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“The trend is that there is no trend” – Contemporary Music in Austria

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When I saw the theme of this conference, “Current trends of contemporary music composition”, at first I was totally mystified. I immediately thought of Austrian music in general, and especially of the musical scene in the city I come from, Vienna: What trends? We don’t have any trends! Well, also a non-trend might be a trend, and so I decided to call this paper: “The trend is that there is no trend – Contemporary Music in Austria”.

Of course, this title is deliberate provocation. I also could talk about a contrary position, but the result of this paper should be that what was meant as a provocation is not a provocation at all, but just a perhaps simple, but realistic view of today’s music. I would like to try a historical report and comparison. As for the last thirty years these are also the memories of a contemporary witness.

At the beginning I would like to quote another witness, one quite well known in Austria and abroad and surely one of the most competent to talk about trends during the last half century – the musicologist Lothar Knessl, who writes and speaks about music. We were sitting side by side at a concert in April last year¹, listening to four world premiere pieces performed – played and acted – by four percussionists. Finally Knessl said with great impatience but a smile: “We heard and saw all that in the 1960s in Darmstadt and Donaueschingen – decades ago!” I replied to him: “Yes, of course, you heard it – but those young composers didn’t!”

Though we have to agree to differ on “no trends” and “nothing new at all”, I think they come together in this dialogue. It follows that my thesis is this: there exists nothing in contemporary Austrian music that was not there decades ago, except, of course, for certain things which are based on present-day technological, electronic and computer development. But this is development, it is not a trend. Nowadays, composers in Austria – there are said to be some 800 of them today – are individuals. Some of them present us with interesting, very interesting, even extremely interesting music, while some do not.

It is obvious, however, that there are no “trends” in a trend-setting way, giving direction to others and educating younger ones. A Kurt Schwertsik or Iván Eröd of 2011 composes like a Schwertsik or Eröd of 1971, a Friedrich Cerha of 2011 almost like a Cerha of 1981, a Wolfram Wagner of 2011 like a Wagner of 1991, a Beat Furrer of 2011... and so on. And their colleagues like Kranebitter, Spuller, Haselböck all do their “job” – as I said – in an often quite interesting or even admirable way. But as for “trends” ...?

I mentioned my colleague Dr. Haselböck by pure chance. Because by pure chance my first example of music is by him. There is quite a “trendy” private opera group in Vienna, founded in 1998, called the sirene Operntheater. Their recent production comprised 12 new pieces based on stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*, all by one librettist, Kristine Tornkvist, and eleven composers. The performances took place on three evenings within three days. Let us take a glimpse at what it was like:

¹ 10 April 2010, Vienna, Konzerthaus, Berio-Saal. Platypus Marathon IV. Works by Niklas Seidl, Qin Huang, Diego Collatti and Ingmar Gritzner. Berndt Thurner, Harry Demmer, Margit Schoberleitner and Georg Mittermüller – percussion. Fernando Riederer – electronics. Conductor: Jaime Wolfson.

Example (Video): Lukas Haselböck (1972), Yunan und Duban (sirene Operntheater, 26 August 2011)

Quite an entertaining piece, somehow funny, interesting, typical of today's musical output in Austria. But definitely this is neither part of a trend nor a pretence at or even the beginning of a trend. So once again my thesis: there are no trends in Austria today! (Don't forget this sentence.)

As I mentioned, this sirene production, which was performed late in this year's hot August, comprised twelve new short operas (in fact ten operas and two dance pieces). Compare two more excerpts: different composers, totally different aesthetics.

Example (Video): Willi Spuller (1979), Attars Tod (sirene Operntheater, 25 August 2011)

Example (Video): Matthias Kranebitter (1979), Der Apfel aus Basra (sirene Operntheater, 25 August 2011)

A short retrospective: Unlike in earlier centuries, especially the first quarter of the 20th century, it seems that since World War II Austria has lost any claim to leadership in international trends in New Music. Nevertheless, there have always been conservative as well as progressive composers and groups, which for decades seemed to be serious rivals – until – and this is a major point, I think – the beginning of the 1990s, since which time things have been much more individual and liberal.

If we think of the situation in the 1950s and early 1960s, there was a very strong ultra-conservative "tonal" party as well as mainly the composition class of Karl Schiske at the Vienna Academy of Music, which was markedly progressive. In 1958 Cerha and Schwertsik founded the "die reihe" ensemble as a chamber ensemble specializing in new music only and reflecting international trends (!) as well as new Austrian, mainly progressive, and definitely not conservative music.

In 1988 the "Wien modern" music festival was established. It was not the first festival dedicated to contemporary music, but it was the first large festival dedicated to mainly New (with a capital "N") music. Since then quite a few other institutions – ensembles, smaller festivals, composers' groups – have been founded.

Just one example: When the Wiener Saxophon-Quartett was founded in 1987, suddenly there was quite an explosion of new pieces for saxophone quartet. Yes, that was a trend. But the music that was composed for them, was not.

Of the younger initiatives I could name the composers' and performing group "Platypus", the composers' group "Gegenklang", the performing group "Cercle – Konzertreihe für neue Musik", not to mention the opera performing group "sirene". Again and again – a great many composers who do not see themselves as part of any "group" or "school".

A good trend that has existed for some three or four hundred years concerns young composers from abroad coming to Austria, mainly to the capital Vienna, and settling here – and enriching our musical life. Very often these are very interesting individuals – who do not set trends.

A few years ago the Prague composer Šimon Voseček came to Austria, because he had fallen in love with a Viennese. Now he lives in Vienna; he is a founding member of "Platypus" and in 2008 was given the Austrian State Award for his opera "Biedermann und die Brandstifter" – which is unfortunately still unperformed. Here is a short excerpt from his oft-performed string quartet Im Säurebad (In the Acid Bath).