

Artistic Research in Art Music

Reflections on the Artistic Research Project 'Music with the Real'

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'Artistic Research' (AR) is an oxymoron which combines two things that parted ways in modernity: science and art. Neither are artists prepared to submit to scientific standards and the constraints of methods, nor can success in the arts be used to acquire a reputation in science. It is clear that the discipline of AR has developed as an epiphenomenon of the advancing academization of university courses in art and music through PhD programmes. Naturally, it has been observed that this strange hybrid discipline is a contradiction in terms: 'Speaking about artistic research leads [...] to a paradox: art is meant to show similarities to scientific disciplines at the same time as retaining its autonomous character. The only way to resolve this paradox would be to place a new focus on the role of our concept of knowledge.'¹ It is questionable whether AR can genuinely be justified as an independent form of knowledge. But it would at least provide a weak legitimation if AR projects in which this synthesis of research and art succeeded in places were documented and interpreted from this perspective.

Music and Reality

'Music with the Real' was organized at the Norwegian Academy of Music, Oslo by the percussionist Håkon Mørch Stene from 2014-2017. Although the project title sounds a little peculiar, it addresses the problem directly: music's connection to what is real, actual and factual. In dealing explicitly with music 'with the real', the project implicitly defines its programme in contradistinction to a music 'without the real'. In concrete terms, the project description states, 'The project's point of departure is how the idea of *Klangrecherche* [sound research] – the last six decades' search for new musical sounds – has caused an increasing fatigue in the field of contemporary music, particularly the last twenty years. This fatigue is partly due to an exaggerated attentiveness to musical material: pitch, rhythm and tone quality.'² Strictly speaking, however, it is not simply a matter of 'sound research', for

the entire paradigm of both Classical-Romantic and New Music is being called into question: the idea of absolute music, which defines music as pure sound or pure instrumental music in its nature and its concept. According to this paradigm, words, theatrical action, images or videos are not part of the essential core of music, and are therefore understood as something 'extra-musical' when they are used in a composition.

'Music with the Real' is essentially a reaction to two contrary tendencies in New Music: on the one hand, the manifestations of fatigue resulting from the fact that there has been no substantial progress in musical material for many years in the way that was still evident until the 1970s in the development of new *isms*. On the other hand, in the wake of the digital revolution, composers today have new 'instruments' at their disposal which allow them to overcome this innovation dilemma constructively. The computer becomes a universal interface where music can be combined with language, texts, graphics, film scenes and concepts – without assistance or regulation from music institutions. This amounts to a programmatic rejection of the idea of absolute music; that is, an entirely different type of art music results. It is feasible to speak of *relational music* in opposition to the concept of absolute music.³

In this relational music, connections to the 'extra-musical material' are included in the concept of art music and not, as is the case in absolute music, excluded from the concept of music a priori. In addition, one can distinguish four different relationizing strategies in relational music: semantization, theatricalization, visualization and sonification. In other words, one can compose relational music by tying music to language, facial expressions and gestures or moving and unmoving pictures, as well as identifiable environmental or nature sounds. The five compositions commissioned for the AR project 'Music with the Real' are first of all experiments in relational music. To what extent these compositions thus grasp reality, that is, how far they are capable of establishing a world-relation, is a separate issue that must be investigated concretely in each individual work.

Experiments in Relational Music

Henrik Hellstenius's *Instrument of Speech* (2016) for clarinet, cello, electric guitar, percussion and piano is an ensemble piece in four movements that goes through the possible relations between music and language in exemplary fashion. The experimental character of this piece

only becomes clear in contrast to absolute music, however. Natural it also works with language in keeping with this central idea, but a language that has been purged of its communicative function – that is, it has now been musicalized. Similarly, in Helmut Lachenmann's *Zwei Gefühle* (1992), a text by Leonardo da Vinci is broken up into individual syllables and fragments of words, and various oral sounds normally inaudible during speech, such as the sibilants, are reinforced. Only after emptying this verbal material of its semantic content did the actual compositional work begin. *Instrument of Speech*, on the other hand, consciously oversteps this immanent boundary of absolute music by explicitly thematizing the relationship between music and language.



Håkon Mørch Stene during a performance of 'Books', the second movement of H. Hellstenius's *Instrument of Speech*

In the first movement, 'Bennett Talks', one repeatedly hears a recording of a statement by the philosopher and mathematician John G. Bennett: 'Because we are accustomed to communicate by means of words we are taking that human intercourse has been based on verbal language ever since man was made.' The words remain intact and the music plays an accompanying role, as in a song. The clearly intelligible text formulates the musical concept of the entire ensemble piece, namely the methodological suspicion that human coexistence is perhaps only seemingly based on verbal communication. The most radical antithesis of this is formulated in the second movement, 'Books', which primarily analyzes the acoustic dimension of the written word (which is really meant to be written and read silently). The secondary noises produced by writing with a pen on paper and turning the pages of a book become musical material and merge with the instrumental sounds. In the third movement,

'Chomsky Lectures', one hears the linguist Noam Chomsky presenting fragments from his theory of language, which states that the learning of language is based on an innate mechanism of language acquisition. Strictly speaking, this is a precise antithesis of Bennett's remark from the first movement, which questions the fundamental significance of language for human existence. If language stems from an evolutionary achievement and this ability manifests itself in a language centre in the brain devoted to this specific purpose, then non-verbal forms of human interaction cannot be valorized in the manner intended by Bennett. The fourth movement, 'Babel', refers to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Individual words and fragments of sentences in a multitude of languages are interwoven to create a sonic depiction of that proverbial linguistic confusion.

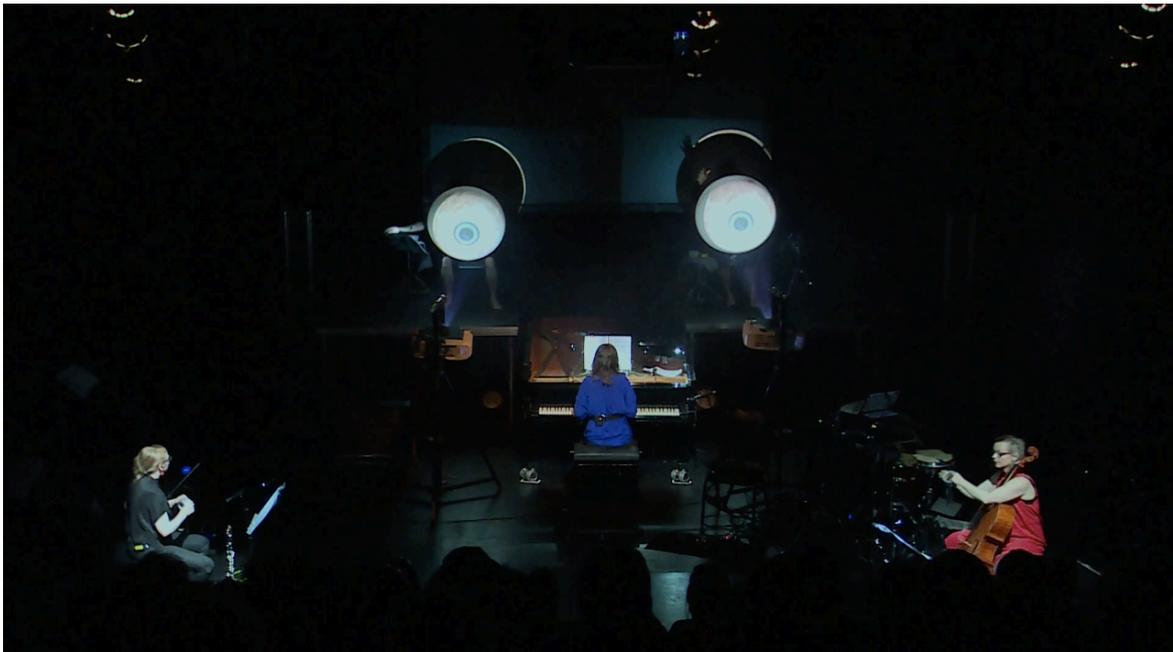
The conflict which *Instrument of Speech* enacts in its four movements relates to the very concept of art music, which traditionally viewed itself as a 'language'. 'Music as language' is a musicological topos intended not least to prove, using the paradigm of absolute music, the capacity of pure instrumental music for communication. As soon as this paradigm is broken up with the aid of new, digital tools for composition, thus creating more and more relational music, the question of music's linguistic character arises once more. If Chomsky is right and Bennett is not, then absolute music does not speak to us in its own language, but instead remains trapped in a Babylonian inability to speak. In terms of his choice of texts, arrangement and aesthetic realization, Hellstenius has written a sharp-witted piece that reflects on itself as art music by articulating a language-philosophical Gehalt.⁴ *Instrument of Speech* is a thought-piece that abandons the imperative of innovation native to the aesthetics of material and arrives at the genuinely new experience sought by art music by taking the aesthetics of Gehalt as its guiding principle.

Mathew Schlomowitz's *Popular Contexts, Volume 8* (2016) has the instructive subtitle 'Five Soundscapes for a contemporary percussionist. For midi pads and assorted acoustic instruments'. The composer himself describes his work as 'textbook postmodernism', though the piece does not quote from popular music, as this announcement might lead one to expect, but rather includes instrumental samples and recordings from the acoustic lifeworld. One hears a dog barking, a child crying, clapping, honking, laughter, an electric drill, a bicycle bell and much more – and all this 'outside material' is rhythmicized with a beat. The ironic undertone of the subtitle presumably

indicates that the percussionist of today who has recognized the signs of the times plays with the sounds of the world.

At first glance, this idea does not seem new; after all, it inspired *musique concrète* more than half a century ago. But the difference between the music of Pierre Schaeffer, who composed with *concrete sounds*, and Shlomowitz, who writes music with *real sounds*, could not be greater, for they follow completely different understandings of music. In the former case, the samples of outside material were transformed by the compositional process to such an extent that they lost their original connections to the lifeworld. It was part of the concept of *musique concrète* to purge the samples used of their outside references, until one could only hear abstract sound events without lifeworld associations. With Schaeffer one can observe such a musicalization of extra-musical material in relation to lifeworld sounds, Lachenmann applies it to language, and Kagel uses it in conjunction with theatrical gestures. Like New Music in general, *musique concrète* too followed an idea of absolute music.

In *Popular Contexts*, however – which really deals with lifeworld contexts – the samples retain their outside references. They still evoke unambiguous associations with the contexts from which they originate, and thus exemplify the idea of a relational music. Hence the difference between absolute and relational music does not lie in the fact that outside material *is* incorporated into the composition, but rather in the *way* this outside material is compositionally treated. A clear criterion for distinguishing between these two paradigms of art music is that of *alterity*, namely, whether the samples used can retain their otherness in the music or the extra-musical material is musicalized beyond recognition. The mysterious ‘real’ in the project ‘Music with the Real’ manifests itself first of all in the alterity of the extra-musical material.



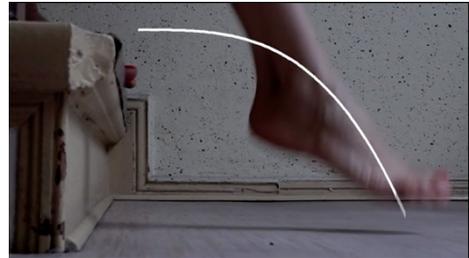
Kristine Tjøgersen (l.) and Tanja Orning (r.) from the ensemble *asamisimasa* attract the attention of the two eyes by producing sounds with adhesive tape during a performance of Carola Bauckholt's *Oh, I see* (2016)

In Carola Bauckholt's *Oh, I see* (2016) for clarinet, cello, piano, two large balloons and video, two musicians each hold a large rubber ball between their knees. The development of this ensemble piece does not follow any internal musical logic, but rather the metamorphosis of these stage props. At the start of the piece, one sees the balls simply lying on stage; then they change into two drums, each with two musicians hidden behind it and playing a beat. In a third transformation, pictures of eyes are projected onto them, turning the rubber balls into two large eyeballs. If the audience members now look at the stage, the ensemble suddenly gains a face (*Oh, I see*). In one scene, the eyes look in the direction of musicians who are pulling adhesive tape off the tape rolls, as if they wanted to draw attention to themselves with these unusual sounds; in another, the ensemble face listens with its eyes open, then at certain moments it starts blinking, and finally the eyes move in time with the music.

This is an example of New Music that departs from its traditional paradigm of absolute music due to the visualization strategy it implements. The alterity of the 'extra-musical material' remains unaltered; the eyes retain their outside referentiality even when they start moving in time with the music, looking left and right on the beat. *Oh, I see* is a lively piece with a cryptic element of humour – at least, if one imagines that art music is opening its eyes here and starting to observe itself. Then one sees, for example, a clarinetist and a cellist attempting to produce previously unheard sounds with adhesive tape – an

epitome of absolute music, which searches in vain for progress in the material where there is no more to be found. Art music becomes philosophical and follows Socrates's maxim: *know thyself!*

Johannes Kreidler's *Fantasies of Downfall* (2016) for vibraphone, fixed media and video is the piece whose character comes closest to that of a 'research project'. It is a series of experiments testing how sounds and video can be combined in such a way that listening becomes visible and seeing becomes audible. In one of these studies one sees a video loop of a woman's foot going down a step. This movement 'in reality' is superimposed with a



geometrical line and a melody line, which are also varied with each loop. The visual lines are curved in different ways, and the vibraphone plays ascending melody lines in some cases and descending ones in others. Kreidler had asked himself whether it was possible to compose a 'visual counterpoint', and one would have to conclude from the experiment that this is not really the case. *Fantasies of Downfall* is a preliminary study for a larger film project, of which *Film 2* was premiered at the 2018 Ultraschall Festival.

Daily Transformations (2016/17) by Clemens Gadenstätter is a collaboration with the filmmaker Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck and the writer Lisa Spalt. The ensemble piece weaves a dense fabric of words, images and sounds, but – and this is the decisive point – in the medium of music. The pictures and texts do not follow a logic of their own, but are rather treated as musical material with which to compose in an expanded sense. Thus *Daily Transformations* is no ordinary multimedia project with a free combination of literature, film and music, but rather an ensemble piece where language and images are woven into a single musical texture. Accordingly, the reality content actually transported by the words and videos is erased again through the compositional process. In every second, the piece creates so many associations and connections between the visual, acoustic and semantic elements that its references to the world can ultimately only be perceived as aesthetic self-references. In the programme note for the world premiere at Wien Modern in 2017, Gadenstätter describes this compositional impulse quite precisely: 'Walking in the park, a rollercoaster ride, small gestures – three everyday observations become the starting point for a poetic, dramatic and utopian journey into the faculties of human perception and sensation. Three media fields – film, text and music – look at (or listen to) the respective object and act on

one another: language changes listening changes seeing changes the understanding of language etc.⁵

Working Hypothesis

The degrees of freedom gained by relational music to compose with extra-musical material, and thus use words, images, gestures, natural and everyday sounds as carriers of information, enables an access to reality that was inconceivable within the model of absolute music. 'Music with the Real' is concerned with the exploration of such connections to reality that can now be created in art music with computer assistance. The project description programmatically states: 'Contemporary music of today takes a new interest in ordinary everyday life, in reality, and the new appearances of reality brought into being by technology. This is a new source of accessible musical material, and even more important, a new opening into "the real world."' ⁶ This opening towards the real world can have highly varied results, however, something that is shown in very instructive fashion in the five works of the AR project, which demonstrate the full spectrum of possibilities.

Clemens Gadenstätter's *Daily Transformations* seems like a foil to the other works in the AR project 'Music with the Real'. Although this piece works more extensively than all the other compositions with 'outside material' in the form of words, images and everyday sounds, it is precisely *not* an example of relational music. Rather, its hypercomplexity transfers the idea of absolute music from pure instrumental music to multimedia music projects. One can only speak of a world-relation in a metaphorical sense, namely as a structural analogy of absolute music in which the texture of the multimedia music stands as a metaphor for the universe. Matthew Shlomowitz's *Popular Contexts* would be the example in which the idea of relational music manifests itself in a purified form. Carola Bauckholt's *Oh, I see* performs an art piece in which relational music begins to see and perceive itself. Finally, Henrik Hellstenius's *Instrument of Speech* draws most on the potential of relational music to articulate an aesthetic Gehalt in the medium of music.

The dominant paradigm of New Music in the 20th century answers two central questions about art music at the same time: the descriptive question 'What is music?' was answered with the idea of absolute music, while the normative question 'What is New Music?' could be answered with the criterion of material progress. The project 'Music with

the Real' reacts to the experience of the crisis in New Music, namely that its genuine claim to newness could no longer be fulfilled within the framework of the aesthetics of material, and instead sounds out the spaces for innovation in relational music.

The working hypothesis that can be derived from this for Artistic Research is that AR projects can generate a specific knowledge when they accompany paradigm shifts. Such projects can focus artistic works on a theme, thus simultaneously creating a context of reflection in which one can test a new self-description of art scenes.

¹ Judith Sigmund and Anna Calabrese, introduction to J. Sigmund (ed.), *Wie verändert sich Kunst, wenn man sie als Forschung versteht?* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), p. 13.

² Project description: <https://nmh.no/en/research/projects/music-with-the-real>

³ See the chapter 'Relationale Musik' in Harry Lehmann, *Die digitale Revolution der Musik. Eine Musikphilosophie* (Mainz: Schott, 2012), pp. 115-126.

⁴ The German word *Gehalt* is retained here because the natural translation – 'content' – does not adequately reflect the contrast to *Inhalt*, which also means 'content'; while the latter refers to an idea or theme that can be named or depicted, the former refers to an aesthetic substance that is mediated through the experience and conceptual context of a work (trans.).

⁵ <http://wienmodern.at/Home/Event?event-id=000000e9h58h0011ddd2>

⁶ Project description: <https://nmh.no/en/research/projects/music-with-the-real>