

Perceptual Shifts

Changes of Perspective in the Work of Carola Bauckholt¹

For many years, before Carola Bauckholt relocated to Freiburg with her family in 2013, she lived with her husband (the composer Caspar Johannes Walter) and their children in a house in Cologne's Mülheim district, and the back of the property adjoined Böcking Park. The spacious park area served as a playground and sunbathing site for the population of Mülheim; but in emergencies, helicopters land here for the KfH Dialysis and Kidney Centre, located on the opposite side of the park. Ear-oriented person that she is, Carola Bauckholt drew inspiration from the acoustic spectacle of the helicopter landings in 2002 for an orchestral composition that she directly entitled *Hubschrauber* [Helicopter].

I lived in Cologne-Mülheim. Behind the meadow is a dialysis centre and you very often find helicopters landing there, which is always a major event. It's overwhelmingly loud, and I often used to listen – you don't have any choice – to this heavy body taking off! An aeroplane is elegant, but a helicopter is pretty ungainly, and it takes so much energy that has to be summoned for this 'fat' thing to take off. It's just great, and that was my model!²

In *Hubschrauber*, the idea of something heavy and inert resisting gravity with the greatest possible effort becomes tangible as an impressive sonic image around the middle of the roughly twenty-minute piece. Here, while the pulsing of ever-ascending pitches ebbs away in the upper registers, double basses and cellos inconspicuously supply new pulses rises from the depths. Bauckholt thus creates the paradox of an endlessly-ascending sonic spiral that powerfully recreates the noise of a starting helicopter.

It is characteristic of Bauckholt's work that she keeps drawing, in fairly concrete fashion, on her subjective experience and her most personal observation and perception. Her compositions are often inhabited by sonic structures that, as in the orchestral piece *Hubschrauber*, she has picked out of the sounds of her daily life.

I have to experience things somehow, so taking a particular fingering or a particular sound out of a book – that's not my thing! I need to hear something that touches me, or find something myself that touches me. It's always this touch that needs to be there as a starting point.

The touch! On the one hand, it is sensual experience – as when we touch or probe an object or a surface – but we also speak of 'being touched' when something moves us emotionally. Many of Bauckholt's works are created in close collaboration with the performers of her pieces. Here both categories of touch come together in a special way, as collaboration with musicians also creates interpersonal and emotional commitment. It is precisely this close interpersonal exchange that allows the composer to grasp the possibilities of her instruments in a more intense fashion. So

¹ The present text is a revised version of a radio manuscript written by the author in 2013 under the title *Rezipieren und Kapieren* for the New Music department at Deutschlandradio Kultur (broadcast on 5 Nov 2013). To make the printed version more readable, the author has made some additions and stylistic changes.

² Unless indicated otherwise, all comments by Carola Bauckholt are taken from an interview with the author which took place in Cologne on 30 September 2013.

Hubschrauber, for example is far more than simply the description of an everyday flying vehicle. The work is the result of an intense collaboration with the Dutch vocal virtuoso Jaap Blonk, for whom Bauckholt composed the piece.

The initial stimulus was the sound poet Jaap Blonk, who does incredibly great things with his voice and uses a very analytical approach. He also composes himself, and can describe exactly what he does. So he can repeat these things. Sometimes one has partners who do something incredibly great, and when one asks them to repeat it, some other incredibly great thing comes out and one simply can't pin it down! And I could work very well with Jaap Blonk! I wanted to characterize his voice, his mouth, and the orchestra simply serves to magnify his mouth.

Hubschrauber, composed in 2002 for Bavarian Radio's musica viva concert series, reflects two central aspects of Bauckholt's work: her preference for non-verbal, onomatopoeic vocal expression and her fastidiousness in realizing sonic discoveries based on the observation and transformation of everyday phenomena. This everyday reality does not usually speak to us through notes, however, but through noises! Thus Bauckholt's sonic cosmos in miniature form is already demonstrated ideal-typically in a composition from 1992, written in memory of John Cage, with the characteristic title *Geräusche* [Noises]. This small piece layers unpitched sounds from different sources to form 'chords', and demonstrates Bauckholt's interest in an extremely particular phenomenon. For the composer is especially drawn to every imaginable variety of squeaking, a sonic phenomenon that has a special status in the world of everyday sounds, because in acoustics, we distinguish between noise or white noise, as an aperiodically vibrating sonic mixture, and a note, which vibrates periodically as a stationary sound with a defined pitch. Notes are the foundation of our music, but in nature they are an exception. Outside of art, we normally encounter identifiable pitches only in the form of humming or squeaking, which can result from friction between objects and surfaces.

Squeaking is my sentimental streak, because there's squeaking wherever I am, all over the world, and when I hear squeaking I feel at home. It's simply overtones produced through friction, but very often it also has an emotional quality. As soon as we laugh or cry, we also squeak, and it often has something very calming too. That's something very archaic. I don't know, maybe my pram squeaked or something? I feel incredibly at ease in this squeaking, and I think it's a sound that gets under your skin.

We are unlikely to establish whether impressions from early childhood determined the path taken by Bauckholt, born in Krefeld in 1959. We can be sure, however, that a key event towards the end of the composer's school days had a significant influence on her career path, which began with early experiences as a pianist at the Theater am Marianplatz, in her Lower Rhine home town of Krefeld.

So I was very interested in visual art, as well as the experimental tendencies like Dadaism, and then I found out in school that the year above me had played a piece by John Cage for bottles. And then I thought, 'Aha, bottles! Playing on bottles, now that could be interesting.' I wasn't allowed to join in, but at least I had the name in my head. Then I found out through the community college that there was at theatre at the Marienplatz that put on pieces by Cage and Stockhausen, and then I went there and it happened.

The Theater am Marienplatz has devoted itself to the work of experimental composers and authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries since 1976, and the theatre in Krefeld-Fischeln under the

direction of Pit Therre has remained a jewel of the Lower Rhine's cultural landscape to this day. Its repertoire includes works by Samuel Beckett, Ernst Jandl, Dieter Schnebel and especially by Gerhard Rühm and Mauricio Kagel, for whom the TAM became a kind of house theatre where he occasionally directed performances himself. Already in the year of the TAM's foundation, as a senior at high school, Bauckholt started working at the theatre, and her personal contact with Mauricio Kagel led her to decide, after finishing school, to study at the Cologne Academy of Music.

The decision to go to Kagel was totally pragmatic. I wanted to keep working at the TAM, and had to start studying to avoid getting any trouble. I was lucky: Kagel said I could sit in as a guest student. Then I sat in his class, and just watched and listened with eyes and ears open wide. Of course, those were completely new worlds for me. Kagel didn't actually do that much. He just provided us with a forum, a space with lights and video where we could do what we wanted. Really it was just a big free space for us, and he made sure that there was an audience so that people would see us.



Fig. 1 Mauricio Kagel and Carola Bauckholt (photo: private, c. 1979)

Carola Bauckholt studied in Kagel's class for new music theatre in Cologne from 1978 to 1984, together with colleagues such as Manos Tsangaris, Maria de Alvear or Chris Newman. With Kagel's class, set up in 1974, the Academy of Music responded to the forms of a new music theatre – inspired by John Cage and the Fluxus movement and already brought to Cologne early on by Mary Bauermeister – that did not fit in with traditional opera or the stage works of classical modernity. Bauckholt's early stage works were noticeably influenced by Kagel's instrumental theatre, and drew on combinations and confrontations between the most diverse resources. But these pieces were already conceived in primarily sonic/musical terms. Referring to her pieces for classical instruments, Bauckholt speaks of a chamber music augmented by visual elements.

My fundamental point of departure is sound. If visual things are there, it's because they make a sound. It's because the sound is treated so unconventionally that it becomes so visually exciting. And if you focus the light on it as well, you have music theatre, even though nothing extra-musical is going on. I find that a very pleasing experience, the realization that we don't actually need extra-musical elements to enable a music-theatrical experience of music.

The practice introduced by Cage, the Fluxus artists and also by Kagel of using everyday objects as sound sources can, of course, also play a fundamental part in Bauckholt's music – for example, when she uses the rolling of balls, the crinkling of paper or the squeaking made by materials rubbed against each other. In addition, she has perfected the art of recreating all these sonic phenomena in the medium of classical instrumentation. Beyond traditional conventions of instrumental treatment, Bauckholt's fascinating sonic explorations are the result of a concentrated and highly subjective appropriation of instrumental practice that would probably not have been possible in this form without the Thürmchen-Ensemble, which she founded together with Caspar Johannes Walter in 1991.

Personally, I didn't actually learn all the important technical craft that a composer needs from Kagel. I learnt other things: saying yes to ideas no matter what comes out, that's something I learnt from Kagel. The technical knowhow that I need in everyday life came after my studies. I founded an ensemble with Caspar Johannes Walter. We worked very closely with the musicians, and I actually rediscovered each instrument with the musicians and the ideas of the musicians, and I actually kept a little notebook and wrote down everything I learnt. So I found out all the instrumental techniques myself.

The Thürmchen-Ensemble³ was officially founded in 1991 by like-minded graduates of the Cologne Academy of Music. This took place on the initiative of Caspar Johannes Walter, who had studied at the academy from 1985-90 with Klarenz Barlow and Johannes Fritsch, and in his student days already worked as a cellist with the same colleagues that would join him to form the Thürmchen-Ensemble, and the initiative of Bauckholt, who had completed her studies in composition with Mauricio Kagel in 1984. Following the lead of Johannes Fritsch's Feedback-Verlag, the first independent composers' publishing house in Germany, the ensemble's formation in 1985 had been preceded by the establishment of the Thürmchen-Verlag as an initial endeavour to make the works of the young composers accessible to an interested public. The foundation of the publishing house was soon followed by the realization, however, that personal initiative would also be necessary if their own works were to be presented to audiences.

The activities of the Thürmchen-Ensemble started much earlier, around 1988 or '89. And we already had role models – there was Ensemble Köln, directed by Robert HP Platz. It already existed as the only independent Cologne ensemble before we came along. It was like this: Caspar Johannes Walter and I had got to know ensemble recherche, and had the opportunity to work with them. That was naturally very nice. But then we realized that they would just play us once, but not do the things we would really have needed. And then we thought, we'll have to do it all ourselves. And when Matthias Osterwold wanted to have a name, we gave the group a name, that was in 1991.⁴

The Thürmchen-Ensemble – with the 'th' spelling rather than the standard *Türmchen* [little tower] as an allusion to the Thürmchenswall, a street near the Cologne Academy of Music and the first home of the publishing house – has made a name for itself over two decades with a specific repertoire. Alongside pieces by Bauckholt and Walter, the ensemble has given portrait concerts of Helmut Oehring, Thomas Stiegler, Manos Tsangaris and María Cecilia Villanueva. Bauckholt emphasizes that

³ The following section is taken from a radio manuscript written by the author in 2013 for Deutschlandradio Kultur, entitled 'Ensembleszene Köln' (broadcast 2 July 2013). Published version: Hubert Steins, 'Diversität und Initiative – Die Ensemble Szene Kölns', in *positionen. Texte zur aktuellen Musik* 2013, no. 97, pp. 38-41.

⁴ Interview by the author with Carola Bauckholt from 21 May 2013 in Cologne.

most of the pieces in the ensemble's repertoire came about in close collaboration between the composers and the musicians, because one of the group's aesthetic focuses is multimedia works that incorporate unusual instruments and noise-producing objects.

To this day, the Thürmchen-Ensemble has remained a fixture in the cathedral city's independent music scene. One reason for this is that most of the musicians have meanwhile joined other renowned independent ensembles, such as the flautist Evelin Degen, who has been a member of the group since 1998 and also belongs to Ensemble e-mex, founded in 1999, which comprises musicians and instrumentalists from Cologne and the Ruhr region. The percussionist Thomas Meixner was a member of Ensemble Köln until its disbanding in 1999, a founding member of the Cologne Percussion Quartet (established in 1989), and now plays with Ensemble Musikfabrik in Cologne. Carola Bauckholt emphasizes time and again that her works too would be inconceivable without her partnership and exchange with musician friends. Her music theatre work *hellhörig* from 2008, for example, which was composed for the Munich Biennale in close collaboration with Meixner and the other musicians from the Cologne Percussion Quartet.

In hellhörig I asked myself why noises always have such high frequencies – can't we produce low-pitched noises? Percussionists mostly have high-frequency instruments, after all, but then I met with Thomas Meixner and he brought some big objects, zinc tubs and big cardboard boxes. Then we tried to produce low noises, and ended up with a big collection of material.

Bauckholt's music theatre piece *hellhörig* does not tell any story. The protagonists of the work are the sounds themselves, which are made on the one hand by three voices, a cello trio, a piano and traditional percussion instruments, and on the other hand by numerous unusual sound sources – a zinc tub which is dragged across the floor and starts making trombone-like sounds, tins rubbed with rosin-coated wood, or prepared balloons that screech when rubbed with sponges. It is exciting to watch all these actions, and one should watch very closely! The interplay between these unusual sound sources and traditional instruments makes us prick up our ears – it makes us *hellhörig* – in the best sense, as Carola Bauckholt not only looks for the musical quality within noises by making objects squeak, screech or sing. Through her extreme treatment of instruments, she also plays with the noise elements that form part of instrumental sounds. Working in these marginal areas, the boundaries between the sounds of her everyday noise objects and those of traditional instruments can become blurred and led to veritable sonic illusions.

In addition, *hellhörig* blurs more than just the boundaries between the sounds of percussive sound sources and those of traditional instruments like the cello or the piano. The voices of soprano, mezzo-soprano and baritone are also challenged with extreme forms of expression beyond tradition and convention – for example, when the composer demands seal cries, goat bleating and, towards the end, the howling of sledge dogs. Such obvious imitations are frowned upon in New Music, as they quickly seem childish, silly or even sentimental; from our anthropocentric perspective, we tend all too easily to project emotional qualities onto animal sounds.



Fig. 2: *hellhörig*, a scene with XXXXXXX (photo: Carola Bauckholt)

On the other hand, the extended conception of art and music that we have today allows us to discover musical qualities in natural sonic phenomena and to enjoy them as an aesthetic experience. But does this mean that the songs of whales and birds or the howling of wolves and dogs are music, which is considered a specific cultural achievement of humans? Anyone who listens to the recordings of sledge dog songs that the poet Oswald Wiener brought back from an Arctic expedition and released on CD in 2001,⁵ together with Helmut Schoener, might start wondering. Carola Bauckholt, for her part, was so fascinated by these recordings that she used the dog songs as material for a vocal trio that appears at the end of *hellhörig*, and which she further developed for the composition *Instinkt*, for six-part vocal ensemble, not long afterwards.

hellhörig ends the way Instinkt begins, with the singing of sledge dogs. We don't know why, but they just sing together and use totally interesting intervals and structures that are very similar, so they really have their own music! I listened to that and it provoked me to have a vocal ensemble imitate it. Naturally one gets dangerously close to something really embarrassing, but because I have recordings and can say precisely that the singer is imitating this specific timbre and this specific articulation, I was able to work very exactly and avoid this cliché of imitating animals. You're really working with completely musical elements. It's just crazy that you then have a conductor standing there conducting six voices, and they sound like a pack of dogs, but those are the things that only become clear in performance.

Indeed, a conductor directing an ensemble of singers who are howling like dogs does is a rather bizarre proposition. But what makes Bauckholt's compositions fascinating is precisely that they provoke fundamental changes of perception with seemingly playful light-footedness. The perfection

⁵ *Animal Music / Tiermusik*, team of Jeremy Roht, West Dawson, Yukon-Territory, recorded by Oswald Wiener and Helmut Schoener, audio CD and booklet (Cologne: suppose, 2001).

and meticulousness of the musical realization make the sounds feel so familiar and natural after a short time that the initial unease shifts. Without noticing, one no longer finds the sounds out of place but rather the actions of the conductor and the concert situation itself, which, as a ritualized form for the expression of cultural convention, takes on increasingly disconcerting, almost surreal qualities.

Of course there's a certain cheekiness in demanding that a choir devote itself to making these sounds. I'd say it rests on a portion of cheekiness, courage and willingness to take risks. Otherwise one wouldn't do such things. But what seems funny in the concert context isn't actually funny, it's terribly sad! We only find it funny because it brings worlds together that are unfamiliar for us. And whenever something is unfamiliar, we react with laughter because we can't classify it. That's what's actually happening there!

The supposedly humorous dimension of *Instinkt* is a music-theatrical one that once again unfolds entirely without any scenic additions. But that is only the surface of the piece, for anyone who allows it can be deeply touched by it. A more fundamental shift of perception takes place when the highly artificial, virtuoso singing employed for this musical adaptation is projected back onto the animals as a highly sophisticated cultural technique: then *Instinkt* gives us, alongside its humorous culture-critical dimension, a deep and touching sense of the dignity of creatures living in the wild.

Nonetheless, if one speaks of the 'howling' of the dogs, there is an always an all-too-human element to this. Howling is crying, an expression of human pain and sorrow! In the animals, then, we encounter ourselves, to an extent, as emotional and vulnerable creatures. Thus *Instinkt* is also a vehicle that, taking a route through elements of nature, experiments with the human voice's non-verbal, emotional forms of expression that lie beyond language.

So language, human expression, is really a very strong element in my work together with a profound distrust towards texts, because our language is simply rational. We speak about a lot of things with this rational instrument, but I keep finding that what we say and what we do doesn't add up in the slightest. I essentially focus on irrational communication. The irrational is an element that I always try to grasp or describe. And that's why I really push the human organ and rely very heavily on human utterance. In instrumental contexts that often sounds like a voice too.

Carola Bauckholt's scepticism towards language is in the tradition of Dadaism and concrete poetry, i.e. the artistic directions that she already became acquainted with in her school days while working at the TAM. Unlike the concrete poets, however, she is not interested in the materiality of language in its systemic and logical dimension. Bauckholt is fascinated by what can be perceived beyond the linguistic logic of our voices, by non-verbal vocal expression, or perhaps rather by para-verbal phenomena like vocal register, speech melody, speech tempo, volume and articulation. These can often be involuntary expressions of deep emotional states such as fear, anger, sorrow, despair and insecurity, but also well-being and joy. The semantics of language, by contrast, is a tool of interpersonal and social communication, a collective agreement that injures the individual – and not only in the case of abuse. This is thematized in, for example, Bauckholt's composition *Emil will nicht schlafen* [Emil Cannot Sleep] for voice and orchestra, originally written for the singer Salome Kammer under the shorter title *Emil*. Here, once again, we owe it to the composer's love of details and powers of observation that we can determine quite exactly in the piece how old this little Emil is, the boy who cannot sleep and to whom the composition is dedicated. The singer has to articulate primal sounds from early childhood like gurgling, babbling, champing, snarling, vowels and first slurred

syllables. So Emil cannot be older than eight or nine months, as he is not yet performing the syllabic reduplication referred to as canonical babbling or idiolalia; the mother, however, demonstrates this to him in low registers in anticipation of all the language acquisition that is yet to come.

Emil will nicht schlafen thematizes the early mother-child relationship, and its topic and realization go to the absolute limits of what is possible in the context of contemporary music: it is quite something to have a soprano babbling like a baby in front of an orchestra and a conductor! Once again, musical theatre originates from the confrontation between the seemingly irreconcilable. This releases volatile associations that go far beyond the topic at hand, however, for when a singer regresses to infancy in front of a conductor, an ensemble and an audience, this plays in a caricatured, and hence provocative manner with the cliché of the child-woman who is deprived of agency.

Mercilessly exaggerating this role cliché and placing it in front of a usually male-dominated orchestral apparatus creates a distancing effect that, in turn, casts a peculiar light back on the constitution of that apparatus again.

All this is funny – in the sense of being humorous and in the sense of being strange – but it is also just one of several dimensions to the piece. Large parts of *Emil will nicht schlafen* are of an amusing character, but when the piece takes on a threatening, almost nightmarish sonic language towards the middle of its duration, the composition also conveys the early childhood drama of vulnerability, defencelessness and helplessness. Here too, Carola Bauckholt's music moves the listener because the composer does not avoid the existential or the threatening. So when she picks sounds out of the physical world, her poetics never stops at this first level of representation.

I don't just want a representation, I want to reach the substance. You could compare that with someone creating an oil painting. There isn't just that, there's a whole situation around it: the undercoat, the foreground, the background etc. So my approach is actually a very detailed form of translation.

The comparison of her way of working to oil painting is a natural one, and anything but a coincidence; for even a form of painting that is representational and supposedly based in reality is ultimately a composition that owes its origin to an artistic volition. Thus Bauckholt draws – very much in the sense of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* – on reality, but then assembles it differently as a work of art. Artistic adaptation thus automatically produces a differences that turns what was originally concrete into something else, and in Bauckholt's case we call this music. At this point the bonds between art and reality could be dissolved, were it not for Bauckholt's penchant for mundane, often descriptive titles.

Some people have told me that these concrete titles are harmful because New Music doesn't like concrete things so much. It prefers spiritual things, which means that I could call it Opus 1 or Opus 2 instead. It's not my concern for the listener to identify those things. For me it's about working on sounds, and this technique simply provides me with a sound that's unusual, and then something happens with the listener too. So it could be that – if I didn't name the pieces so honestly – the effect would be even more interesting, but I say to myself, 'That's how I worked! Why shouldn't I be open about it?'

Undoubtedly Bauckholt's descriptive, sometimes curt titles act in favour of the comprehensibility of her music, especially for a non-specialist audience. Occasionally, however, her work titles have

suggestions that mislead the listener – her orchestral composition *Brunnen* [Fountain/Well], for example, which was written in 2013 for the 250th anniversary of the writer Jean Paul's birth and commissioned by Austrian Radio. Bauckholt sees Jean Paul as a kindred spirit in terms of the writer's love of details; one is tempted to add that their kinship no doubt also lies in the subtle sense of humour and taste for ironic subversion that they share.

In keeping with the literary and historical concept inaugurated by Jean Paul, the title of Bauckholt's piece alludes to the literary metaphor of the well as a portal to the underworld, as a mirror of the soul and a component of the Romantic landscape. The composer therefore chose a field recording of a slurping spring in the Graubünden Alps (Switzerland) as the point of departure for her orchestral piece. But she also used other recordings played back in addition to the orchestra: the sound of pneumatic drills, recorded at a construction site in a shopping arcade in the Kiev subway, as well as the warning signals and shutting sound of doors on an ICE train. So how does that all go together in a composition that deals with the Romantic metaphor of the well? Are the passages of unknown subway systems portals to the underworld or the noises of train doors ciphers for a pastoral romanticism, now mutated into railway romanticism? The listener can only guess at such things, for these things quite simply go together because Carola Bauckholt brings them together! Her pieces may be rooted in reality, but her associative recombinations of realistic or concrete elements are transformed into works of art precisely because they are no longer bound to logic, and because the shifts of context subjects them to an artistic adaptation that follows a kind of intuitive dream logic. And thus Bauckholt's pieces always tell a different story, a story entirely their own!

Translation: Wieland Hoban