Ming Tsao

**Dialectical Composing**

Having been asked to write something for the topic *Perspectives for Contemporary Music in the Twenty-First Century*, I cannot help but be influenced by my composition and teaching activities in Germany for the past seven years where composition seminars are often good indicators for new critical perspectives. Yet I have been surprised that the composition classes of many, if not most, music schools in Germany have been comprised by a majority of non-German students, even non-European students. Could it be the case that critical perspectives on music composition in Germany are in essence ways in which the rich history of the German-Austrian musical tradition will be reflected by foreign voices? The filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub, when filming Hölderlin’s *Der Tod des Empedokles* in 1986, defended his use of foreign actors where German was not their mother tongue by stating that because of Germany’s recent history only through “foreign tongues” could the language of Hölderlin be heard and appreciated.\(^1\) The poet Lyn Hejinian continues this idea in her essay *Barbarism*—a term originating from the Ancient Greek as foreigner or “someone not belonging to the dominant linguistic community”—by which she states that a “barbarian art” is one “intimately occupied with the strangeness of its native terrain.”\(^2\) And with such terrain, one can “become the advocate and topographer of border states”\(^3\) for the purpose of “reestablishing life on marginal territory, and making lines of contact between marginality and the domestic security which usually suppresses such knowledge.”\(^4\) In music, such lines of contact suggest a dialectical exchange between “uprooted” categories of sensation such as rhythm, meter, consonance, melody, pathos—uprooted by “resisting every form of domestication” and “corroding the boundaries of the old, ruling

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idea of music.” In other words, as Lachenmann has pointed out, making the question “What is music?” a palpably reflective category for perception.

My text addresses the nature of “dialectical composing,” a practice of mine that has been influenced by Adorno’s view of Schoenberg as a “dialectical composer” as well as Lachenmann’s “dialectical structuralism,” by which music composition’s focus is upon the “intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself.” Such a practice sets “beliefs and principles on line” and is “self-determining but nothing for its own sake merely; all under test of how things are.” As poet J.H. Prynne has remarked: “Nothing taken for granted, nothing merely forced, pressure of the composing will as varied by delicacy, because these energies are dialectical and not extruded from personality or point of view.” Such a methodology I see as a way of rejuvenating a late-Modernist poetics of musical composition where such traits as “irony” and “humor” are viewed as genuine markers for intrinsic anomaly and not simply an optional position for a work to occupy. Furthermore, I find that such an approach reestablishes the role of subjectivity, expression and the “lyric” in music that avoids such pitfalls as “personal voice,” “personality” and “self-expression” which too often shelter the composing subject from the natural, social and economic forces that conspire to define it. I see the line from Romanticism through Modernism as not irreparably broken but one in which expression can be mediated through lyric subjectivity in music subjected to a stringent formal rigor that makes the connections between extreme expressionistic abstraction and documentary “authenticity.” In this way, subjectivity can manifest itself in a musical work that engages with exteriority rather than retreating from it, a subjectivity that is inherently fractured, damaged, multi-perspective and problematized in order to negotiate the complexities of the surrounding world.

Example 1: Ming Tsao, Mirandas Atemwende (2014–15), mm. 956–959

Caliban’s position towards the end of my opera is mediated through a citation of Beethoven’s Opus 135 and “Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß” referring also to Straub-Huillet’s Schwarze Sünde (1988), a filming of Hölderlin’s Der Tod des Empedokles (third ver-

9 Ibid., p. 597.
10 Ibid.
Example 1

(all examples © by Edition Peters)
sion) where the choir (portrayed by Huillet), after the same Beethoven citation, speaks: “Neue Welt...Aber wo ist er? Daß er beschwöre den lebendigen Geist” (New world... but where is he? That he might adjure the living spirit) echoing Caliban’s final words from J.H. Prynne’s “The Wound, Day and Night” (1969).

Much of my compositional method actively engages with what Lachenmann refers to as the “tonal” and “structural” aspects of musical material, where the expressive potential of “damaged” historical materials is explored as genuine intrinsic anomalies in my music. In “Bedingungen des Materials” (Conditions of the Material), Lachenmann expands upon the tonal aspect of material by including the rhetorical aspects of music: tension and relaxation, gesture, consonance and dissonance, as well as the structural aspects of material, which in my case, refer not just to the acoustical aspects of sound but structuring processes (both as composition and de-composition of the materials) through serial and mathematical organizations and their formal implications. Composing demands the unreserved commitment of the composer, “deep-down within the choices and judgments of dialectical composition” by which the pressures of syntax (analytical relationships), “aura” (associational memory) and the sensuality of sound move in such a way as to keep each a perpetually active parameter in order to prevent what Feldman called the “hardening of categories.” What is important is that no single aspect of the material dominates but is always a dialectical revealing of a possible truth that can change over into something other. To proceed in such a manner, one must place oneself “under pressure of conscience to be fully active” within the area of compositional practice, to be “at maximum energy and indeed vigilance.” This is why Cage essentially refers to composition as “work,” the ethics of the composing process as a daily practice of intense engagement, with resonances from Cage’s “Black Mountain” colleague poet Charles Olson and his projective stance: “to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined.” Indeed, dialectical composition assumes that music composition is essentially about “energy” or “lines of force”—Ferneyhough’s idea that com-

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13 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.


posing is a process of “harnessing forces”\textsuperscript{17}—for such “high–energy constructs” have the capability to transfer energy from the notated page through the performer and over to the listener.\textsuperscript{18} Such an energy transfer puts a listener in a position to engage with music’s “broken magic,”\textsuperscript{19} a term Lachenmann uses to describe the trance–like yet \textit{reflective} potential of composed music, a potential that has the possibility to change a listener’s perceptions in order to reestablish relations with the world and the listener’s position within it.\textsuperscript{20}

Example 2: Ming Tsao, \textit{Plus Minus} (2012–13), mm. 1–8
A composer enters into a dialectic with the rules of \textit{Plus Minus} that truly makes it a living work animated by the energy produced by one’s confrontation with, and working out of Stockhausen’s serial materials. My composition is, to my knowledge, the first \textit{full} realization (all 7 pages with 2 layers) of Stockhausen’s \textit{Plus Minus} (1963).

My practice of dialectical composing begins with the music concrete situation (“musique concrète instrumentale”) that, as Lachenmann has stated, is not about noises but rather the physical energy of a sound produced by performers engaged

\textsuperscript{18} Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” p. 240.
\textsuperscript{20} Helmut Lachenmann, “Philosophy of Composition Is There Such a Thing?,” p. 67.
in a most intense form of somatic communication.\textsuperscript{21} Such energy is heightened by noise as a result of specific instrumental actions and their material resistances as well as rhythmic and metric notations that require full concentration on the “acquisitions of the ear and the pressures of breath” (i.e., Feldman’s “tumbling of sorts” from the page to its execution).\textsuperscript{22} I never mix loudspeakers with live musicians—particularly prerecorded sounds—since such a mixing interferes with the music concrete situation. In such a context, I often find that no element retains its authenticity; sounds are mixed together in a way that violates the premise that reality is richer than our imaginations, and we impoverish our art otherwise.\textsuperscript{23} An exception is Luigi Nono’s use of electronics in his later work in which stark lines are always drawn for the listener between the electronic and instrumental sounds, where meaning is generated by their montage rather than the a priori condition of abstracting sound from the music concrete situation and mixing it with live performers.\textsuperscript{24} In my compositions, sound refuses to abstract itself from the material immediacy of perception thus placing experience as central to my music as a way of displacing any conceptual certainty. Abstraction of sound from the music concrete situation can occur but only through a complication of syntax by which energy is released through the internal pressures of a compositional language. In my music, this can include negotiations between phrasing and cadence, pattern and gesture, rhythm and meter, citation and noise, whereby sound’s materiality is made palpable through a dialectics between my compositional language and the resistances proper to the music concrete situation (i.e., the conditions under which a sound—or noise—is produced, what materials and energies are involved and what resistances are encountered). This way of abstracting sound is in marked contrast to a “reduction to sound”: the former occurs in a dialectical context that allows for sound’s materiality to be discovered in the compositional process whereas the latter remains an a priori confirmation of faith in one’s sonic materials.

Perhaps an analogy with poetry is useful when Prynne states that language “bends back to other and indeed opposite connections because it is a pluralized system, invested with contradictions which are themselves the diagram of its energetic over-determination.”\textsuperscript{25} While music is aconceptual and a different sort of thing than language,\textsuperscript{26} one can compose within musical structures a kind of “ener-

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 334.
getic over-determination” in which seemingly spontaneous relations emerge from extreme organizations that are potentially invested with the contradictions that lie at the heart of dialectical composing. As Adorno notes of Schönberg, the “contradiction between strictness and freedom is no longer transcended in the miracle of form. It becomes a force of production, the work does not turn the contradiction towards harmony, but conjures up its image, again and again, looking for duration in its cruelly ravaged traits.” Indeed, the idea of contradiction is built into Lachenmann’s very notion of a Strukturklang where a strong material identity (with unpredictably rich, continually varying textural components and noise) is subjected to a grammatical syntax, often wrestling the material into tonal patterns of cadence, tension and relaxation, antecedent and consequent. By Strukturklang, “what is meant is a way of thinking which cannot just be aimed at the creation, stipulation or drawing of attention to musical structures, but focuses on where such structures emerge, take shape and foster awareness of themselves as a result of the direct and indirect confrontation with existing structures in the material derived from all areas of experience and existence, all realities, including those outside the realm of music.” This aspect of creating spontaneous “sparks”—a kind of compositional alchemy—between the energy of conception and the grain or rhythm of the material, in both its natural and historical sedimentations, is dialectical composing through which one can discover “new reflex slants and ducts and cross-links that open inherent potentials previously unworked.” Indeed, dialectical composing places one’s compositional language under intense pressure of new work and new practices maintained through the integrity of the work-specific locus—Ferneyhough’s “work-internal assembly of forces”—in combination with an “explicitly material-oriented generative strategy.” Such practices critique a music compositional language that strives for a clear psychologized intension in the drama and musical ideas, i.e., composing as representation through “personal voice” and “self-expression.” Rather, these practices discover subjectivity through the materials themselves—what Ferneyhough refers to as the “dialectical historicization of the acting subject”—by bringing their energies together into a field of composition in which a disruption of representation can occur and thus become a strategy for overcoming dualistic structures of thought toward a more liberated listening perception.

30 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.
32 Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” in Collected Writings, p. 76.
Example 3: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax* (2007), mm. 174–78
A rewriting of Beethoven’s Opus 135 (1826) with a citation from the Grave movement “Muß es sein?,” that appears as a genuine intrinsic anomaly in the context of the composition.

The *fin de siècle* German-Austrian musical tradition—Nietzsche’s extreme manifestation of the sickness of Western modernity—and the early expressionism of Schönberg’s musical prose forms much of the basis for my own engagement with composition by which dialectical composing can keep open the wound of this music’s “cruelly ravaged traits” by intensifying features already inherent within (often transcribing historical excerpts with the greatest sense of rigor—Deleuze’s “straightening of the head”). Indeed composition, as distinct from a Sound Art, is essentially inter-textual in nature: “every work of music is, to some degree, the erase and rewriting of any number of earlier compositions.” I confront this idealist musical tradition as a foreigner, but one whose musicality has been wholly informed by it and where the phenomenon of tonality, in my view, was always approached dialectically in the sense of a “working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality and the obduracy of thought.” One perceives such working encounter with contradiction in the way that compositional technique was never something to be mastered—an observation Brahms made

35 Prynne, “Poetic Thought,” p. 597.
when researching his “Collection of Octaves and Fifths.”\textsuperscript{36} In my view, composers such as Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, Schönberg and later Lachenmann with his added third voice to Bach’s d-minor invention, initiated a lifelong study of counterpoint, and its consequence “polyphony,” as a means not to master a composition’s potential but to seek to understand it. Polyphony is a means to activate the energy inherent to relating multiple “lines of force,” each suggesting their own direction, so that new perceptual spaces can be opened for a listener. This idea of counterpoint as a way of harnessing energy is prevalent, for example, in the music of Bernd Alois Zimmermann—and his brilliant opera Die Soldaten—whose dialectical use of counterpoint is able to place radically distinct music into the same compositional space and allow their leakage to precipitate a “Kugelgestalt der Zeit” (spherical form of time) in which a multi-layered simultaneity, or “pluralism,”\textsuperscript{37} presses upon a listener’s awareness. In Zimmermann’s music, the “textures and formalisms of multiplicity” are “tendencies to culminate and synergize, percolating by reticular connections and antagonisms across the channels of prescribed signification so as to challenge and displace the whole fabric of interpretation but not at all to extirpate it.”\textsuperscript{38} Polyphony, as signifying textures and formalisms of multiplicity, resists conceptualization on the part of the listener and forces one to think dialectically by not filing sensations according to prior systems, which is a more genuine way of achieving freedom in the listening experience.

Example 4: Ming Tsao, \textit{Puzzle Canon a 3} (2011)

Example 5: Ming Tsao, \textit{Mirandas Atemwende} (2014–15), mm. 624–28
A working out of the three-voice puzzle canon from Example 4 through Paul Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s \textit{Sonnet 105}—“Schön, gut und treu” so oft getrennt, geschieden/ In Einem will ich drei zusammenschmieden. Miranda’s text, whose words are forged together (zusammenschmieden) from fundamentally different categories (such as “Wortmond” or “Wundenspiegel”), create a metaphorical language that escapes Prospero’s garden of rational discourse.

The future of composition, I believe, does not lie in notions of “personal style” or “stylistic consistency,” an attitude that too often closes a work through its self-referentiality and quickly leads to “stylization,” often having the unwanted effect of reducing a music’s appreciation to taste and cosmetic choice. With my own music, I blend references to various kinds of existing music—mutually incompatible

\textsuperscript{38} Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” p. 44.
Example 5
musically discursive modalities—that are integrated in such a way as to create genuine intrinsic anomalies by a dialectical montage of their stylistic differences, that can result in a multiplicity of fragmented discourses ranging from the musical to unmusical and noise.

Example 6: Ming Tsao, *One-Way Street* (2006), mm. 169–78
An “erased” transcription of Stravinsky’s “Sacrificial Dance” from *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) that is placed in a montage with the mechanical sound of a prepared vibraphone motor.

My goal is indeed to embrace the “textures and formalisms of multiplicity” as shifted but recognizable aspects of the world in order to “challenge and displace the whole fabric of interpretation” in the absence of a “personal voice” or one sustained perspective. Complexity arises from multiple “perspectival causal energies” that occur in the “momentary successive or overlapping chaotic vortices of perturbation,” an excess from which a core of meaning may or may not be recuperated by a listener. Complexity almost naturally accompanies a substantial sense of indeterminacy—in the sense that organization to an extreme degree yields a tendency towards the chaotic—and one must strive for that precarious mixture of what is constructed and what is by chance. Yet complexity, fundamentally, can only be achieved through a complication of syntax—“percolating by reticular connections and antagonisms”—and not an extirpation of it, which is why I find it peculiar that many works that fall under the umbrella of New Complexity offer

39 Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” in *Collected Writings*, p. 77.
Caliban's Wound Response

Example 7
reduced modes of listening through undifferentiated textural states. An exception is the early work of Klaus K. Hübler whose music, like Ferneyhough’s, emerges from the damaged expressive topoi of late Romanticism and early expressionism in order to expose the “wound” by deconstructing the very act of producing these expressive gestures on instruments. Hübler’s music requires a traditional performance practice in order for the performer to work against their habits of learned musical expression.


Referencing the “Galopp” section from *Mouvement (– vor der Erstarrung)* by Helmut Lachenmann (1982) in order to mediate Caliban’s position with respect to Prospero where the material of “noise” is brought into a compositional sound structure as a metaphor for “taming” or for “colonizing” through a compositional language.

Any current sense of formal rigor in composition should proceed from the utopian promises of the Darmstadt and New York schools from the 1950s and early 1960s with such important works as Barraqué’s “Piano Sonata,” Nono’s “Il Canto Sospe-so,” Stockhausen’s “Gruppen” and “Momente,” Boulez’ “Le Marteau sans Maitre” and Cage’s “Concert for Piano and Orchestra.” Attempts to ignore such developments historically resulted in neo-Romantic reactions (such as Henze and Rihm) that made the “struggle of the fractured subject with itself superfluous through an “innocent drawing from the venerable reservoir of affect” and thus perpetrating an “ideology of the transparency to expression of the single gesture.” Yet in the later 60s, as more composers left the paradise of the “tabula rasa” by including “pre-serial topoi, gestures, tonal relics and fragments in the widest sense, which had already proved their expressive qualities and as such had been ‘socialized’,” a larger sense of reactionary music developed which has continued to this very day. Beginning with Kagel, the desire for provocation became adversarial and ultimately mediated by valuation, where such provocations could be “induced to form by use of apt detergent, e.g. “humor”…thereby further reducing value to fetish.” In addition to these provocations were the *Texturklang* pieces (Ligeti, Penderecki, Xenakis) that, as Lachenmann suggests, resulted in a kind of “passive listening” by which the serial experiments of the 50’s were reduced to their sonic effects only, effects to be controlled through either traditional means or processes.

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43 Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” p. 95
such as “stochastic composition.”\textsuperscript{45} An exception includes Dieter Schnebel’s \textit{Für Stimmen (missa est...)} and \textit{Maulwerke}, important works that bring a performer’s (and by extension a listener’s) awareness to their own physiological processes as well as the social processes of music making.\textsuperscript{46} From this climate of the later 60s in Germany emerged a “Critical Composition” (\textit{Kritisches Komponieren}) with Matthias Spahlinger and Nicolaus A. Huber that perhaps has led to today’s interest in a conceptual music (\textit{die Konzeptmusik}) from which I find the musical experience often to be “stillborn” and reduced either to sterile concepts or fetishized sound worlds (\textit{Geräuschmusik}), “the extremes of faith in the material”\textsuperscript{47} that represent a lyrical retreat into romanticized (and often narcissistic) spaces of “pure sound”—scrubbed clean from any aura of the past—that only further marginalizes music’s potential as an expressive force (as if the absence of a compositional syntax promotes a liberated listening). And much of the new conceptual music offers a full embrace of commercial culture in which concepts and “branding” are paramount for maximal exchange value and managing artistic (and financial) risk. Such directions, in my view, celebrate the reification of composition as entertainment either through what Ferneyhough calls “the objectified free play of values on the dance floor of symbolic exchange”\textsuperscript{48} or Lachenmann’s critique of a “mannerist music” that never transcends the mere decoration,\textsuperscript{49} both of which constitute a music that seems “every bit as restrictive in their ideological conformity as to satisfy the expectations of a predefined market”\textsuperscript{50} (i.e., the German new music festival circuit). Indeed, “the notion of fun comes to displace work as what we are here for. Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture”.\textsuperscript{51}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ferneyhough, “Parallel Universes,” p. 78.
\item Lachenmann, “On Structuralism,” p. 96.
\item Prynne, “A Letter to Steve McCaffery,” p. 40.
\item Charles Olson, “Human Universe,” p. 159. Italics are my own.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Example 8: Ming Tsao, *Canon* (2001), mm. 13–14
The excerpt above is from a two-voice mensuration canon between clarinet (top stave) and cello (bottom staves) that begins with the indication *Quaerendo Invenietes* (“Seek and ye shall find”), a reference to Bach’s *Musikalisches Opfer* (1747). There is a dialectical “working out” between the strictness of the canonic rule and the ephemerality of the musical material.

I think that the role for serious composition today should instill a sense of wonderment in a listener, to step out of the everyday, not for any surreal fascination, but to instill *value*, our peculiar responsibility as Olson reminds us, and “caring–for” as expression of a profound feeling not as a psychological state but as revealing existential meaning and purpose.52 This profound feeling is perhaps the essence of a lyric subjectivity in music whereby beauty and sublimity are to be discovered through a composition’s limits pressed up under test of “how things are”, where the lyrical “voice” belongs to the musical materials in their concrete (and historical) context and not to a single consistent “speaker” or to a technological enframing of “sound”. This sense of the lyric begins with John Keat’s state of “negative capability” where one gives themselves over to the materials of experience and knowledge53 or Olson’s “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the subject and his soul,”54 coupled with the necessity for experimental action so that all sound materials can be given their own individual uniqueness and contexts for coming into relations.55 My compositional orientation proceeds from the rhetorical materials of early expressionism (particularly, the second Viennese School), through the experiments of the Darmstadt and New York Schools into the music of Lachenmann and Ferneyhough (with strong influences from Zimmermann and Gerhard Grisey regarding how musical time is perceived). Both Lachenmann and Ferneyhough, in my view, attempt to reinstate the lyric in contemporary music through their respective notions of the *Strukturklang* and

52 Ibid., p. 160.
the figure. Lachenmann’s *Strukturklang*—as well as Ferneyhough’s “figure”—re-
cuperates the rhetorical qualities from early expressionist music with a structural
thinking from the post-war generation of serial composers in order to create an
expressive language which for Lachenmann is always mediated by the materiality
of sound and sound production. For Ferneyhough, an expressive language is gen-
erated through the figural energies of tracing what happens in the act of moving
from one discrete musical gesture or sound complex to another, so that lines of
force arise in the space between these objects—“not space as temporal lacuna, but
at that moment of conceptual differentiation in which identity is born”. 56 Unlike
a traditional musical gesture that rarely leaves its descriptive context, the figure
congeals and dissolves into a field of processes as pure energy.

Yet Lachenmann’s use of noise, a necessary element of the *Strukturklang* for
contributing to a textural richness, unpredictability and “musique concrète in-
strumentale” does not provide the necessary critical distance from his rhetorical
materials which too often suggests a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable
lyric that results in mere nostalgia for a musical expression that is somehow lost.
Ferneyhough’s use of rhythm and meter, key elements by way of which the “figure”
is made palpable, can provide such critical distance by damaging the rhetorical
materials Ferneyhough employs to obtain “new reflex slants and ducts and cross-
links” for expressive potential. Ferneyhough’s use of noise, or lack thereof how-
ever, does not provide the necessary condition of a “musique concrète instrumen-
tale” to overcome such distance through the experience of listening, often placing
his rhetorical materials into the realm of mere artifice and abstraction.

Lyric subjectivity in my music is made possible by synthesizing the idea of the
*Strukturklang* with the “figure” into a musical language that is rooted in a noise-
based aesthetics of the music concrete situation while using rhythm and meter to
activate “a system of discontinuities and breaks which interrupt and contest the
intrinsic cohesion and boundary profiles of its (the languages) domain, so that
there is constant leakage inwards and outwards across the connection with the
larger world order.” 57 Such leakage—often perceived through a composition’s
“aura”—allows my music to discover beauty, violence and desire within a complex
exterior world of sounds placed under formal pressures that are dialectically me-
diated through simulative invention and discursive reference.

Example 9: Ming Tsao, *Mirandas Atemwende* (2014–15), mm. 1–4
An experimental reworking of Arnold Schönberg’s *Erwartung* to invoke a sense of ex-
pectation (*Erwartung*) for the possibilities of a radically new language, musical and po-
etic, away from Prospero’s influence (and in Schönberg’s case, from tonality). Miranda
recites poems from Paul Celan’s *Atemwende*, poems that question the very possibility of

56 Ferneyhough, “Il Tempo della Figura,” p. 35.
pp. 126–127.
Mirandas Atemwende

Erwartung

Ming Tsao

2015

Example 9
building a renewed poetic expression from the ashes of Prospero’s language. In this new language, lyric subjectivity is placed within the musical sounds themselves rather than in the voice of the singer.

Christian Wolff has delineated the responsibility of the composer via compositional intention and the integrity of the final result as making “possible the freedom and dignity of the performers” by which music should “allow for concentration, precision in detail, and release, or collapse, virtuosity and doing things in the ordinary way.” The seriousness that my music attempts to achieve in respecting a classically trained performer’s performance practice but at the same time becoming inventive with it by pressing against its boundaries, requires an intense concentration and effort from performers that opens the path to their dignity and freedom through Cage’s sense of “disciplined actions” that, in my music, are interconnected through an overall feeling that performers have when their actions are contributing to a larger sense of musical communication. The ethics of composition as a means to instill freedom and dignity in the performer (and ultimately the listener) is the composer’s responsibility, not freedom of relinquishing control in order to remove the “bad spell” of a composer’s sustaining authority, which is “magical thinking at its most inflated.” Performers (and listeners) cannot free themselves with one bound from the economic and social orders within which they have negotiated their position during their development (which includes their classical musical training). As Prynne reminds us with respect to poetry but applicable, in my view, to the conditions of musical communication: “the ludic syntax of a language system is mapped onto determinations and coercions by which invasion cast their weights and shadows parasitically into the playing-fields.”

Freedom from prescribed ways of listening within music (i.e., “normalized musical communication”) can exist, I believe, through “the acceptance of irrational, locally-determined states which germinate, grow and dis-balance in the interstices of the dominant paradigm of reason, taking their nourishment from it, adapting and subverting its vocables to illicit purposes—purposes not directly responsible to the referential whole.” In other words, the felt presence of Kristeva’s “geno-song” that punctures, ruptures and disturbs the clear passage of normalized musical communication that takes place “within an ‘administered,’ universally owned medium, in the form offered by tradition and public practice.”

60 Ibid., p. 25.
64 Lachenmann, “Philosophy of Composition Is There Such a Thing?,” p. 57.

The Adagio of Mozart’s oboe quartet (K.V. 370, 1781) that is radically transcribed through the 7 x 7 lines of text of architect Daniel Liebeskind’s *Virtual House* (1997). In the example above, the Mozart material is worked out according to the rule: “Toward a white opening whose extension cannot be controlled (because it is rooted in great weight).”

A dialectical composing is, perhaps, a way of engaging with Olson’s “composition by field,” which I believe is close to *a musique informelle*. Through a continuous process of dialectical energy exchange, the lyric as a subjective marker is continually reabsorbed into a stream of syntactical connections and transitions as it collides with whatever inhabits the spaces that are gradually opened up by the composition’s formal movements. For an informal music, “order and disorder need to be brought into rich and unstable zones of conflict in which musical objects, arising through the energized intersection of provisional, sometimes self-destructing streams of coherent energy, are thrust to the very limits separating perceived order from unfocused chaos and, in being thus ejected, themselves provide new, momentarily cohering perspectives for the speculatively observing consciousness.”

Ferneyhough’s own ideas toward an informal music navigate between the poles of an “automatically-generated discourse” (music as generated by processes or those “shadows of objects in time”) and an “informal” way of “working freely but with


rigorous modes of order” (with musical objects that “enjoy a primal state already imbued with a certain internal differentiation or relational complexity” that can “enter into a dialogue with the composing consciousness, assigning values and articulating criteria of relevance themselves amenable to being treated as material for further manipulation”).67 And this is where an informal music and dialectical composing find common ground: in an informal music, “whatever manifests itself … as immediate, ultimate, as the fundamental given, will turn out, according to the insights of dialectical logic, to be already mediated” and dependent upon its opposite.68

Example 11: Ming Tsao, *Serenade* (2012), mm. 137–43

The excerpt above represents a dialectical confrontation with Schönberg’s *Serenade* (1920–23) and its leakage of scattered residue from early expressionist musical materials.

My engagement with the German-Austrian tradition through Hejinian’s sense of “barbarism” situates Lachenmann as the last great composer in this tradition since his rhetorical structures represent the final gasp in persuading a listener of the substance out of which they arise and within which they are anchored, suggesting that future attempts in this direction can only lapse into mere sentimentality. I think


that further engagements with this tradition for composers born after 1945, should proceed along the lines of what Deleuze has referred to as a “minor music” or, in my case, a “determinitorialized” music that originates in early expressionist music but is exaggerated and damaged in order to bring awareness to the forces of violence and tenderness that are at the heart of this music and to ensure that they are not forgotten through this music’s canonization. I use rhythm and meter—what Stravinsky once referred to as the one parameter that can inflict violence upon the composition—to wound these “scattered residue” which I transcribe from historical works. My sense of “aura” is not one of nostalgia but of waste by recuperating the rhetorical aspects of music through bits of residue from tradition through which a listener wades. Waste signifies excess and “rubbish stands as a rebuke and challenge to instrumental systems … because rubbish is what is left when the operation of the system is complete and nothing should be left.” Rubbish, according to Kristeva, suggests that the expelled and used-up parts are in a constant process of dissolution and exchange with the world and thus resists its being “enframed” for use value by some manipulative power or as mere decoration within a commodifying culture. My scarred transcriptions are not intended toward a surrealism or humor but rather, as poet Paul Celan would state, to engage with the materials of tradition in a “more sober, more factual … greyer manner” defining a lyrical continuity through interruption, noise and wreckage. My own compositions proceed from a damaged and degraded lexicon torn from once all-inclusive ideological enframings and now blended with noise into a kind of “figural Strukturklang” where rhythm and meter become aggressively irregular, placing intense pressure on the sounds in order to “open the wound” through a tortured syntax and compression of energy. The Strukturklang itself becomes a vortex into which multiple processes as carriers of musical energy channel an acute physicality between the performers and a dense materiality of sound through extreme polyphony that activates every part of the sonic process into strong question. These processes of gestural deformations can encompass the musical equivalent of enjambments, elisions, frequent stops or shifts of direction, and other threats to the continuity and integrity of the musical line that continually deflect and absorb the lyric as a genuine marker for subjectivity and musical expression in order to “keep open the wound, to keep

69 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature, p. 17.
70 “Deterritorializing” in the sense that “expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings.” Ibid., p. 28.
72 Reeve and Kerridge, Nearly Too Much, p. 10.
73 Ibid., p. 9.
alive that simultaneous sense of the expelled as self and Other.”75 Such “detroitialization” of a musical language which must proceed along syntactical pressures (vis-à-vis Deleuze’s “cramped spaces”),76 exposes the violence, rupture and tenderness of this musical tradition through the internal energy of the work as a high-energy construct in which discovery as a “liberated perception” can be made possible.77 “Energy is invested in concrete musical objects to the extent that they are capable of rendering forces acting upon them visible,”78 which is why energy, force and violence become key characteristics of a “barbarian” music. “The degree to which destructive tendencies are perceivable in the object...is a wound that opens a small window onto the things that really take place in the interior of a sound-object.”79 But these syntactic pressures on musical objects are dialectical in the sense that their relations percolate, are never hypostatized, and always under the fragility of becoming something other. As Wolff has remarked, “By dialectical, I mean the interconnecting of differing features of the music which brings about the music’s life, and so its way of participating in representing, and being part of a commentary on individual and political history.”80 It is in this sense that dialectical composing is “not cultural neutralism, but a critique of the past”81 and, in my practice, a way to reinvigorate waste as the leakage between damaged historical materials to discover a renewed level of materially sedimented meaning.


75 Reeve and Kerridge, Nearly Too Much, p. 131.
76 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka, Toward a Minor Literature, p. 17.
78 Ferneyhough, “Il Tempo della Figura,” in Collected Writings, p. 35.
79 Thomas Meyer, “The important thing is for the composer to recompose himself in the act of composition: an Interview with Brian Ferneyhough” 2007, unpublished manuscript.
80 Wolff, Cues, p. 184.