of the artificial term “semitone variants” where the composer seems to be using different forms of the same basic interval for the same musical purpose— i.e., members of the family consisting of minor second/augmented prime, major seventh/diminished octave, and minor ninth/augmented octave. Similarly, the variants and inversions of a chord that has become part of the harmonic repertoire since the Second Viennese School, the “triad” built from a tritone and a perfect fourth-or-fifth, may be referred to by the summarizing term “T/F stacking or interleaving.”<sup>1</sup> Only where a distinct priority for one of the two perfect intervals and for a definite vertical arrangement must be assumed is it meaningful to use more specific abbreviations like [T/4] for tritone-below-fourth or [5/T] for fifth-below-tritone layerings.

In several of his works, Widmann explores with gusto in how many ever different ways an instrument can be made to sound—including or even emphasizing “body parts” that were considered to be of only structural significance in earlier times. Verbal description, be it geared at analysis or interpretation, comes up against its limit here. This is regrettable, since compositions incorporating such extensions of the familiar sound spectrum often afford significant insights into the wide range of what music, beyond euphony and structure, can also be. Moreover, such works tend to be characterized by an infectious enjoyment of the music-making activity as such. Last but not least, a contemporary composer’s creative scope can only be assessed appropriately on the basis of a full appreciation of how he combines learned skill and craft with creative inventiveness of new sounds.

We are dealing with a strange phenomenon here: A composer can invent unusual and even previously unheard-of sounds and noises, which musicians may reproduce with glee and an audience will ideally listen to with fascination, but which verbal language has no means of describing

<sup>1</sup>This proves clarifying, since all eight variants of this “triad” often serve a single expressive intent. To give an example for the triads around the tritone B<sub>♭</sub>-E: interleaving of a tritone with a perfect fourth occurs in B<sub>♭</sub>-B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♯</sub> and B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♯</sub>, interleaving of a tritone with a perfect fifth in A-B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♯</sub> and B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♭</sub>-F, stacking of a tritone and a perfect fourth in B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♭</sub>-A and F-B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♯</sub>, and stacking of a tritone and a perfect fifth in B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♭</sub>-B<sub>♭</sub> and E<sub>♭</sub>-B<sub>♭</sub>-E<sub>♯</sub>.

adequately. The reason why terminological rendition will at best have only limited success in the case of music with an extended sound spectrum is the absence of a vocabulary that, rather than merely explaining to the musicians the unusual playing technique or instrument treatment that is desired, would define the expected effects of such techniques for a wider audience. Such portrayals of soundscapes would preferably be appealing to read, which presupposes that they be couched in terms familiar to a larger readership. As long as composers who wish to explain the nuances they envisage need to append footnotes the reading of which takes ten or twenty times longer than the eventual sound production, verbal explanation risks to become tedious and unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup>

A few terms have become common currency in the course of the past decades. Helmut Lachenmann's *Pression for One Cellist*, written in 1970, was instrumental in this endeavor, at least for the string repertoire. In this composition, Lachenmann explains a large number of playing techniques that he has either developed himself or adapted from his contemporaries. Nonetheless, terms that have gained acceptance beyond the small world of new-music audiences are still restricted to a rather small catalogue, staples being "snap pizzicato" (plucking a string vertically and so fiercely that it snaps loudly back onto the fingerboard), *ricochet* (throwing the bow on the string so that its bouncing produces a series of rapid notes), *col legno battuto*, *col legno saltando*, *col legno tratto* (hitting, bouncing, or bowing a string with the stick rather than with the hairs of the bow), as well as indications like double glissando, trilled glissando, tremolo glissando, and overtone arpeggio. Terms for extended playing techniques on wind instruments include "multiphonics" (producing several notes at once, either with new fingerings, by using different embouchures, or voicing the throat with conventional fingerings), "growling" (simultaneous playing and singing),

<sup>2</sup>To sample some of what is at stake, consider these explanations for various instruments: (1) Strings: "Rasping sound with short rotation of the bow on the underside of the body (bow stick should touch hairs)" or "Move the bow vertically (!) along the bridge, with utmost pressure, so as to achieve an uncontrolled yowling glissando noise." (2) Winds: "Unscrew mouth piece, hit bell with flat hand, remove hand speedily so that the vacuum creates something akin to a rising glissando," or "Play without involvement of tongue, using keywork as indicated by notation but without left thumb." (3) Piano: "Use the bottom of a cigarette lighter on the part of the strings nearest to your body, alternately touching and withdrawing; result: quasi trill." (4) Singers: "Gradually open mouth and pass into *ordinario* singing, continuing *non vibrato poss. sempre*; singing on 'oh' or 'ah' *ad lib.*, later adding other vowels *ad lib.* and alternating *ab lib.*"; (5) All instrumentalists: "Breathe in and out loudly, with a certain resistance at the hard palate as in German 'ch'; add lighter and darker coloring by altering the form of the oral cavity, assisting with the facial muscles."

“slap tongue” (producing a popping sound along with the note by releasing the suction in the mouth), “circular breathing,” and “key click.” For the piano, there are word pairs denoting various ways of hitting or plucking strings in the string cabinet (“fingertip staccato,” “fingernail glissando,” “plectrum glissando,” etc.). Most special effects, however, particularly all those exploiting the resonance of instrumental bodies, still require rather cumbersome directions.

One example of a musical passage by Widmann that is utterly fascinating but defies detailed verbal rendering is found in the long phase with various strange noises that opens his six-part cycle of “Light Studies.” When, after about five minutes, the accordion sounds the first “real” tone, listeners in the concert hall frequently report to experience an epiphany. Words, however, can at best describe the emotional effect created, but fail if they attempt to describe the impressions that precede the pivotal moment and what exactly is done to make the epiphany possible.

A rather extreme example in Widmann’s œuvre for what one might describe as tones being superseded by (always musically molded) noises is his *Resonance Study* for piano. Two YouTube videos, assembled from excerpts from a live performance of the piece by Irene Russo and an interview with the composer and the pianist, give an impression of what is at stake:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGuhoos\\_h4A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGuhoos_h4A)  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfpT\\_LFmeto](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfpT_LFmeto)

A counterpole of sorts among Widmann’s more extensive works for piano solo, one in which he limits himself to actions on the keyboard while grappling constructively with a classical genre, is the piano sonata *Fleurs du mal*, described and interpreted in the very first chapter of this book. Comparatively ample space has been allotted here to the musical analysis, since the clear and traditionally notated piano score provides a good basis for discussing how Widmann deals with the components of his thematic material, how he anchors its constituents within the lavishly expanded but never quite abandoned tonality, and how he designs contours, textures, and chords, but also rhythm, dynamics, and agogics in accordance with his expressive needs.