Ming Tsao
Toward an informal music...

In discovering what it means to talk of composition in a post-Postmodern context, I found myself revisiting the atonal works of the second Viennese school—some of my favorite music—before twelve-tone technique and, later, serialism had set in. These are works that somehow always seemed to me intuitively yet precipitously balanced between "organization to an extreme degree" and "a tendency toward the chaotic."[1] Indeed, Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Berg's *Drei Orchesterstücke* are examples that Adorno points to as stepping stones toward conceiving a musiqué informelle: where the rigor of the compositional act progresses with an "unrevised, unrestricted freedom," never asserting itself in a way that feels superimposed, arbitrary, or contrived, integrating "a sense of the chaotic, the incommensurate and the disintegrative" through the creative experience of powerful forces for order, including structural and stylistic consistency.[2] Rethinking the idea of an informal music as one in which radically disassociated fragments of cultural perceptions are integrated into a single composition formed by interlocking layers of contextual focus, as Ferneyhough has suggested, is key toward understanding what a post-Postmodern music could be.[3]

   An informal music has much in common with Adorno's conception of the essay as form, where an unbroken chain of ideas negates systematic thinking through a discursive logic that takes a critical stance towards historical reality.[4] In my view, an essay format for music composition generally resists self-referentiality, a quality that often closes a work under the guise of an absolute music. Instead, its boundaries are made porous by the "meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and exits into the material" of the composition: a labyrinthine movement that reveals "surplus, drifts, ruptures, ellipses and double-backs," an animating energy that is in a word thought.[5] In this sense, an informal music can be self-reflexive by showing the movement of spontaneous

1   Theodor W. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," in *Quasi una Fantasia* (London: Verso Classics, 1998), trans. Rodney Livingston, p. 184.

2   Ibid., p. 275; Brian Ferneyhough, "The Presence of Adorno" (Royaumont Conference, 1994), p. 7, unpublished manuscript.

3   Brian Ferneyhough, "Schoenberg's String Trio" (Royaumont Conference, 1995), pp. 6, 2 of original manuscript in English, published in French in Peter Szendy, ed., *Compositeurs d'aujourd'hui: Brian Ferneyhough* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

4   Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 10.

5   Jean-Pierre Gorin, "Proposal for a Tussle", in *Der Weg Der Termiten: Beispiele eines Essayistichen Kinos 1909-2004* (Vienna: Viennale/Vienna International Film Festival, 2007), p. 10.

compositional thought placed under the particular pressures or resistances of the material at hand, where the process never becomes stream-of-consciousness, "automatic," or self-confessional but instead revealing of a dialectical thinking that moves between spontaneity and rigor, where the complexity of the overlapping ideas transforms each work into a piece of free prose.[6]

Spontaneous compositional thought need not labor toward the invention of something new but instead is "perfectly at ease quoting, plundering, hijacking, and reordering what is already there and established" in order to produce a context for hearing a multiplicity of references that establish discourses without a consistent, dominant voice.[7] This latter quality, brought about through a continual self-scrutiny during the compositional process whereby the relations between types of discourses established is never fixed, is essential to a composition's searching and exploration around a problem. One can glimpse this in the essays of Montaigne, such as *Of the Cannibals*, an important influence on Shakespeare's *Tempest*, where the voices of foreigner and native are never fixed but often turn into one another. I view an informal music as not striving for originality, but rather as using what is already there to "become aware of the work as a force-field organized around a problem."[8] Every compositional situation poses a problem from the very beginning—even its instrumentation—that, like an essayist beginning to pen a new work, requires one's creative powers to bring order and disorder into rich and unstable zones of conflict.[9]

The space occupied by an informal music is often dense, compact and requires multiple listenings since multiple contexts for discourse are present and often intersect, signifying many things at once. One needs to retrace, re-listen to the various signifying trajectories implied at a given moment, to be aware of as many forces in the circumambient field of the composition.

A field of forces placing pressure on the material is audible in many earlier works. In the *Diabelli Variations* Op. 120, Variation XX, mm. 17-20, there are passing diminished chords on strong beats that do not resolve, and inversions of a G dominant seventh chord on weak beats. Each time I listen to this fragment, I hear both stasis (continual elaboration of a G dominant chord) and movement (diminished chords searching for a resolution), as well as two different kinds of discourses: canonic imitation as a reference to an earlier stabilizing technique, and a harmonic vocabulary that seems on the verge of collapse through the elision of harmonic progressions that Beethoven felt was redundant to elaborate fully.

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6   Theodor W. Adorno, "Berg's Discoveries in Compositional Technique," in *Quasi una Fantasia*, p. 188. See also Charles Stein, *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (New York: Station Hill Press, Inc., 1987), p. 104.

7   Ibid.

8   Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Problem of Musical Analysis," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 173.

9   Ferneyhough, "The Presence of Adorno," (see footnote 2), p. 7.

As I listen to this variation, I recall Prospero's words from Shakespeare's *Tempest*:

The creatures that were mine, I say, or chang'd 'em
Or else new form'd 'em; having both the key
Of officer and office, set all hearts i'th' state
To what tune pleas'd his ear,
(William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*: 1.2.82-85)

Shakespeare, in his late work, utilizes techniques that are quite similar to those of Beethoven's late work, such as extreme compression of the line through omissions and elisions, obsessive repetitions (recall Beethoven's String Quartet No. 16 in F major, Opus 135, Second Movement), choices that somehow defamiliarize expression in their respective styles of writing. In the Shakespeare example above, extreme omission disturbs "the order of the pentameter" through the sheer quantity of accents and stuffs as many ideas as possible into lines that can barely contain them.[10] Techniques such as ellipses, irregular meters, and elisions, removing connections between clauses and convoluting the syntax are, in general, ways to exert a constant pressure on the sound and sense as the poet (or composer) concentrates expression.[11] Verse in late Shakespeare "already shows forth the weave of accent, quantity, breath which makes prosody the music it is: a very close music, sharp, long and stopped, all in a small space of time."[12] This "very close music" requires one not only to read the lines but to speak them as well, gauging the movement of the tongue against the teeth as well as the intake of breath. In much of late Shakespeare, we find "discrimination (logos) and shout (tongue)" moving at different velocities (Example 1).[13]

To imagine how a given music is physically played is as important as imagining how it sounds: the tongue against the teeth, the intake of breath, the pressures of fingers against various materials of resistance. This is how energy is conveyed to a listener from the score by the performer, "a tumbling of sorts happens midair" between the notated page and its execution.[14] The *work* that a performer undergoes in a performance, ranging from their physical actions on instruments—actions that can require a great deal of virtuosity or meditative concentration—to following the music's rhythmic challenges with the conductor, is what gives my music an immediate physicality in the listening experi-

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10   Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 87.
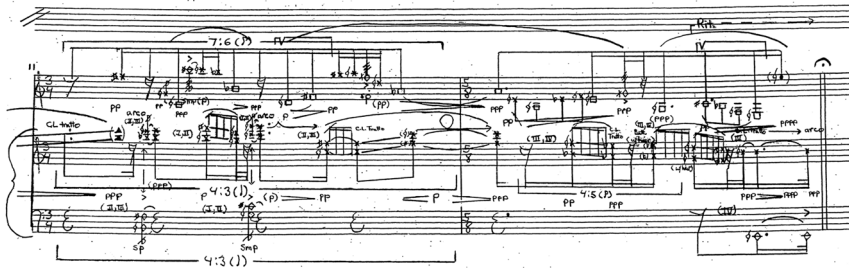
11   Ibid., p. 33.

12   Charles Olson, *Collected Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 274.

13   Ibid., p. 155.

14   Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), p. 143.

Example 1: Ming Tsao, *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions* (2005), mm. 1-17[15]

ence (Example 2). A weave of accent, quantity, and breath between varying levels of concentration and degrees of physical effort is projected by the performer, radiating an energy that can quickly change from an inward, meditative focusing to a de-centering of gravity and loss of balance where its impact has somatic repercussions. This physicality of sound is often best achieved when the instrumental effort works against the sounding result and a tension can be heard in the quality of sound. As Mahler recounts: "If I want to produce a soft, subdued sound, I don't give it to an instrument which produces it easily but rather to one which can get it only with effort and under pressure."[16]

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15   "The Constellation of a Labyrinth": The "rough music" of Shakespeare uses ellipses to make the aural surface more irregular in order to compress the poetic statement and make room for sounds of greater resonance and complexity. In this example, "discrimination"—the concentration on counting—and "shout"—the physicality of the instrumental actions—move at different velocities to create a "very close music."

16   Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler*, ed. Peter Franklin, trans. Dika Newlin (London: Faber Music, 1980), p. 160.

Example 2: Ming Tsao, *Canon* (2001), mm. 11-12[17]

Adorno has characterized Beethoven's late style, of which the String Quartet No. 16, Op. 135 is an example, as a stepping back from appearances through a "pairing away of the sensuous, a spiritualization."[18] This stepping away from the "closed acoustic surface" reveals the fissures of a classical, formal construction, now damaged to produce a fractured, splintered music where figures such as appogiaturas and suspensions, originally used to camouflage the seams, seem divorced from context and manifesting their own fragmentary identity.[19] The music of late Beethoven is close to that of late Luigi Nono; there is in both composers the exposing of structures through an austerity that rejects all that is "mere beautiful illusion," as well as a structural handling of the expressive tone.[20] There is a naked quality to the late music of both as evidence of a tonal or serial architectural ruin whereby, in Beethoven, one finds "bare axiomatic motifs and polyphonic complexes" as well as rejections of all ornamentation just as, in Nono, one finds "naked intervals, minute hoverings, unisons, and non-vibrati passages."[21] With the illusion of seamlessness now gone, we are presented with a friction between materials that strive for organic release and the formal structures that contain them.

In the opening two measures of the op. 135 String Quartet, Third Movement, the unfolding of a D-flat major chord, present the extremities of the melodic range for the antecedent of the theme (mm. 3-7). The thematic material, carried by the first violin along with an accompaniment in the other three instruments, appears as a quivering of stepwise motion that develops from the subtle vibrations of the sounding chord at the end of the second measure. It is as if the D-flat major chord is intentionally pulled inward, yielding a lyrical melody con-

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17   "A weave of accent, quantity, and breath" in the physical effort of navigating difficult rhythms coupled with extremely soft, delicate instrumental actions.

18   Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 188.

19   Ibid, p. 189.

20   Ibid.

21   Ibid, p. 152; Helmut Lachenmann, "Touched by Nono," in *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 18, 1: 1999, ed. Stephen Davismoon (New York and London: Taylor and Francis Group), p. 27.

structed via stepwise motion as if suggesting that "triads are the objective and seconds the subjective moment of tonality."[22] The quivering also appears in the viola and cello, a rocking motion from tonic to the dominant in second then first inversion, subjugating harmonic strength to a melodic consistency in the voice leading. The antecedent of this melodic phrase ends in the middle of measure seven, where the stepwise rocking motion, foregrounded by a crescendo, now present in the second violin, mitigates the formal division between antecedent and consequent.

In measure six, the prevailing stepwise motion is broken by the appearance of a third in the melody of the viola and second violin. This interval of a third provides a subtle interruption in the linear motion, preparing one for the arpeggiation of triads that occurs in the consequent of the phrase with the first violin. Note, however, how subtle the introduction of this interruption really is. Indeed, no two leaps occur simultaneously in measure six. The first leap down a third in the viola is obscured by the first violin moving up stepwise, but encompassing a third, producing the perception that the leap down a third in the viola is an elaboration of that stepwise motion by withholding the middle note in the sequence. As the second violin moves up a third, the first violin moves down a second, thus drawing attention away from the leap. A similar situation occurs between the leap up in the viola accompanied by downward, stepwise motion in the cello. When the leap down a third occurs a second time in the viola with no melodic motion in the accompanying voices (first half of m. 7), it precipitates the consequent of the phrase (mm. 8-12) with a sequence of melodic thirds in the first violin, leaps that now appear organic as Beethoven maintains this illusion of seamlessness.

The first variation begins elusively. Yet the accompaniment is a cue; the cello and viola repeating their accompaniment to the theme yet up an octave. This registral shift foregrounds the accompaniment, suggestive of moving inward, or at least closer to that which was previously in the background. Furthermore, the push inward reveals the stepwise motion of the theme to be primarily suspensions, as if the interval of a second exists as the melodic residue of the harmonic movement. With such a focus, literal gaps within the texture begin to emerge (as exemplified by rests) that allow either one or two instruments only to speak. These gaps later emerge as the focus of the subsequent variation.

The partition between antecedent and consequent of the main theme (m. 7), that occurs five measures into the phrase, is marked by the first crescendo that immediately falls back to *piano*. This same break between antecedent and consequent in the first variation (m. 17) is marked with a *sforzando* and in the second variation (m. 27) with a crescendo followed by a diminuendo, as if subtly drawing attention to the fissures between the parts.

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22   Adorno, *Beethoven* (see footnote 18), p. 51.

In the second variation, melodic movement has been diluted to a rhythmic movement, the harmonic suspension to a rhythmic anticipation (Example 6, the sixteenth to quarter-note rhythm in m. 23). Yet the melody of stepwise motion is still present in the background. Harmonic movement throughout this variation yields a sequence of unresolved diminished chords (mm. 27-29), the most harmonically tense moment within the movement. Yet it is not surprising that as one pushes inward with each successive variation, the harmonic movement that was largely in support of a melodic movement prior becomes magnified. This magnification amplifies minute harmonic motion as a sequence of diminished chords between two chords normally placed in immediate succession (i.e., interpolating the dominant to tonic chord resolution—V at the end of m. 26 and I minor at the beginning of m. 30—with diminished chords).

If the second variation lies in the innermost interior of this third movement where rhythmic anticipations project an agitated quality that amplifies the minute silences, then the third variation can be perceived as a first glance back to the original theme (third Movement: mm. 33-42 [third variation]). One hears the original theme as if through a prism, diffracted by canonic imitation among the four voices. Harmonic movement is no longer a support but a byproduct of the slippage between voices, where the preceding magnification of the harmonic movement has drawn out inner voices that convey their own sense of direction and purpose. This emergence of the inner voices obfuscates the rhythmic pulse that was an anchor in the variations prior. It is this sense of rhythmic uncertainty, where motion has lost its rhythmic points of orientation, that the weaving of individual lines projects multiple directions simultaneously.

At the end of the third variation (mm. 40-42), there are appoggiaturas in the second violin and viola that support the ascending line in the high register of the first violin and the descending line in the low register of the cello by filling in the range between with ornamental activity. Yet it is the appoggiatura, carried over into the fourth variation by the first violin, which now seems detached from its harmonic function, almost floating. The fourth variation presents a view of the original theme where the seams between formal divisions that were hinted at prior, but for the most part obfuscated, become foregrounded as rests placed primarily upon rhythmically strong beats (see Third Movement: mm. 43-54 [fourth variation]). Outworn tonal materials that had manifested in earlier variations, such as the appoggiaturas in the first violin, the arpeggiations in the second violin and the harmonic oscillations in the viola and cello, are detached from each other slightly, exposing fissures between them that frame and question each ornamental device by observing how it behaves in isolation. The greatness of Beethoven lay in his "powers of self-reflexivity which liberated the mechanical from its inflexibility and transformed the trivial."[23] The impression this last variation conveys is a fracturing of materials that no longer

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23   Ibid., p. 305.

speak together in an integrated context, as if the illusion of organicism has been exposed. Devices such as appoggiaturas, suspensions, ornamental figuration acquire a symbolic function that are heard as "crystalline sedimentations of no-longer-valid sentiments; they "stand for" the world within which their roots (now severed) were originally located."[24]

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Elements of a late style need not correspond to lateness. Throughout Mahler's work, one finds elements that resemble a late style sensibility, that is, inhabiting a style in such a way that becomes alienating. To co-opt a term by Deleuze, late style has much in common with a *minor music*, in which one becomes a stranger in the language or style in which one is accustomed to creating music. Just as Beethoven estranges the very grammar of tonality, Mahler estranges the formal functions of tonality, where introductions, codas and themes with a strong identifiable character—as if he names them according to their formal function—appear at seemingly absurd and inappropriate moments, perceptually at odds with what the formal conventions of the music may suggest, and producing "exacerbated deviations from high musical language" without ever losing the coherency of the work (recall the comical reappearances of the introduction throughout the first movement of the fourth symphony).[25] As a listener, one perceives "flaws" in the musical logic—"artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax"—at which Mahler's self-criticism is directed, flaws that are produced by "an intention that walks the narrow ridge of meaning between the absurd and the qualitatively new."[26] Furthermore, "through the contrast between the disruptive intention and the musical language, the latter is transformed unobserved from an a prior convention into an expressive means."[27] The key toward understanding much of Mahler's work lies in the idea of parataxis, where musical phrases are related not through subordination but through juxtaposition, an expressive means that Mahler uses between sudden shifts of scale that can overwhelm a listener. Referring to his fourth symphony, Mahler wrote that "the first movement begins as if it couldn't count to three, but then launches out into the full multiplication table."[28] Indeed, at rehearsal eighteen of the first movement of Mahler's fourth symphony, the recapitulation of the exposition emerges suddenly, juxtaposing two themes of

24   Ferneyhough, "Schoenberg's String Trio" (see footnote 3), p. 3.

25   Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 131; Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 16.

26   Ibid.

27   Ibid.

28   Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Recollections of Gustav Mahler* (see footnote 16), p. 154.

different tempi and character, creating an impression of parataxis where the logic of continuity and transition is somehow at odds with the formal categories of classical sonata form. Mahler uses parataxis to exaggerate the flaws of a musical logic where relations of subordination reign, in order to create an overall impression of an incomplete totality in which all subjects and discourses are interpenetrative parts: "A symphony must be like the world and embrace everything," Mahler once said to Sibelius.

The idea of a late style sensibility suggests ways I incorporate tonal elements—harmonic, contrapuntal, formal—into my own work with the deliberate attempt to bring music of the past into a meaningful confrontation with contemporary stylistic practices, to break them open, and, by doing so, problematize their inner characteristics. Parataxis, which I consider at work in my music, can form sudden connections between past and present as well as between materials that operate on opposite scales of magnitude. At the end of my composition *(Un)cover*, the listener experiences a piano trill taken from the beginning of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32 in c minor, Opus 111—a single decoration from a piano sonata suggesting grace and decorum—that evolves into the sound of bowed, metal hangers on timpani and bass drums, a powerful sound that has references to seismic, geological activity as if the ground beneath is slowly opening up (Example 3). These shifts of scale, as sudden connections between ancient ("natural") and modern ("refined") sounds, can overwhelm a listener, drawing one into the music so that one participates in—rather than observes—its process of unfolding.

At the conclusion of my string quartet *Pathology of Syntax*, bowing indications from Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in a minor, Opus 132 (third Movement) are mapped onto a quasi-serial procedure of determining metric lengths (mm. 171-173). The bowing actions themselves take place on wooden mutes where a listener becomes distinctly conscious of the energy required to move the bow back and forth, as well as the inherent friction within the materials (see Example 4). Each one of these aspects: tonal phrasing in the bowing indications, serial-like processing of the metric accents and a strong, sensual identity to the materials, interact with one another creating a interference pattern between pattern and gesture, materiality and abstraction, resulting in a sound image akin to howling animals, something quite remote from the original fragment.

Example 3: Ming Tsao, *(Un)cover* (2008), mm. 192-195[29]

Example 4: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax* (2007), mm. 299-306[30]

29 The trill in the piano part (bottom three staves) taken from the Beethoven op. 111 Piano Sonata evolves into the seismographic sounds of the ensemble bowing timpani and bass drums, creating a paratactic moment between modern and ancient sounds.

30 "*Mit innigster Empfindung*"—Beethoven's bowing patterns and accents are serially transformed through overpressure/flautando bowing on wooden practice mutes.

I refer to many autonomous styles put to unexpected uses without resolving them into a hierarchy of value or flattening them into a mosaic where their historicity is denied. Rather, I create an integrated work that preserves their contextual focus so that each stylistic reference tries to circumscribe each other in the larger context of my own stylistic language, and, in so doing, problematizes their function through their displacements. Consider the excerpt from the end of my opera *Die Geisterinsel* where a fugal texture (in the violins and viola) with references to "culture and learning," is juxtaposed with a texture that has references to "nature" and that which cannot be tempered (natural harmonics, whispering, wind-like sounds in the woodwinds, noise), mirroring the two feelings that Caliban has developed in part through his educator Prospero. This juxtaposition is followed by an isorhythmic motet in the winds pointing to an earlier time before Caliban's education, an alternative to abstraction and a "learned style" (Example 5). Yet noise finds its way in both the fugal and isorhythmic motet styles, infecting both to some degree and even causing the fugal texture to lose its points of orientation through glissandi. Similarly, the fugal writing finds its way into the noise by seeking to contain it in regular, even measured durations. The isorhythmic motet writing, while the clearest of the three, introduces rhythmic variances between the voices (a 4:3 relationship)—recalling the slight rhythmic variances in the noise-like texture—yet still maintaining regular measures of temporal duration. All three textures seek to circumscribe each other, a play with categories, by creating a dance-like behavior between them that mirrors Caliban's final ruminations.

My use of material often mixes the musical with the unmusical, artifice with banality: I juxtapose and intermingle lyrical passages through intricately composed materials—via contrapuntal, harmonic or serial techniques that are often multivalent in their syntactic meaning—with the prosaic: noise and repetitive actions on an instrument that anyone can execute, locally schematic, almost mechanical, processes applied to the material that allude to a loss of subjectivity, etc. Noise in my music suggests a kind of "cultural residue" that carries no apparent use value as musical material when juxtaposed with more traditional rhetorical figures. A flexibility of compositional technique requires that the musical often slip into the unmusical and vice-versa: a highly polyphonic texture quite easily saturates into noise just as noise—such as overpressure on a stringed instrument—can attain a lyrical, almost *bel canto* quality (Example 6).

Example 5: Ming Tsao, *Die Geisterinsel* (2010) (Scene 12, *Ich heiße Caliban*), mm. 970-973[31]

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31   *Die Geisterinsel*: an isorhythmic motet in the winds pointing to a time before Caliban's educa-
       tion.

Example 6: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax*, mm. 186-192[32]

Lyrical passages in my music are not meant as a place of familiar orientation or even beauty for the listener but a displacement through which unmusical materials, such as noise, and sudden, direct quotations—"added from outside, not immanent in the music"—can be felt as severe contrasts, as violence to the composition from without in order to displace and derange the stylistic gram-mar of the work.[33] Other uses of quotations in my music can give the lyrical passages a sense of ironic distance, similar to the way that Mahler achieves the same effect through his appropriation of outworn tonal clichés (Example 7).

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32   Overpressure achieves a lyrical quality in the strings.

33   Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven* (see footnote 18), p. 189.

Exampel 7: Ming Tsao, *Die Geisterinsel* (Scene 3, *Tiefer ins Leben*), mm. 314f[34]

34 Miranda, referring to the island that Prospero has cultivated into a garden, quotes Schoenberg's *Das Büch des Hängenden Gärten* to create a sense of ironic distance from the lyricism in the instrumental voices.

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The struggle between material and the compositional idea gives rise to form, as Schoenberg has suggested.[35] One has to be sensitive to the internal resistances of the material—"the nervures in the marble, the cracks, all the geological layers in it"—and to be always aware of its possibilities through rigor and patience, "to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined."[36] Indeed, form in my work is always determined by the processes that actively shape the material over time, and is never conceived separately from it. This allows me—and the listener—to discover the formal trajectories that the music may take though my working out of the material. According to the filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub, it is precisely this dialectic between idea and material that gives rise to content: historically sedimented meaning, as well as the physical gestures (cutting between filmic shots in Straub's case) that leave their imprint on the material as it has been worked by the artist. Late Rembrandt's paintings are good examples of a content signifying both meaning as accumulated through representational painting and the condensed symbolism that it can entail, as well as the indelible imprint that the unrestrained, almost stochastic-like, energy of the brushwork makes on a viewer.

Rhythmic strategies are essential in my music for conveying energy to a listener. When rhythm is activated as a parameter in the music and brought to the foreground, it often works in counterpoint to the meter, and vice versa. Meter can contribute to the kinetics of a composition by suggesting propulsion of movement through possible lines of force, as can a mapping of polyrhythmic ratios onto gestures whose more immediate tangibility can be twisted and dented into something new with potential to upset the balance of energy at any given moment. I generally begin with meter before I write anything else, using constant additive and multiplicative shifts in the metric values, akin to Stravinsky, listening to the rhythm that the sequence of metric values creates as possible lines of force for the material to register their somatic resonances. Then

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35   Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leo Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press 1975), p. 253.

36   Straub's remarks in Pedro Costa's film *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?*, Olson, *Collected Prose*, op. cit., p. 240. I am more sympathetic to Straub's remarks on material than the typical Modernist idea exemplified by Stockhausen's attitude that "we shall govern the material—it shall not govern us." Straub's remarks continue: "There are those who stick close to reality and do not put their imagination in there, their limited imagination of limited creatures. And then there are those who distort reality for the sake of the so-called wealth of their imagination. The result is that the imagination is much more limited in the work of the second family than in that of the first, because there is less patience in the work of the second family. As someone once said, genius is nothing more than a great deal of patience because, if you have a great deal of patience, it is charged with contradictions at the same time. Otherwise, it does not have the time to be charged; lasting patience is necessarily charged with both tenderness and violence." (English subtitles by Marta Mendonça/CRISTBET, Lda.)

I conceive the material against the meter, feeling the meter's lines of force as vectors of gravitational pull or resistance that can push my materials into unexpected areas of expression when the focus of regularity and pattern compete with chaos and deviation. I often draw on Olson's poetics to suggest an aesthetic of rhythmic forces in a work, in order to "register both the acquisitions of the ear and the pressures of the breath" (Example 8):[37]

"the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE."[38]

Example 8: Ming Tsao, *Pathology of Syntax*, mm. 134-143[39]

In Ezra Pound's conception of harmony, he states that *any* two chords can follow one another provided the right time interval is discovered, which is another way of prioritizing pacing.[40] Correct pacing can almost justify any series of sounds. This is something I have learned from Straub/Huillet and their pacing of filmic shots, which achieves a musical quality through the juxtaposition of short and long durations (such as in the film *Nicht versöhnt*). In a similar manner, I juxtapose short and long measures, akin to Pound's "weights" and "durations," to create a rhythm of juxtaposition in the pacing of materials, where sounds and

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37   Ibid., p. 241.

38   Ibid, p. 242.

39   This example illustrates a relationship between "syllable" and "line" in the music as they fall against the meter. The "syllable" and "line" are respectively suggested by the repeated musical figures and the line of force projected through the rhythmic energies of the figures as they expand and contract.

40   Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound and Music*: *The Complete Criticism*, ed. R. Murray Schafer (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 296.

gestures often pile up to create a forward rhythmic drive that is palpable as performers count downbeats to measures, placing greater concentration on the shorter values.[41] My primary inspiration is late Shakespeare, where the "syntax of accumulation and apposition, along with other prosodic devices like the predominance of monosyllables and a high incidence of the use of the caesura, add up to an energetic forward moving rhythm and an intensification of attention."[42]

As part of the compositional process, I decompose transcribed materials into their constituent lines of force (usually parametric tendencies akin to Shakespeare's parametric decomposition of the poetic line) so that they can later be reconstituted into radically different, even incommensurable, musical figures. Transcription of other materials can be a means of *energy transfer* from their original context to the composition at hand, which is the way Beethoven imagined it in the twenty-second variation of the *Diabelli Variations*. There he transcribes a quotation from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, something from outside the Diabelli theme, in order to give the theme new life after exhausting its possibilities in the variations prior. In my composition *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions*, forty-nine lines of text are taken from Daniel Libeskind's *Virtual House* that were applied to the adagio movement of Mozart's Oboe Quartet (Example 9). Each line of text suggested musical parameters from which forty-nine aural images were constructed ("images" in Pound's sense of an "intellectual and emotional complex" grasped in an instant of time), such that elements of the Mozart were recalibrated according to a different and often strange set of acoustical laws (Example 10). These aural images and their relations pose as stimuli that can force a listener to complete a virtual transcription of the Mozart movement by constructing a way to "re-hear" the Mozart that engages the musical unconscious, as past knowledge and experience, with one's imagination stimulated by these very images. By removing transcription from the realm of the descriptive, and placing it into the realm of the imagination to be constructed by a listener, *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions* can be said to consist of not just one transcription of the Mozart movement but potentially an infinite number of them.

Example 9: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Oboe Quartet in F Major, K. 370, Second Movement (Adagio), mm. 1-5[43]

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41 Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 199.

42 McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (see footnote 10), p. 87.

43 The opening illustrates a typical cadential gesture at the beginning of m. 4. A performance of this movement precedes each performance of *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions*.

Example 10: Ming Tsao, *The Book of Virtual Transcriptions*, mm. 493-506
"An end to hierarchy" traces of the cadential gesture in Mozart's Adagio movement of the Oboe Quartet as an aural image.

Energy moves through the resistances I compose into my materials to become directed lines of force, like expressive underdrawings in the music, that can achieve a figural status through differentiation and coherence; a movement of energy that, when pushed through specific compositional contexts, can coalesce into something intimately graspable by the ear. Yet, energy need not be conveyed in an active sense but also as potential force. Consider the function of fermatas in Nono's late work or repetitions in Feldman's, which create a sense of agitated tension within a stasis where energy is accumulated and stored for future use (for example, *Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima* or *For John Cage*). This gathering of potential energy opens up a listener's perceptions to an "awareness of the acoustically determined moment, its internal differentiations," and the possibility for spontaneous relationships to arise.[44]

Toward this end, I often expose the material conditions of musical production in terms of sound and its relationship to instrumental effort and intention. A dialectical movement results between intentional and non-intentional control of the material (particularly with the use of noise) whereby *sound* seemingly devoid of agency and exposing its own materiality emerges from and is

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44   Lachenmann, "Touched by Nono," (see footnote 21), p. 22.

structured by a manifold of intentions. For composers such as Mahler or Helmut Lachenmann, even when the music arouses strong associations of "nature" (and hence is suggestive of non-intentionality), it does not present it as absolute but in relation to its opposite as structured sound.

<div align="center">*</div>

For my opera *Die Geisterinsel*, I was commissioned by the Staatsoper Stuttgart to rework a relatively unknown opera of the same title by Johann Rudolph Zumsteeg, a contemporary and champion of Mozart. The librettist was Wilhelm Friedrich Gotter who based his libretto on Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Gotter's libretto, written in a high Classical German style reminiscent of Goethe, imbues Shakespeare's text with Enlightenment values of the time. Caliban, an ambiguous figure at the very least in Shakespeare's text, is turned into a buffoonish villain in Gotter's libretto in order for good and evil characters to be clearly delineated. Shakespeare's story is open ended (Prospero leaves the island to Caliban) but Gotter's libretto is closed (Caliban commits suicide and Miranda and Fernando are married). The witch Sycorax is only a memory in Shakespeare's text whereas in Gotter's libretto she remains an evil spirit who terrorizes people when they fall asleep. So many differences between the two texts only highlight the differences in cultural and class values between Shakespeare's and Gotter's audiences. In my reworking of the Zumsteeg opera, and consequently of the Gotter libretto, I chose two actors to portray Caliban, representing those qualities that have either been educated by Prospero through leaning his language or that are closer to the wilderness of the island where he was raised. The opera consists of one act divided into 13 scenes as follows:

Die Geisterinsel

1. Steine (Chor mit Steinen)
2. Blumen, meine ganze Habe—Miranda (Chor im Hintergrund)
3. Tiefer ins Leben—Miranda/Chor
4. Schrecken, die uns drohn—Miranda/Prospero
5. In der Hülle dieses Sklaven—Caliban (Chor and Miranda/Fernando im Hintergrund)
6. Fremdling, höre meinen Willen—Fernando/Prospero (Chor im Hintergrund)
7. Vor des nahen Sturmes Grimme—Fernando
8. Traurige Korallen—Prospero/Miranda/Fernando
9. "Where the Bee sucks"—Prospero
10. Der Sturm (Chor mit Pauken)
11. Geisterchoral—Chor
12. Ich heiße Caliban—Caliban/Chor
13. Sandfall (Chor mit Kieseln)

In the text *They that have powre to hurt: A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeares Sonnets 94*, Cambridge poet J.H. Prynne in near exhaustive depth draws out the historical and linguistic nuance from each word of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 94*. Beginning with the word "They," Prynne comments that "we do not know who they are." "They," most likely, refer to a class of beings who have learned to self-regulate their power: the power of beauty in Miranda's case and the power of language in Prospero's, if we think of the sonnet as spoken by Caliban which I have done in the opera. "It is not that the human figures here are presumably dark within the inner world of the poem, since to each other they must at least have been extremely close; rather just that to the outside view they present as anonymous, beyond any reckonable perspective. The reader infers an uneasy distance, perhaps widening, between the implied speaker and the persons of whom he speaks."[45] Because of this widening distance, one senses a hidden violence in the sonnet waiting to be released. My strategy was to find isolated words that Caliban speaks in Gotter's libretto that could forcibly intrude into the smooth sonnet form, to break it open and release that violence, often through the sound or meaning of the intruding words. The goal was to bring the language of Gotter's libretto "slowly and progressively to the desert" (which is then mirrored in my treatment of Zumsteeg's music) by eventually detaching sound from sense, where the word ceases to mean and becomes only a vibration or sonic disturbance.[46] I situate Zumsteeg's music alongside a more sonically "urban" environment where such unwanted residues as "noise" infiltrate the original music, pulling it out of the limited cultural space that it is often afforded and into the qualitatively new. The accumulation of "noise" as cultural residue can reveal relationships connecting my musical language to Zumsteeg's original opera through abruptly shifting scales between the two, making their juxtaposition apparent to a listener.

By the fifth scene, Caliban shows himself to be someone who has become a stranger in his own language and has grown resentful of that condition. In the score, I notate all spoken text with simple rhythms that are to be performed with *rhythmic sprechstimme*, where the speakers should deviate from the notated rhythms slightly, using them only as indicators of pacing. In this way, speech is given a Straubian flow throughout, in the manner that Straub is precise with his actors on the enunciation and pacing of spoken text, where words are spoken in a non-expressive yet, at the same time, non-mechanical manner. The following example shows the text for the fifth scene of *Die Geisterinsel* with Shakespeare's *Sonnet 94* and the intruding words extracted from Gotter's Caliban text.

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45   J. H. Prynne, *They that Have Powre to Hurt: A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeares Sonnets, 94* (Cambridge: J.H. Prynne, 2001), p. 3.

46   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 26.

5. *In der Hülle dieses Sklaven*:

Caliban 1: "They   that have power to   hurt   and will do none"
Caliban 2:   schlägt   ohnmächtig   hört ihr   diesen Mund
(Chor):   schlägt

Caliban 1: "That do not do   the thing they most do show"
Caliban 2:   Fuß und Zunge gelähmt   ohne Sprache

Caliban 1: "Who   moving others   are themselves as stone"
Caliban 2:   verfluchen   deine Macht   stumm und lahm machen

Caliban 1: "Unmoved, cold   and to temptation slow"
Caliban 2:   süßeste Gefühle   wollt' ich ihm lähmen
(Chor):   schlägt

Caliban 1: "They rightly   do inherit   heaven's graces"
Caliban 2:   alle drei   seid ihr verwandelt   mein Reich fängt an
(M/F):   eins, zwei, drei

Caliban 1: "And husband nature's   riches   from expense"
Caliban 2:   beim festlichen Schweigen   ich rede   aus dem Tone

Caliban 1: "They are   the lords and owners of their faces"
Caliban 2:   Schlagt die Träumer   mit Arm, Fuß und Zunge
(Chor):   Schlägt

Caliban 1: "Others but stewards   of their excellence"
Caliban 2:   Sklaven   eins, zwei, drei
(M/F):   acht, neun, zehn

Caliban 1: "The summer's flower is   to the summer sweet"
Caliban 2:   ein Unrath von Worten

Caliban 1: "Though to itself it only live and die"
Caliban 2:   falsche beide
(M/F):   eins, zwei, drei

Caliban 1: "But if that flower with   base infection meet"
Caliban 2:   das Vögelchen   hat ausgespien

Caliban 1: "The basest weed   outbraves his dignity"
Caliban 2:   Erdenwurm   schon verwandelt

Caliban 1: "For sweetest things   turn sourest by their deeds"
Caliban 2:   und spiegle mich

Caliban 1: "Lilies that fester   smell far worse than weeds"
Caliban 2:   tief bei Schlangen   und Eidechsen

Prospero, Miranda, and Fernando in my opera are the characters from the Gotter libretto: refined and conveying a late 18th century moral character, who do not have the psychological conflicts that they have in Shakespeare's play. Caliban, on the other hand, is the character from Shakespeare that extends through Robert Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos* and W.H. Auden's *The Sea and its Mirror*, who is self-reflective and often ruminates about his condition. By Caliban's second appearance (scene twelve), I have used up all of the interesting lines from Caliban's text in the Gotter libretto. We are left with "Ich heiße Caliban," the first words anyone learns to speak when learning a new language, reducing the Caliban lines from the Gotter libretto to its essence, so to speak. In that vacuum, the lyricism of Shakespeare's Caliban emerges. Caliban, in this scene, is someone who reflects on the inherent power inequalities in learning a dominant, foreign language and how, in the process, one becomes alienated from their native tongue. I set the lyricism of Shakespeare's words against the sounds of a prepared, mechanical vibraphone motor and the repetitive refrain of "Ich heiße Caliban," where Caliban's words are occasionally picked up by the choir and stripped apart to simple animal utterances. The words "Ich heiße Caliban" also refer to Montaigne's essay *Of the Cannibals* that Shakespeare drew from, in which one discovers that the Tupinamba Indians of South America were colonized, in part, through naming and identifying them as cannibals. It was a way in which they could be objectified and treated like savages that required civilizing. Caliban needed to be named by Prospero in order to educate and control him.

Throughout the opera, Caliban inhabits the language learned from Prospero in such a way that becomes alienating. Similarly, the manner in which the music is composed inhabits the stylistic grammar of Zumsteeg's opera, the Classical style in the manner of Mozart and Haydn, in such a way that the musical rhetoric becomes not only deconstructed but also made foreign from within, a music that is closer to the sounds of animals than anything authentically Classical. From this, a strange and austere music is created depicting a "new sobriety, a new expressivity," a kind of "Prague German" equivalent to the Classical style in music, Deleuze's terminology for a "deterritorialized" German language.[47] My "Prague German" of the Classical style is one that sheds all local influences to produce a logically "correct" Classical grammar that is cold, unadorned and constructed with a greatest sense of rigor, a "straightening of the head."[48] Yet from this deterritorialization of the Classical style, I concentrate expression through the use of elisions and compressions of the original material, creating a compact musical space in which ideas unfold through excess by way of irregular rhythmic forces (shifting meter, polyrhythms, sudden drifts in pacing) that twist and deform the Classical phrasing of progression, to allow a new kind of

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47   Ibid. p. 23.

48   Ibid, p. 26.

lyricism to surface. Through distilling the logic of progression by dropping transitional connectives between phrases (as with the Mahler example above), as well as the use of parenthetical asides (in the manner of Schumann's *Phantasie op. 17*), I create sudden digressions that gradually lead from the Classical style grammar to noise and back again, often in a roundabout way. The *energy transfer* from Zumsteeg's music to my own is often achieved through inversions, interpolations and convolutions of the Classical style syntax applied to hidden tonal harmonic progressions, contrapuntal textures, and formal conventions, as well as interrupted cuts of tonal phrasing and meter. Toward the end of scene nine I employ literal repetition to draw attention to the Classical conventions, as well as an accelerated hypotaxis of musical thoughts—as interconnected musical figures—that accumulates in noise because of its resulting saturated textures. Much of the meter was derived from the jagged, jarring meters found in *The Tempest*; for example, the exaggerated *assonance* and *consonance* of Prospero's lines below create a sense of poetic excess that I tried to capture in my handling of meter and rhythm, often feeling the speed of the assonance and consonance as somehow associated with either downbeats of measures or as rhythmic friction created through the use of polyrhythms against the implied impulse density of the measure.[49]

> within which rift
> Imprison'd thou didst p*ai*nfully rem*ai*n
> A dozen years, within which sp*a*ce she died,
> And left thee th*ere*, wh*ere* thou didst vent thy groans
> *A*s f*a*st *a*s mill-wheels strike. Then was this island
> (Save for the son that she did litter here,
> A freckled whelp, hag-born) not honor'd with
> A human shape.
> (William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*: 1.2.277-284)[50]

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49   McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (see footnote 10), p. 185.

50   In the example above, the highlighted fonts in the first half point to the areas of assonance and consonance: "the smallest units, a series of vowel sounds spin themselves out to almost absurd lengths (‚within which rift/Imprison'd thou didst painfully remain'); pairs of long vowels alternate with short (‚she d*i*d l*i*tter here'); consonants are repeated independently and then combined and split apart (in 'hast *p*ut thyse*l*f/Upon this *i*sland as a spy'), the *p*, *s*, and *i* sounds establish themselves separately and then coalesce in 'spy'". (Ibid.)

Example 11: Sketch of a background rhythmic layer based on the Shakespeare example above and eventually developed (by shifting and changing measures until the correct pacing was discovered) into the example below beginning in measure 648 (Example 12).
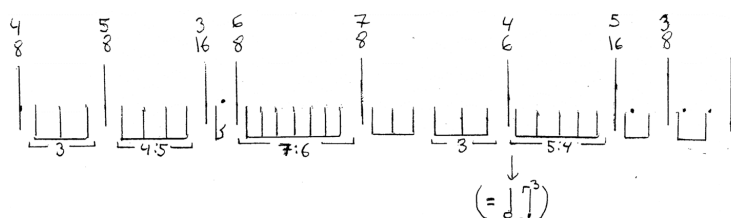
By taking a "minor" composer such as Zumsteeg to deconstruct the Classical style through his musical grammar—to attack his syntax syntactically—was a first step in creating a musical language that is wholly informed by the local German culture of the period but at the same time divested of those local influences, creating a "deterritorialization of sound."[51] But I also used techniques derived from Shakespeare's late style to take the Classical language of Zumsteeg to its expressive limits, so that something like an expressive cry is not merely released from the grammar of this language but infused with a new kind of logic; "to give syntax to the cry" or to any other deterritorialized sounds that may be released from a deconstruction of Classical musical rhetoric.[52] I am currently at work on a sequel to *Die Geisterinsel*, a song cycle titled *Mirandas Atemwende*, which traces Miranda's unraveling of Prospero's language through a more elevated deconstruction of language than that of Caliban's. Miranda creates a metaphorical language (through Paul Celan's poetry) that escapes Prospero's garden of rational discourse through its emphasis on symbol, sound and the materiality of language. My initial material, derived from Schoenberg's *Das Büch des Hängenden Gärten*, yields the following puzzle canon for three strings upon which the first song of the cycle rests (Example 13).

Example 13

"Schön, gut und treu" so oft getrennt, geschieden.
In Einem will ich drei zusammenschmieden.
(Miranda's text quoted from Shakespeare/Celan, *Sonnet 105*: 13-14)

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51   Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (see footnote 46), p. 26.

52   Ibid.

Example 12: Ming Tsao, *Die Geisterinsel* (Scene 9, *"Where the Bee sucks"*), mm. 646-656

For me, an informal music is one that concentrates expression through compressed, dense musical structures, as well as through the use of ellipses and elisions in order to place pressure on the sounds and sense of the compositional ideas. Formal trajectories are not preconceived but discovered through a dialectically working out of the content that reveals the historicity of the material as well the self-reflexivity of the compositional process. The projection of energy from performer to listener is paramount, which can be achieved through an intensification of rhythmic forces to animate a work, as well as exposing the materiality of sound by incorporating noise in relation to the source of its production. These are elements that I try to absorb into my own compositional practice in combination with a composition rigor: a moment-to-moment alertness to the compositional act where careful attention is always placed on the precipitous balance between organization and chaos. Toward this end, it was essential for me to have absorbed the experiments of the fifties and sixties in a meaningful way, and have these works continually confront and challenge my compositional thinking. Some of my favorite pieces from that period—Stockhausen's *Gruppen* and *Momente*, Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Mâitre*, Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso*, Zimmermann's *Canto di speranza*, Schnebel's *für Stimmen (... missa est)*, Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, Pousseur's *Miroir de Votre Faust*, Barraqué's *Concerto*—continue to exert a force on my compositions through their inventive, almost utopian qualities; as if "each work is a new effort to formulate the historical moment."[53]

Yet over time, I have found myself less concerned with invention or even originality—which can so often lead to the trappings of a stylization—and moving away from Boulez's dictum in *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*: "Freedom can only be found through discipline." Without falling into the pitfalls of a Postmodern superficiality that often results in gratuitous sketchiness, I find myself returning to Debussy's words from *Monsieur Croche Antidilettante*: "Discipline must be sought in freedom."

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53   Dieter Schnebel, "Karlheinz Stockhausen," in Herbert Eimert, Karlheinze Stockhausen, eds., *Die Reihe* 4: *Young Composers*, English Edition (Pennsylvania: Theodor Presser Co. in association with Universal Edition, 1960), p. 121.