

On precarity, pizza and production forces

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Today, the word precarious refers to something unsafe and uncertain: to social, economic, aesthetic risk. Precarity is inextricably relative to context, and from a privileged vantage point, it is necessary to bear in mind that risk is not always imposed but may also involve choice. Etymology¹ however also reveals a former meaning of precarious as "dependent on the will of another", a mutual dependence that is not necessarily critically unsafe, but also not without hierarchies.

When I asked permission to follow the rehearsals for what was to become the composition KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE, I did not know about the artistic research project *Performing Precarity*. But I knew Ellen Ugelvik, Jennifer Torrence, Trond Reinholdtsen and their practices. Earlier, in March 2020, in a glitch between a theatre director who cancelled the last days of a festival and a prime minister who closed down a country, I had as well produced another performance bearing Trond Reinholdtsen's signature, *To Arms! Two Arms! An Affirmative Oratory*², a collaboration between a theatre festival in Oslo and a concert series I co-curated. It was fun and disturbed sleep (we practically staged a mass gathering event a few hours before everyone learned what those could do).

This made me curious to learn more about insides and outsides of Trond Reinholdtsen's compositions. In the following months as everything transferred to digital realms, my supervisor insisted that I specified the music I was planning to discuss in my ongoing ph.d. thesis, the Norwegian Arts Council announced a research initiative about creative practices in music, and I submitted a proposal to the latter to attend rehearsals and first performances of new Reinholdtsen compositions. At the first rehearsal of what was to become KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE, I learned that the piece was part of *Performing Precarity*, a large project where performers Ellen Ugelvik, Jennifer Torrence

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=precarious>

² <https://oitf.no/>

and their collaborators explore alternatives to mastery as a strategy for performing contemporary music. Before the pandemic, *Performing Precarity* was introduced as follows:

To be a contemporary music performer today is to have a deeply fragmented practice. The performer's role is no longer simply a matter of mastering her instrument and executing a score. Music practices are increasingly incorporating new instruments and technologies, methods of creating works, audience interaction and situations of interdependence between performer subjects. The performer increasingly finds herself unable to keep a sense of mastery over the performance. In other words, performing is increasingly precarious ³.

Why attend rehearsals as a musicologist? Another musicologist who commented on my work after a presentation, questioned their use as research objects. Everything seemed so loose, why not wait until the work is finished, until the work is a work? I tried to explain that I am less interested in musical works than in how music work, while realising that arriving at a discussion, from a musicological perspective, of how scored and devised, collaborative strategies interact in Reinholdtsen's dialogue with contemporary music as institutional practice, requires more work. On my part.

Rehearsals are precarious spaces and spaces of intended risk and should be. Some of my finest musical experiences both as a performer and as a listener have happened in rehearsals: A hasty Brahms motet in a narrow cellar in a village in Italy while the audience sat waiting in a small stone church above us. Helmut Lachenmann's *Mouvement (– vor der Erstarrung)* coming together in a rehearsal studio with Oslo Sinfonietta where I was at work as an ensemble producer. To be allowed into rehearsals as I have been, is a sign of trust and a privilege of which I am deeply grateful.

Attending rehearsals might also be thought of as a dramaturgy, in the sense of an outside eye or preliminary audience perspective on a proposed course of composed or performed events. If so, it is important for me to expand dramaturgy beyond words as analytical tools. I often consciously tried to restrict putting words to what I experienced

³ <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1040522/1054989>

in the rehearsals ahead of KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE's first performance, to leave space for possible discoveries in the outskirts of language.

One such outskirt emerged in a short workshop where the composer arrived with excerpts of a manuscript and instructed the two performers in a way that made them read the text aloud simultaneously, unmetrical, slow and mumbling as if half asleep. The text was German, the first language of the future audience, but were to be pronounced with the performers' individual accents. In the following adjustments that were the reason for calling a rehearsal, two expert performers in contemporary music worked on optimising how to sound unclear, unmetrical and slightly uncoordinated (– precarious?) while keeping some traces of intelligible words. This task required precision, improvisation, attentive listening. The text could be understood as a score, even though instructions that are often noted there, were communicated orally. This short session set established conceptual distinctions between clarity and vagueness, speech and sound, language and music, composing and performing, planning and improvising in motion. Its material and intention seemed precisely directed, its performed development more freely devised. In other words, inbetween does not necessarily mean indecisive.

Another similar example is how KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE simultaneously embraces and opposes the context of its first performance. Festival ECLAT in Stuttgart is a festival for contemporary composed music taking place in a complex of performance spaces called *Theaterhaus*. The words of the two-part and unison recorded stage text mentioned above explicitly addresses this disciplinary encounter, however less as a convivial exchange than as a site of tension in which it, modernistically, takes music's side: "Dies ist kein Theater. Dies ist kein Musiktheater. Wir suchen nur "strukturelles Hören." On stage however, the costumes turning the two silent performers into spectres of music history and a repeated reference to modernism in theatre blur the distinctions. While the composition was still in the making, composer and performers knew that due to the pandemic, its first public performance would have a hybrid format where the live show in *Theaterhaus* would simultaneously be broadcasted on the internet. The piece embraces this fact in what appears as *modernist-nostalgic-neoclassical-revival video documentation* in the work's joyful scoring. The opposition plays out in the performance

space. Here, loud surround sound, black- and whiteouts, video projection perpendicular to the fourth wall and recurrent restriction of action to the outskirts of the stage undoubtedly makes it a challenge to video document the work as a whole and gives priority to the audience experiencing the live performance.

The modernist-nostalgic video, where the performers' everyday clothes indicate a rehearsal situation, was recorded during the rehearsal period in Oslo. I attended the recording session, which reminded me of how rehearsals are also precarious in the dependent way mentioned above. They depend on other rehearsals and working processes: On the composer having written a score, on the performers having rehearsed their parts individually, on composers and performers before them having established piano and percussion as a kind of genre in post-war 20th-century composed music, a genre Trond Reinholdtsen's music in *KEINE IDEEN*, *KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE* parasites as a simultaneous copy and original. Along the lines of how the performers define today's contemporary music performance as precarious above, the video recording locks up mastery and execution of modernist scores in a recorded past. The paradox of a modernism that has become history and style can also be found in the title's eager negation of the currency of the new on the market for contemporary music. The closed video format however also opens the public space and live presence in Stuttgart to an apparent rehearsal situation and a musical past.

Performing Precarity is Ellen Ugelvik and Jennifer Torrence's research project. However, in a conversation I had with them together with the composer together some months after the premiere, it seemed like all three of them had been involved in selecting the theme of precarity (while sharing a pizza). This can be thought of as a devised process. These three artists collaborate regularly, and composer Reinholdtsen is as well educated as a performer.

Alternatively, an omnipresent and more inescapable composing agency is at work, potentially contributing to the non-coincidence and division of labour between composers and performers that projects directed by performers may often aim to

challenge. The biography published on Festival ECLAT's website prior to the premiere of KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE performs such a ubiquitous composer:

Composer Trond Reinholdtsen decided a few years ago that his practice would include all art forms, that music is more than sound, that there should be no restrictions on the type or relevance of material – resulting in an “aesthetic of universal genius-dilettantism”.⁴

Der Komponist Trond Reinholdtsen (*1972 in Norwegen) beschloss vor einigen Jahren, dass seine Praxis alle Kunstformen einbezieht, dass Musik mehr ist als Klang, dass es im Prinzip keine Beschränkungen gibt, welche Arten von Material erlaubt oder relevant sind. Dies führte zu einer Ästhetik des Universalgenie-Dilettantismus.⁵

The first couple of lines seem to be written by the festival, as presentation texts like this should. The words “universal genius-dilettantism” however break the illusion of a professional curatorial voice. Their combined omnipotent ambition, indecisive judgement, and joyful collapse of distinction between the Western concepts of art and crafts allow for suggesting that Trond Reinholdtsen is writing in third person with the festival website as his performance space. Besides pointing to the fact that biography texts like this are often collectively stitched together, this makes the above text a potential part of a continuous composing agency with a musical material that is "more than sound".

(Paratexts like the above are also precarious. The German version of the quote above is from a screenshot I happened to take from Festival ECLAT's webpage soon after the first performance of KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE in February 2022. Since then, the webpage has been edited. My source has disappeared and is replaced by a more abstract sentence where for example the beautifully charged "erlaubt" – allowed – is gone. I like the thought that this is how writing music history has always been. What we consider musical monuments and statements are ghosts, disappearing and recurring temporarily and by coincidence, existing inside human bodies and rehearsals or on a disconnected server in Stuttgart. As the two ghosts in KEINE IDEEN, KEINE NEUE PERSPEKTIVE we must work together to keep it alive, dependent on the will of another.)

⁴ <https://www.eclat.org/en/konzert/performing-precarity-ii/>

⁵ <https://www.eclat.org/konzert/performing-precarity-ii/>

