

FIRST PERFORMANCES

2023 Darmstädter Ferienkurse.

Darmstadt

There's a quasi-review of Darmstadt in *The New York Times*, where a critic-at-large – I forget who, the authorship function isn't important here and I'm not going back to check – ferries himself between Bayreuth and Hesse's fourth city, ultimately deciding that the Darmstadt composers – here Jennifer Walshe and Matthew Shlomowitz – have outdone poor Richard W. for sheer spectacle and conceptual punch. It's framed like a lark, a typical Eurotrip, but I think it's interesting nevertheless. Why would an anglophone critic do this, bringing together Bayreuth and Darmstadt? They have nothing in common besides people playing some music, which they do in many places this time of year; also they are both in Germany. In between the two there is over a century of difference in tradition, practice, nearly anything and everything. Music notwithstanding, their functions are radically opposed: Darmstadt has always been explicitly international *courses* for music, while Bayreuth plays Wagner operas/music dramas/festival-stage consecrations. You go to Darmstadt to learn; you go to Bayreuth to cry (in Darmstadt, typically, tears are merely an incidental outcome of the courses). So why is this the yardstick?

The reason I *think* is that for anglophone residents over the past decade Central Europe in general and Germany in particular have attained an almost mythical stature as the last remaining place in the Global North (this is, still, the preferred euphemism) where artistic production (not 'creative' production) of a grand scale can be largely supported without some sort of disaster. Bayreuth, Darmstadt, Berlin – these are metonyms. Now I am writing in this sweepingly breezy generality because this is a review and I can probably get this past peer review so long as I don't swear or put in too many pop culture references, but also because there are some empirical, phenomenological, experiential facts that follow from this generality. The amount of extraordinarily talented musicians who make the leap from the Anglosphere to the relative economic stability of the Teutonosphere has increased to the extent that 'move to Berlin' is a *de facto* career move for most ambitious

American musicians that falls somewhere next to 'graduate from college'. All this to say that when reviewing the Darmstädter Ferienkurse, which began in 1946 with almost entirely German and very often deeply compromised personnel, in an English-language publication today, one is not so much reviewing a music festival (like Bayreuth, sure) as much as a proving ground for expat composers to make the sort of impact that they are institutionally excluded from making in their countries of origin. While English has been a lingua franca at the courses for a good while (I think official communication from the IMD even stated as much in 2016 or so), the 2023 Darmstädter Ferienkurse, workshops, lectures, everything were almost entirely given in English. The only major exception – a mid-concert interview with Helmut Lachenmann in German – only reinforced the stark reality that these proceedings were thoroughly Anglicised, not in the sense that they *were* somehow English but that they certainly existed *for* those who spoke English primarily if not exclusively.

It's not only Darmstadt, of course: there's more than a smattering of these sorts of new-music proving grounds on the continent of Europe that are beacons for every musician whose ambitions exceed the grim horizons delimited by Bang on a Can, the Met, and *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and their schedule is getting denser. This year, Impuls (like Darmstadt, a festival plus academy) very nearly coincided with the Ferienkurse (Impuls ended 3 August; Darmstadt kicked off 5 August). Some participants came directly from Impuls to Darmstadt, and a lucky few unusually indefatigable souls continued on for the entirety of the Ferienkurse. There's a risk, then, as there always was, I guess, that these things become treadmills rather than invigorating fora for collaboration. There's also a vague post-COVID-19 tension in returning to large performances in large performance spaces in large international festivals after a caesura of two interminable years and the vibes being a bit off. Around 5–6 August, I was astonished at the number of people filling the guts of this small city, more than I had ever seen in nearly a decade of Darmstadts – in even the most cavernous concert-gymnasiums, the only seats available up to 20 minutes before a concert were on the ground. By 19 August,

these halls were three-quarters empty. People had moved on, probably – a commuter festival.

Some Workshops

what is harp?

Gunnhildur Einarsdóttir's workshops have been one of the most consistent incubators of musical and professional success over the past few years, being the source of multiple Kranichstein winners. This year the haul was particularly striking: both composition and interpretation prizes originated from Einarsdóttir's harp workshops ('ausgeräumt', a colleague noddingly remarked after the award ceremony). It's not difficult to see why – Einarsdóttir and her collaborator Sarah Nemtsov have created a marvellously open and intensely collaborative environment for their composers and harpists. The most remarkable thing is that these workshop concerts didn't *feel* like workshop concerts, with a gauntlet of short give-it-a-go pieces. The harp composition workshop had thematic interludes – composed, I believe, by Jutta Pranulytė, under the overarching title *what is harp?* – self-interrogating this cartoonishly unwieldy instrument and giving the entire lengthy concert a coherence that was as effective and compelling as if they had planned the thing a year ago (they had, in fact, planned it over the course of five days). This was doubly extraordinary given the vastly different approaches to the instrument, from Julie Zhu's smooth *Purples*, performed by Miriam Paschetta (the note I scribbled in the programme reads 'Coldplay chords. Brave'), to Justin Zeitlinger's arch-abrasive *PHARPH*, performed by Lucie Spedicato ('magnetic tape on strings – a sound that's hard not to hate'), to Kari Watson's hauntingly cavernous and elegiac *For Maaria*, performed by its namesake Maaria Pulakka. Watson was the recipient of the main Kranichstein composition prize, and the stark beauty of her harp piece – at one point there's a glissando that doesn't sound contrived, an impossible achievement – belied this achievement. The grand finale was Ed Cooper's *SUB ECLIPSE BLOOD WORK*, a howling, gloaming, brooding and extremely resonant work, ending with a sustained bowing on the lowest string of the instrument which has been detuned into oblivion. Jenna Vergeynst's hypnotic and utterly captivating performance likewise helped her to win one of the Kranichstein interpretation scholarships.

Voice

Juliet Fraser's voice workshop, like many of the other instrumental workshops, was given in an

Open Space concert, and presented a dense set of musical brilliance that was hardly possible after only two weeks. Especially stunning was Lidia Luciano's performance of Elizabeth Gartman's [*Weight*]: this is a work of the most visceral intensity, and Luciano's voice was dizzying, almost nauseating in the best sense of the word, at once coaxing and sickly threatening, masterfully controlled. Luciano won an 'honourable mention' along with a handful of other performers; this was something the jury decided to do this year, with a full list published on the IMD website. Equally beguiling, in a more immediately inviting way, was Julie Zhu and Sarah Grace Graves' collaboration *Ghosts*, which gives the listener the feeling of undergoing something akin to a haunted audiology exam.

Open Space

Open Space – in previous years one of the major draws for the courses, with several telling me that it is the only reason they paid a visit to Hesse's fourth city at all, and generally speaking the forum that puts Darmstadt head and shoulders above any other event in new music – is where post-COVID-19 malaise was most obvious. The Lichtenbergschule was disturbingly quiet and empty for most of the courses, although the schedule seemed relatively full. There were, of course, many very exciting performances given, but the density and volume of these seemed to me to be far less than in previous iterations.

Jack Adler-McKean was one of the most tireless performers here, giving three separate Open Space recitals, ranging from 'classics' like Finnissy and Aperghis to contemporaries like Jesse Ronneau and Fernando Garneró, to members of the youngest generation like Ed Cooper. In ... *grown up, you are grown, and feeling stronger, feeling...*, Cooper's explosive interiority reached something like an apotheosis, and by the end, the muggy classroom seemed to breathe and pulsate with a very wet energy.

Potentially the most rewarding Open Space performances were the loosely organised improv sessions between performers who seemed to be having a hell of a good time playing together. Bassoon tutor Katherine Young gave a wonderfully gritty couple of sets with fellow bassoonist Gabi Vanek, likewise Mivos Quartet cellist Tyler J. Borden with laptop-boy Hunter Brown in a joyously effervescent duet. As two thirds of Technical Reserve, these two have also released an album on the Party Perfect!!! Label (google

'party perfect bandcamp'), which was certainly my discovery of the summer.

The Big Names

Braxton Comes Alive!

Undoubtedly, the biggest name at Darmstadt in 2023 was Anthony Braxton, and he seemed to be everywhere. This led to a very embarrassing bit of repressed discourse where some senior figures discussed a new and exciting trend towards improvisation in new music; what they meant to say, of course, was simply that Anthony Braxton is here, and his music is in very many concerts, more than any other single composer. His presence made itself felt immediately at the pre-opening [sic] concert, a conducted orchestral improvisation called *Language Music*. At the time I thought I understood it perfectly and was completely blissed out on these sounds coaxed out of a large number of instruments in such a perfect and indescribably unique way, but now that I'm a couple weeks out and having to write it up, I'm a bit confused. *Language Music* – italicised in the programme and thus italicised here – isn't a *piece*, really, as much as a system for making sounds (the unusually artful programme notes by Nate Wooley, truncated from some unlisted source, describe it as both a set of delimitations, 'starting points or springboards to musical activity', and 'a structural framework for improvising'). It unequivocally did not sound like an experimental system, however, which is a testament to just how well the PMP (Prague Music Performance Orchestra) under the direction of Roland Dahinden had assimilated this creative practice. They were speaking the language fluently. There were three further Braxton concerts on the main programme – the world premiere of *Thunder Music*, a beguiling and occasionally almost new-age-y ensemble + electronics concoction, the presentation of the 'Creative Orchestra' workshop led by Braxton and Kobe van Cauwenberghe, and *Ghost Trance Music* given the Ictus-ballet treatment – in addition to a two-day conference on his creative output and legacy.

Political Music

Marshall Trammell ran a very mysterious course with the utterly innocuous title of 'Music Research Strategies', which resulted in a concert comprising a single piece, *Anti-Monumental Music: Remembering Hanau IS Fighting*. There is, obviously, the tension of institutional critique being supported by institutions here, a tension that Trammell answers bracingly head-on.

Describing his experience at the Borealis Festival, which housed his 'Insurgent Learning Workshops' between 2020 and 2022, he says, 'I found out that the musicians were racist, they were not interested in politics but using Black music and Black culture to feed their families or sell their records, and were not engaged in loving Black people or Black struggles' (quoted in the festival book, p. 77). But Trammell knows verbal confrontation (which, when done right, cannot be easily dismissed or assimilated into institutional discourse) does not translate into effective artistic confrontation (which axiomatically is effective institutional discourse), and so Music Research Strategies was not a de rigueur exercise of sticking it to the man. Relevant here as a counterexample are the accounts I've heard of a post-colonial-ish provocation on the main programme of the 2018 courses ending with raw meat being thrown on the audience and one of the performers addressing them with 'fuck you' – this wasn't that kind of thing.

Nominally concerned with the victims of right-wing violence, in this case those killed in Hanau on 19 February 2020, the work was quite open, almost installation-like. Workshop participants spun bullroarers and walked around showing us videos on their phones where they talk vaguely about their backgrounds, giving the sorts of answers one might expect from a university admission interview ('How did you become interested in music?' etc.); later on, Trammell took to his drum set and gave some narration that was very, very difficult to make out over the sounds of drums (drumming and pronouncing words at the same time is almost impossibly difficult – this is why Phil Collins was largely replaced by Chester Thompson in live performances). There is a bit where I think I heard him say something about not really being sure how to pronounce the names of the victims of the Hanau massacre – of Turkish, Kurdish, Afghan and Eastern European origins, their names contain many of what are often called 'special characters' in English-language typography – which, to my mind at least, is a profoundly touching corollary to 'say their names' activism. What does it say about the extreme nature of alterity involved in this violence that even saying the names of victims requires training? No wonder the media – in this case including filmmaker Uwe Boll, who has produced and directed a film from the Hanau gunman's perspective – focus with barely bated fascination on the far right instead. This was good political music, I

think: covertly challenging, equal parts engaging and confusing.

If I wanted to make a big pronouncement, I would say that this is something of a new direction in new music, away from the satisfaction of straightforward protest music and towards more dynamic understandings of how this sort of music might effectively relate to its own niche community (it's all niches now anyway). Another interesting (I substitute this ambiguously positive euphemism for the ambiguously negative 'problematic', which would work just as well) example was *Until Nothing Left*, by Niels Rønsholdt, given almost too sensitively by accordionist Andreas Borregaard on the first day of the Ferienkurse proper. Making references to the so-called European refugee crisis that are at once both oblique and gratingly obvious, Borregaard encourages the audience to sing along to a little sea shanty that – maybe? – makes these supposedly remote problems closer to the audience, which is correspondingly a priori assumed to be non-refugee. Rønsholdt himself makes much of the supposed ambiguity of the performance, interviewed by Borregaard in one of the handful of 'Darmstadt On Air' featurettes: 'I think the idea of being complicit is important. So even if you just sit and watch the news and think that this has nothing to do with me, you are complicit. And the more privileged that we are, the more complicit we are, the more we at some point benefit from the sufferings of others. And I think that's important to at least acknowledge.'

More productive was 'Sonic Writing and Soundings', a concert of eight seamlessly consecutive bits of music whose inscrutable titles remind me of T. S. Eliot: *Territory*, *chaosBEET*, *Alan (Steppe)*, *Mothertongue*, *Water Cycle*, *Hidup Perempuan*, *Mumakwatanano*, *Vengayış*. As he's done many times before, Cedrik Fermont assembled a group of international musicians in a multinodal aural experience (the programme says 'rhizomatic' – the music backs it up). In addition to Cedrik himself, these included Farzané, Sabrina Eka Felisiana, [M] and AGF on live electronics in various forms, and Lindatumune Mudimba, Annisa Maharani, Mira Tulenova and Zelal Ekinçi playing objects, instruments and voices. I really wish I could come up with something better to say than it 'resists categorisation', but it *really does*: it's endlessly surprising without any easy reference points (the ending bit sounded a little Morricone-ish, I guess). The set-up itself might look a bit like Berlin-style improv, sure, with every performer sat in front of a mini-mixing console, some cables and a

dynamic microphone, alongside non-traditional (read: non-conservatoire) instruments, but the resulting music is at once limber and explosive in a radically unexpected and yet fully coherent way. Here the exigencies of securing travel visas – a huge invisible gatekeeper for every field that publicly prides itself on being 'international', from academic conferences to sport events – were folded into the creation of the concert, as both the form and organisation of the music developed based around which performer could be present for what period of time. '[W]e want to tell you about some of our daily lives' it says in the programme book: this, to me, is very beautiful as well as very effective political music, music that is political simply because it *is here*, and because it is the way it is, it alerts other musics of another, more radically contingent mode of being.

The Tiniest Sounds

Besides his Open Space appearances, Jack Adler-McKean gave a concert of four works written for him, all of which coaxed out miniscule, twisted sounds from his industrial instrument. Next to this, there was Marco Fusi, a performer who embodies delicacy, expertise and down-to-earthness in an almost miraculous combination, premiering Evan Johnson's *dust book*. In keeping with the quasi-ironic dual-language movement titles of the work, its duration might be described *abendfüllend*/quite long. As far as description goes, I really can't improve on that *Guardian* review that called Johnson's music 'etiolated'; once I looked the word up, there's no question – it's exactly that. Fusi also has an extremely full recording schedule; it is hoped that *dust book* will soon be available for the repeated listening it demands.

Bigger Sounds

Some of the most effective pieces on the main programme pushed new music in more anthemic, almost stadium-rock directions. Jorge Sánchez-Chiong is far from an unknown name (indeed, in an interview in the Darmstadt festival book, he's described as 'very talented and established' by Mariam Rezaei), but *growing sideways*. *Choreografische Komposition in rückfälligen Verhaltensmustern*, his collaboration with Brigitte Wilfing, seemed like not only a new personal compositional direction but an essay on new possibilities for festival-style new music. Certainly, it's an exciting constellation, with the group and other stage giving a performance (indeed, all

members are credited with 'Performance', as in 'Brigitte Wilfing: Choreography, Voice, Performance') that kaleidoscopically evokes in turn glam rock (keytar solos!), classical-ish dance and nature documentaries, with some of the most arresting percussion set-ups I've ever seen. Even more embracingly bombastic was Ricardo Eizirik's *adolescência*, with Håkon Stene and Jennifer Torrence on amplified drum kits doing a snare roll with a death-grip for upwards of 20 minutes while Roberto Maqueda played different chords on an arpeggiator. This is music that makes you feel *good*, in the same way as a massage or a hot shower.

Mivos!

Finally, there was the ensemble-in-residence, the Mivos Quartet. This review is already very long, but Mivos is just so good that I need to write something at the end. They were perfect, and they gave a perfect performance of one of the most perfect pieces of music I have ever had the absolute joy of hearing, Alvin Singleton's String Quartet No. 2 'Secret Desire To Be Black', one of those very special pieces where you know exactly what the music is going to do and you *cannot wait* for it to do it.

Max Erwin
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Sarah Angliss, *Giant*. Aldeburgh Festival, 2023.

The Aldeburgh Festival 2023 opened in commendably adventurous style with the world premiere of Sarah Angliss' first opera, *Giant*. She has been working for many years as a composer and sound designer, known for her blend of acoustic instruments and electronics, of short folk-like songs and distinctive weird sounds. Angliss herself is a multi-instrumentalist who performs on recorders and the theremin, and she also designs and builds her own instruments.

Ross Sutherland's libretto for *Giant* is based on the life of the Irishman Charles Byrne (1761–1783), who was around 2.30 metres tall; until recently, his skeleton was exhibited at the Hunterian Museum, in London, where Angliss viewed it and became curious about his story. Exhibited as a freak in his lifetime, Byrne was adamant that he did not want to be an object of curiosity after his death, and the opera tells the imagined story of the conflict between the museum's founder Dr John Hunter, who wanted to study him, and Byrne. More broadly, reason (science) is opposed to magic and religion.

Hunter, performed by baritone Jonathan Gunthorpe, is portrayed as a successful if vulgar man, though someone who is also in pain. *Giant* opens with a tiny coffin being brought on stage; Hunter sings 'the opportunity of death brings knowledge to this house', as he had studied the body of his six-week-old child. The Giant himself is first hidden behind a curtain, as if on a stage within a stage. Gweneth Ann Rand portrays Rooker, a master of ceremonies/music-hall character whose livelihood depends on exhibiting Byrne to the public. In one of many very British touches in the work, Rooker serves tea to the 'audience' who have come to view the Giant. Of course, we the opera audience are also complicit, as we too have come to gawp at this extraordinarily tall man.

Karim Sulayman (Byrne), standing on a raised platform, is already tall, and his height was further enhanced by huge platform boots. His lyrical tenor voice rendered the Giant as a profoundly human character. Byrne is portrayed as a deeply religious man who is horrified at the idea of being dissected post-death; other characters ascribe mystic qualities to him, wanting to believe that someone so tall can more easily communicate with heaven.

The most dramatic scenes are those between Hunter and the increasingly ailing Byrne: the doctor is a complex character who says he just wants to help Byrne and provide medicine, but he also gets him drunk and provokes anger when he speaks of wanting to study Byrne's body. As the Giant is measured in every direction, an English folk-style recorder melody is looped against itself, building up tension. Drawings of his body join drawings of other creatures on stage, adding to the museum of images and stressing Byrne's position as an object of curiosity.

Vultures circle as the Giant dies: Byrne asks Rooker to promise to bury him at sea in a lead-lined coffin, though Rooker raises the question of cost, and a graverobber (Steven Beard, in a spoken role) addresses the audience directly about the realities of his livelihood: again, we are complicit. A tick-tock sound in the background highlights the inexorable march of time. After Byrne's death, a huge coffin was wheeled on, poignantly mirroring the opening scene with the tiny coffin, but it is made clear that Byrne's body was sold to the graverobber. As the body was treated offstage, we smelled the stink of burning chemicals. This farewell to the Giant is followed by a concluding scene in which the other characters set up Hunter's museum; the versatile singers Héloïse Werner