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Thomas Christoph Heyde is one of Germany's most important young composers. His numerous works have been performed on their own and on many different festivals. As an artistic director of radio broadcasts and different projects, he is also responsible for quite some programming himself, always trying to stimulate interest in new experimental music. We talk to him about his current interests, his view on the art scene and the internet - and on "High-Culture Motherfuckers".

Movement nouveau: Hi! How are you? Where are you?

Heyde: I'm fine, thanks. I live in Leipzig, but I'm in Berlin right now.

MN: How are preparations for your new work for the Gallery for Contemporary Art progressing?

H: »Frost«, which I am currently working on in the Studio, is a pretty complex piece for violoncello, live electronics and five video screens. This is a collaboration with video artist Ulrich Polster and we are working on it in a quite unusual process. The reason for this is that we are not simply trying to backup a video with environment just as music, or the other way round, but instead we are in close contact at every stage of the work – naturally with him handling visuals and me creating sounds. We are meeting on a frequent and regular basis, presenting our ideas as well as the realisation of sounds and images to each other, talk about form and content, listen a lot and look at parts of the video material a dozen times in a row. Then we go our separate ways gain, continue working or wait until the other uploads a new »take« on the server, which can then be used as a template or a basis for discussion.

MN: There have been a few controversies surrounding your work and activities. When I read the comment aries on your website, I didn't have the impression that you were necessarily out to »shock« anyone, merely on the search for exciting new possibilities. Am I wrong or where does this misunderstanding come from?

H: As an artist I view my primary duty in reflecting my environment just as much as my private sphere. Naturally, this can come to a head-on collision with the »Zeitgeist« - if one refers to the »present« or a specific way of historic reflection or the development of vision-potentials - or at least with a certain way of thinking. Especially in the media-society we live in today, which finds it hard to develop linear potentials of thinking from its heterogeneity, I feel it is one of my important tasks to raise awareness for processes, which seem to lie outside of the realms of what is usually considered »relevant« or »authentic«.

In order to understand society, one must deal with it and for me, one way of dealing with society is the possibility of harking back to mechanisms, which it (society) uses everyday. To be more concrete, this means that I ostensibly use regular things as an envelope in which I place different contents; these being exactly the ones, whom the recipient will not expect on the basis of its cover. If you should feel this sounds as though I am putting an emphasis on change, then you are correct. It is a great responsibility as well as a unique opportunity to say something which others can not or may not express. This means that I only chose to stand »at the edge«, if it means that it enables me to act independently – and by »acting« I do not mean expressing what one is against, but in favour of; which as a rule of thumb is always more »dangerous«.

MN: Let's turn to one of these controversies: Why on earth did local german broadcasting company MDR refuse the titel of your work »High-Culture - Motherfuckers« ? Didn't you feel that this kind of behaviour was exactly the one the piece was directed against – Narrowmindedness and unreflected category-thinking?

H: You have to know one thing beforehand: At that time, as a freelance employee, I was responsible for a series of concerts on new music at the MDR. Quite soon, there were fierce debates on the contents of this project and its profile. The MDR is Germany's second biggest broadcasting service and is not exactly an icon of innovation in the field of contemporary art. If one is used to working in teams with flexible and relatively unbureaucratic structures, an organisation such as this one can pretty quickly set one's boundaries. Especially, when you have proven yourself to be suspiciously flexible. By dealing extensively with institutions, I realised that the key factor for actions of people within these mechanised structures is fear. This inertia, which results from fear, is exactly »High-Culture - Motherfuckers« central theme. It was of course inconvenient for the MDR that I received a remit for an ensemble belonging to the MDR at the exact time of the dispute. Since there was no kind of loyalty in my position as an artist, I knew I had to react in some way and as I had dealt with it long enough, I knew just as well what the reaction of the institution would be: Prohibiting a performance under the chosen name. When this happened as predicted, I reacted with a personal press statement and a massive marketing campaign for the piece, which made things even more embarrassing for the MDR, but naturally led to me being dismissed. In a certain way, you could call this piece a layoff by notes.

MN: Another heavily debated issue was an open letter of protest after a music festival in Donaueschingen. What was that all about?

H: As I already mentioned, I deal with the way and the conditions in which art is being displayed and represented. An important place for sustainable reflection of contemporary music has been for many decades Donaueschingen. As the music- and festival scenery have extremely changed in the past decade, it seemed necessary for my friend Péter Köszeghy and me to more clearly define the much regretted claim that there is nothing »new« any more and to start a fundamental debate. We got ourselves the domain www.donaueschingen.org and published a paper with theses on the situation of new music. Our basic aim was to ask questions about the contents and the current position of new music in today's society. We were totally unprepared for the backlash resulting from the (admittedly) provocative theses in the media and those affected by them as well. You can by the way read about the discussion on <http://www.donauwelle.org> or in the special edition of the NMZ of that time (Dossier, »Aufstand der Komponisten« <http://www.nmz.de/nmz/nmz2002/nmz02/#dossier>). The use of the domain www.donaueschingen.org was by the way prohibited by threat of a horrendous sum of compensation. (You can read about this in a related gloss, <http://www.nmz.de/nmz/nmz2002/nmz02/internet-webwatch.shtml>)

MN: Your letter brings something to attention which should be fairly obvious: That there is a natural friction between New Music and an institutionalised New Music »business«. Why do you feel have there been so many enraged reactions and animosities?

H: I think what we did, was to express in an unpleasantly open way what quite a lot of those active in this relatively autarkic scene consider as a worst-case scenario: That academic new music loses itself in complete insignificance, because it is not able by itself of opening up and thereby of renewing itself. And by »opening up« I expressly do not mean inviting artists from other branches, merely because it is considered fancy. Regrettably, the scene tends to react only when their money is concerned or – which is considered even worse – someone from their own ranks finds reason for criticism. What a lot of people forget is that we (and by this I especially mean those responsible for realisation and representation: Organisers, publishers, broadcasting services and others) carry a responsibility – or to use a phrase from realpolitik, a »mission of education«. Among other things, this means mobilising and funneling the potential, which is present in the scene without any doubt, to a broad audience – by moderation. It just is not like a few decades ago any more, when one could justly say that only an enlightened circle of few had the maturity needed to understand this music – because you just can not walk away from one simple fact: There are a lot of scenes involving music and arts beyond new music, which have to be taken just as serious. Examples are the »ambient« or »sound-scape«-scene or the area of experimental electronic music from the club-context, which deals with the same musical processes as academic serious music – not to mention the complex area of media arts.

MN: Can a part of the problem not also be attributed to the difficulty of defining what exactly is »New« in music? What is your opinion on this?

H: There are two difficulties: For one, we live in a time of visual primacy with a less distinct sensitisation for acoustic processes (which by nature are already clearly more abstract) than for optical ones. Therefore, it is harder to identify the »new« when listening; furthermore, the creation of different parallel musical scenes has led to an extreme secularisation, without necessarily involving more communication within the scenes. And hence, questions are not approached collectively. »New« has become such a materialistic and simplistic term and not rarely a superlatively-spectacular attribute in commerce, that it can hardly be used without a defining context. (In as such, I find the use of the term, »new music« quite grotesque nowadays). It is my personal belief that the term »New« is inextricably connected to other questions, such as those towards originality, extending the borders of acoustics and formality, suspense, dramaturgy, content, etc... So essentially, a record by Björk can be called modern, while a new piece by Rihm can be characterised as old (even though no one within these circles will admit this). And can it not be said that op. 111 by Beethoven is still new and »Il canto sospeso« by Nono still relevant?

MN: Your friend Peter Köszeghy greets visitors to his page with a Xenakis-quote, stating that one should be able to understand music without reference to special education. Do you agree?

H: To a certain extent. Of course, with Xenakis, such a comment is unsuspecting, as it has to be seen against his own dealing with the central-European academic concept of art. And, of course, also in which time it was made. On the other hand, populists quite frequently tend to say something quite similar – while meaning something entirely different. Music, which not only serves as a satisfaction of the senses or as an acoustic decoration, will always need listeners, which turn their full and conscious attention to it. I however strongly doubt, whether such a conscious listener requires a special education, as we are all equipped with ears and they all operate in roughly the same parts of the frequential spectrum. What I find much more disturbing, is the fact that open-minded listeners, which exist without any doubt, are too rarely exposed to this kind of music; which, again, has to do with the before mentioned problem of mediation. By the way, I am not exactly fond of the blatantly arrogant thesis that listening to complex or intellectually demanding music has something to do with a certain level of education. Not seldomly have I found that those with the highest level of education turned out to be the most small-minded. It is a great fortune that listening is such an abstract process that it can not only be attributed to the intellectual capabilities of the recipient in which way he or she understands music. And I am

glad that sensual listening experiences are no longer regarded as intellectually undemanding in »new-music-circles« any more. And when it comes to creating sensual experiences, which nonetheless base on theoretically founded structures, then Xenakis is without doubt one of the greatest masters of the 20th century.

MN: A question in the same vein: You are a fierce opponent of elitism in Modern Music. But what exactly do you feel could attract »outsiders« to this kind of music? The inclusion of traditional harmonies? Spectacular media? Does Modern Music need to compromise in order to survive?

H: To me, there are several factors, which could contribute to more young people being interested in this kind of music. Each new medium and even more the combination of different media need time – even opera needed more than just a few decades to gain the importance of its golden age. We are dealing with a fundamental change in music, therefore it is impossible to predict even cautiously what the next decades might bring. As different fields of art move ever closer together, it is quite natural that after a time of experimentation, we are moving into a phase of consolidation with regards to the choice of means (even though the greatest part of the heated debates and austere techniques of the 50s and 60s have vanished, some approaches have remained and are still relevant today). And I am certain that there will be a homogenisation amongst listeners. I think a lot of potential listeners are deterred of going to concerts by the way these are presented. I myself (who has a natural connection) quite often lack the motivation of taking seat in a dusty environment and listening to programmes I have heard times and times before. Even though sometimes at least the names change... There is a plethora of factors which can ease access. As an organiser or mediator of this music I have to think about how (!) I organise these concerts. Sometimes effective advertisements are enough, or an unusual hall, a bar where one can talk, the lighting, the design of the room or other medial components and of course: an uncompromising programme with a clear content and not a mashed up potpourri designed by trendsetters and connected to an »artistic meat inspection«.

MN: You are constantly working on concerts and you haven't – if I am not mistaken – yet recorded a CD. Does this mean you still view the concert as the most important place to listen to music?

H: But yes! One should not forget that a concert and music on a stage are not only an aesthetical event, but just as much a social and quite often a theatrical one. I try to bear this in mind when realising my own works and when organising concerts. There are of course several CD releases (among others festival-compilations), which include renditions of my works; but I have up to now found it hard to release my music on a different medium, which only insufficiently reproduces what is really happening. You have to realise that a substantial part of my works is conceived with space in mind or in surround-sound or in combination with a lot of other media such as video or light.

Another thing is that as I am working as a producer for broadcasting services and other artists I am (admittedly) extremely squeamish about the quality of productions. I take about as much time for a broadcast production as others might for a CD. To be honest, I never understood why so many quality criteria were neglected precisely in new-music productions, when there are sufficient technical possibilities to authentically realise a given original. Of course, this is time-consuming and also pretty expensive, but I am of the opinion that it is the right way to avoid trade-offs in quality – especially when such complex acoustic processes as those in contemporary music are concerned. I have about thirty productions available which others would have released on CD without hesitation. But I want to realise something which was really conceived especially for the medium and not just pressed onto it.

MN: An album is however projected for 2005. What can you tell us about this upcoming CD? Which artists are you going to collaborate with?

H: There will be a DVD. For this project, I will collaborate with artists and ensembles from contemporary serious music as well as jazz musicians and electronic musicians from club culture. There will also be a collaboration with video artists.

MN: How do you view the Internet as a sales medium for as yet fairly unknown artists? How is it working for you in order to sell sheet music of your pieces?

H: As I am fortunately not dependent on selling my music, I can offer my music for free listening. This is important to me, because I foremost care about circulation and not commerce. Apart from that the Internet is the most essential medium for me, because I use every opportunity to handle things through the Internet and it enables one to present ones works and person.

MN: Where, if any where, do you feel your diverse activities are leading you?

H: I have, if I'm not mistaken, the feeling that things are flowing and that I can be a part of the decision, where they should be flowing to. I find our time to be extremely exciting, full of positive tension and plentiful and I am happy to have the privilege to be a part of it and to have the opportunity and the means to express myself.