

Speech in Honour of Aribert Reimann

Stephan Mösch

Dear Aribert Reimann,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Coincidence is wise company. As the date of today's speech in honour of Aribert Reimann approached, a quote from Bach's *Johannes-Passion* crept up on me again and again. It comes from the beginning of a contemplative bass aria and almost sounds as if it could be by Mörike: "Betrachte, meine Seel', mit ängstlichem Vergnügen" [Consider, my soul, with anxious delight]. Delight in the preparations for today, to be sure. But also the question how I could present a whole cosmos in twenty minutes, a cosmos that encompasses more than six decades of an intensely lived composer's life, the life of a pianist and chamber musician, and, last but not least, a teacher and ambassador for music.

Coincidence – as I said, wise company – changed the anxious delight into pure delight. Recently, at a private dinner I met, no, not John Cage, but Helmut Lachenmann. And the way it is: at some point we couldn't sit any longer and we were tired of small talk at the big table. So we wandered around the old apartment in Berlin-Charlottenburg, and I asked him about his relationship with Aribert Reimann. It was quite late, and we were tired. Nevertheless, Lachenmann's face lit up. When we went into the kitchen he said in his magnificently concentrated, laconic way: "Aribert – he still gets on my nerves."

It was the self-confident amazement of a member of the new music resistance who knows all the tricks of the trade. And it was full of admiration: here's somebody who can still get on my nerves. A statement full of real-life music philosophy. Aribert Reimann and Helmut Lachenmann are, it is true, only six months apart as far as their age is concerned, but as far as their aesthetic positions are concerned, they are, let's be honest, worlds apart. They are both undogmatic. Indeed, they are both practising self-doubters and refuse to adhere to a particular creed. But in their relentless search for truth and beauty they take entirely different directions.

Lachenmann touts, suffers under, and is praised for his handling of musical material, to be more precise with material which can be treated musically. He explored the degree to which noise can be used as a precise means of expression for displacing the dull and hackneyed. In Donaueschingen he warned: „Music is dead.“ This means: the old categories of sound, listening expectations and sound production stifle music. When, after many years, he finally writes for the stage, there are no figures in the narrow sense of the word, no plot. Text is broken up into syllables and vowels. In *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* [The Little Match Girl] expressivity and song shine through, as it were, only from beyond the notation. It is an intentionally inverted, deeply subversive soundscape.

Aribert Reimann, on the other hand, not only sets whole words, but also whole sentences (even if they are often fragmented); he uses poems by Emily Dickinson and Karoline von Günderode, Celan, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Lord Byron and many others; and – how could it be otherwise with these poets – maintains the high tone; he tackles dramas by Shakespeare and Strindberg, Lorca and Grillparzer; and he dares to write "opera" on the front page of a work in the 21st century. Reimann immerses himself in the psychological ramifications of his figures, he lives and suffers with them. Nothing at all would come into being in his tower room on the edge of the Grunewald if it wasn't for this restlessness, *Lustschmerz*, attraction and repulsion. For Reimann, expression comes from an excess of pressure. He often fixes this in almost tangible clusters, chord blocks, which are in sharp contrast to extreme melodic concentration, loneliness, intimacy: the

individual tone and the maximum accumulation of tones are, as it were, dialectically dependent on each other and entwined. Reimann went to Darmstadt on only one single occasion and returned home alienated. He does not doubt that a work is a work, an orchestra an orchestra and a voice a voice. Nor does he revolt against these concepts, rather, he makes use of them by radicalising them. He believes that music can be a mediating instance while at the same time repeatedly posing the open “unanswered question”. Reimann – he neither deconstructs, nor follows blindly. He is someone who has to go his own way, or better: explore it over and over again.

„Aribert – he still gets on my nerves.“

Why is he able to get on our nerves? What sort of artistic physiognomy is behind this?

Let us feel our way forward. First, there is Boris Blacher, the teacher who sent Reimann on his individual way. So you might say that Reimann’s idea of art is strongly influenced by the second Viennese school. It is well-known that Schoenberg understood musical artworks as systems of value relationships, the components only making sense inside this system and only developing themselves within it. Schoenberg is also of importance because his idea of art is moral and is informed by ethical ideas. Pieces such as Reimann’s *Unrevealed* for baritone and string quartet, or, more recently, *Medea* at the Vienna State Opera (to highlight but two) are unimaginable without this concept of art.

We can approach the matter from a different perspective. Nietzsche insisted that art derives its dignity and meaningfulness from its will to self-renewal. In this context we can say that Reimann’s expressivity does not grow from a store of set ingredients, but rather from newly created, if you like, idiosyncratic realms of experience and communication.

All of this is important. But it isn’t yet specific enough.

If we are to engage more intensively with Reimann’s work, I think we must enquire about two aspects: the voice, and narration. These are related to each other.

As you all know: like Mozart or Richard Strauss, Reimann writes for voices he knows. If he doesn’t know them, then he gets to know them. He prefers to say it the other way around, that the voices write something out of him. This was the case with Lear and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Before that, Catherine Gayer, Ernst Haefliger and Martha Mödl inspired Reimann. Later there were roles for Helga Dernesch, Christine Schäfer, Claudia Barainsky, Yaron Windmüller, Thomas Quasthoff and others. That doesn’t mean that other singers are restricted in their interpretative work. Many bass-baritones and even basses with vocal profiles greatly different to Fischer-Dieskau’s have played Lear. Every time a new figure came into being. That this should be possible has to do with a dialectical relationship. “Objectivity through depth of subjective perception”, Adorno notes in his *Theory of Musical Reproduction*. In other words: the role is a different challenge for each vocal profile; that it remains demanding motivates each and every singer.

How does Reimann compose for voice? Differently for each role, is one answer. That is correct. But it would be a pitifully narrow view of things. More important, because it is more characteristic, is what one could call – using concepts from modern musicology and theatre studies – production of presence, to be more precise: experimental production of presence. That sounds more technical than it is. But what does it mean?

In Reimann’s operas there are basic motives and variations, thematic emphases and metamorphoses, an architecturally conceived structure, through and through. And at the same time Reimann develops a radius of the experimental, just as his colleagues do using electronics, juxtapo-

sition of different styles, or multimedia approaches. Reimann uses the genuine operatic medium: singing. Construction and performance are closely intertwined as two sides of one compositional strategy. The voice is not given a diastematic line of varying artfulness, but rather the voice's materiality is as such a subject of compositional thought. And thus its physical and psychic energy, its spatial unfolding, its virtuosic potential, its fragility, its age disposition, its unpredictability. The same goes, of course for the lied and for Reimann's vocal chamber music.

It is about interaction. That means more than the trivial fact that every more or less experienced composer thinks about the sound texture while composing. It has to do with a mix of body and language, sensuality, eroticism even, which was the main theme of Roland Barthes. It is the aesthesis of vocalisation which accompanies Reimann when composing. The musical notation bears witness to this in an incomplete way. But it is one of Reimann's outstanding abilities, the ability to push the notations as far as possible towards this aesthesis, to encircle it with the notation and at the same time to allow it its freedom and uniqueness. I think this is a fundamental reason why Reimann's music get on our nerves and still excites us, again and again. It can grow from being an event to a provocation, to such a degree that some listeners can hardly stand it, they become restless in an almost physical fashion. There are still some who – it is becoming more and more seldom – leave the auditorium.

A preliminary finding might be: the voice doesn't just cavort about unspecifically or complicitously in the triangle between composer, artist and listener. Rather, it lives in and from within this triangle: causally, urgently, demanding everything and everybody. This is how music comes into being – not only but also – as situation. And these situations are anything but congruent with those of the piece: they follow their own logic. Music, as I mentioned earlier, as a multifaceted intricate interaction.

There are only a few composers who are able and who want to approach the human voice in this way. Beethoven was certainly not one of them. Neither was Reimann's Teacher Boris Blacher. Composers like Wolfgang Rihm and Helmut Lachenmann admit openly that they have only been trying to write for the voice in an emphatic sense for a few years. The serialists viewed voice and text with scepticism. Boulez, Nono and Stockhausen solved the problem of compatibility in very different ways. Nevertheless, the accusation of "tonal remnants" that supposedly still stuck to the voice was still in circulation. It is true that the voice does not easily fit into a rationalised sound concept. And that is precisely why the voice is an inspiration for Reimann.

Allow me to approach the matter from another angle. Meaning, hermeneutics tells us, consists of significance and perception. For Reimann we must add: meaning arises from experience. To be more precise: the physical experience of making and listening to music, an experience that unhinges everything that has gone before and continues to have an effect long afterwards. Reimann whips final syllables upwards, he has the voice obsessively gasp for intervals, he alienates its time flow, offers it weightless phrases and almost sculptural tone quality. None of that has to do with tautological expressivity. It is a sign of genuine presence. And it is difficult. It requires an enormous degree of virtuosity from those who do not just want to perform something, but want to become active, to take part in the music, so that the aesthetic structure reaches the senses and becomes meaningful.

Where does one learn to write for voice like this? Reimann experienced many singing lessons given by his mother: first as a child lying under the grand piano, and later as an accompanist. And later he was the pianistic partner of great singers such as Elisabeth Grümmer, Julia Varady, Doris Soffel, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, to name but a few. He recorded *Winterreise* with Barry McDaniel and with Brigitte Fassbaender. One can hear how his playing promotes and demands the emergence of totally different voices and ways of singing. Of course, a composer who creates relationships – not as cognitive cross-reference but as a sensual auditory experience – is

sitting at the piano. *Letzte Hoffnung* from *Winterreise*, for example, recorded with Brigitte Fassbaender in 1988 in the famous Abbey Road Studio in London, sounds quite in the spirit of Anton Webern: scattered, lost pianissimo splashes of colour, composed instability, a composition that tears apart its own structure. Conversely, Reimann was able to extract so much melodic beauty and naturalness from the lieder of Schoenberg and Webern, that, suddenly, Schubert seemed near. Aribert, after all, gets on our nerves. In his second profession, as pianist, too.

I must take a step back. We wanted to enquire about the voice and about narration. I can only hint at this. When Reimann began composing the use of world literature was out of all proportion and therefore frowned upon. Vampirism was the verdict. Adorno spoke – in Darmstadt, significantly – about the meaning of artistic utopia. His answer: “Makings things of which we don’t know what they are”. For a long time this was aimed aggressively at composers who helped themselves at the bookshelf. Although almost all of them were doing it and still do it. It took a long time (in fact until into the 1990s) for people to recognise that musical originality has nothing to do with the question whether the composer retains a plot structure or cuts it up. The concept of narration has become more flexible; fundamentalist hardly ever appear on the scene. Beat Furrer and Adriana Hölszky, Rihm’s *Dionysos* and Lachenmann’s *Mädchen* tell stories, too. But the narration disengages from the text transport. Reimann doesn’t go this far. Man as singing creature remains the be all and end all. Texts attract him as parables he can change into music that is unique. He pursues neither linear logic nor semantic unambiguousness. Rather, his music lets us understand with our ears how polycentricism is contained in the apparently linear, and narrative elements in a conglomerate.

Reimann’s experiments are also aimed at instrumental voices. *Bernarda Albas Haus* requires four prepared pianos in the pit. The strings are plucked, stroked and hit in all ways imaginable. Winds and twelve cellos, the only strings, are gathered around them. Sound becomes meaning, meaning experience. And then there is the fastidiously and yet poetically composed rotational movement in the orchestral piece *Spiral at Halom*. There is much more we could mention here, too, Reimann’s relationship with romanticism, for example, which has to do with engaging with art as a totality, and which has been described in detail by Wolfgang Rathert.

Semantic spaces, this implies by no means a superficial politically active music. Reimann was born in Berlin in 1936. He belongs to a sceptical generation, a generation that experienced the instrumentalisation of art and that, today, reacts all the more sensitively when art is pushed aside, even excluded by medial simplification. The way Reimann’s music was slashed, robbed of its aura and context at the television broadcast of the so-called “Echo-Klassik” is a shameful and alarming sign.

Reimann’s music is expression of a permanently strained consciousness for the present. Occasionally he is able to look into the future precisely because he takes no notice of current events. Some of you may remember: *Melusine* was first performed in 1971 in Schwetzingen, a piece about nature and the threats facing it. That was almost ten years before the green party was founded and before the gradual awakening of environmental awareness. *Melusine* it still often played, and it has to be played, for its themes are more pressing than ever. At a production of the Semperoper in Dresden one of Reimann’s students had her big breakthrough: Claudia Barainsky.

And so I have come to Reimann’s third profession, that of a teacher. Like Kurtág and Stravinsky, Reimann never taught composition, although he was often asked. He always helped young composers on their way and advised them personally. But at the conservatory – first in Hamburg, then in Berlin – he worked with singers, formed duos and had above all an impeccable intuition for pieces which would present the greatest creative challenge for a voice or a duo at a certain time. He helped two generations of students become acquainted with the 20th century

lied, thus opening the door for them to music from earlier periods. He continued at the Universität der Künste in Berlin (via Axel Bauni). One feels sorry for conservatories that do without such teachers, not to mention their students. The horizons merge, as one could say with Gadamer. But many singing teachers don't want to accept this. It is absurd when a Pamina spends a whole semester working away at the G minor Aria, instead of taking the challenge of the expressive density of Szymanowski, Krenek or Samuel Barber, after which Bach or Mozart are technically, musically and emotionally much easier to come to terms with.

By the way, Aribert Reimann never picked out students who were nearly finished. No, his intuition was attracted to singers who still had undiscovered potential. He recognises with somnambulist certainty which tones and phrases have a natural authenticity. He was able to bring out artistic results that nobody – not even the singers themselves – would have thought possible. Unfortunately, students are often abused to satisfy their teacher's vanity. They are a means to an end – for ambitious singing teachers and for singers whose diary is becoming a little thin. Reimann could always do without this kind of self-enhancement. On the contrary: while teaching, he gave himself up completely, he (to quote Brahms) took a holiday from the tormented ego of the composer, unconditionally engaging with his partner. He was thus able to release enormous potential.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am reaching my conclusion, and I am aware more than ever how poorly a life's work can be described in words. It lives in the people who are open for Reimann's music, it lives in those who hear his interpretations, and it lives in the practical work of his students. One thing is true for all the activities of the winner of this year's Ernst von Siemens Music Prize: as composer, pianist and teacher he doesn't dictate his impact, he opens our senses. This is a fundamental point he has in common with another prize winner, Helmut Lachenmann. You noticed early on that my initial polarisation was a crude simplification, no more and no less than a heuristic instrument. I am sure they will forgive me.

„Aribert – he still gets on my nerves“ – that is where we started.

May he have the strength to get on our nerves for a good while yet.

Thank you very much!