



## In the Stream of Sound

by Markus Böggemann

'Composing means: building an instrument.' This statement by Helmut Lachenmann is a perfect match for the music of Michael Pelzel, for the Swiss composer's works often incorporate the idea of special sonic resources – an imaginary ensemble, as it were, that is represented by the actual one present and has to be veritably wrested from it on at times. ...*sentiers tortueux...* (2017), for example, an ensemble piece for nine musicians, is described by the composer as reminiscent of an entire 'gong orchestra'. To this end, the two pianos (tuned a sixth-tone apart) are prepared with an array of objects, as are the three string instruments. Together with an enormous arsenal of percussion instruments – temple bells, cowbells and church bells, cymbals, gongs, trompong, steel drums and also a kalimba (thumb piano) – this results in an overwhelmingly rich and multi-faceted sound that almost transcends the chosen instrumentation. At the same time, this richness is embedded in a combined sound world that overarches and merges its components.

This only seemingly paradoxical interweaving of differentiation and homogeneity is a central aspect of Michael Pelzel's compositional thought. Referring to the fascination evoked in him by the monochrome pictures of Yves Klein, he speaks of an 'amalgam sound' that he seeks to realize in his works, bringing about a timbral merging of instruments while retaining an exceptional depth of focus in the details. And, just as the painter's simultaneously clear and fathomless ultramarine triggers a dizziness in the viewer with which he draws them into the picture, Michael Pelzel's music likewise develops a pull that one should accept while listening. Pelzel himself uses the image of a river that sweeps all manner of things along with it; taking up this metaphor, one can say that the ideal listening position for his music is not on the shore, but rather in the midst of the current.

*Sculture di suono* (2014) for large ensemble is one such current. Although the work, whose subtitle 'in memoriam Giacinto Scelsi' makes it a form of stele, an act of remembrance, takes the sound world of Scelsi's improvisations on a simple electronic instrument (the ondiola, or clavioline) as its point of departure, it does not simply imitate them. Rather, the piece projects certain characteristics of this sound world – its incorporeal, non-expressive quality, its organ-like homogeneity, but also its microtonal riches, its diverse vibrati and beating effects – onto the large ensemble. This ensemble becomes something resembling an oversized, multiply-expanded replica of Scelsi's instrument that can be played individually to formulate and execute one's own musical ideas. In *Sculture di suono* these include the changing relationship between foreground and background, between incisive motivic elements and their diffuse environments, and the interaction between the different instrumental layers. It is entrancing to hear how a figure in the

cor anglais breaks through the opaque sonic surface after a few bars and is then sucked back into it, but remains present as an individual colour, and it makes the listener very curious as to its development, as the ensemble enacting this contrast is itself already the result of compositional work.

Reflection upon sound and its means of production seems like a maxim for Michael Pelzel's music, even when it takes up genres supposedly stabilized by tradition. ...*vague écume des mers...*, his string quartet from 2013, does not rely on this tradition, but instead conceives the individual sound anew, and with it the ensemble producing that sound: the four string instruments mostly use a separation into two layers that interlock, run in contrary motion, evade each other and reconverge. Their forms of interaction are influenced not least by Pelzel's reception of the interlocking technique found in African music, where rhythmic patterns are woven together in the manner of a zip.

Building an instrument means: taking sound not as something given, but as something to be discovered, a field of considered compositional action. The music of Michael Pelzel demonstrates this in an aesthetically convincing fashion, characterized by reflection and an exceptional aural imagination.

*Translation: Wieland Hoban*