

Review

Lena Dražić, *Die Politik des Kritischen Komponierens.****Diskursive Verflechtungen um Helmut Lachenmann.***

Vienna: mdw Press, 2024, 316 pp., Print ISBN: 978-3-8376-6701-1, PDF ISBN: 978-3-8394-6701-5, EPUB ISBN: 78-3-7328-6701-1, DOI: 10.14361/9783839467015

Daniel Ender

Alban Berg Stiftung

ender@albanbergstiftung.at<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4019-6557>

Discourses, especially those surrounding culturally significant phenomena, are governed by implicit conventions that shape interpretation, generate meaning, and stabilize constructions of validity.¹ The greater the cultural significance attributed to such phenomena, the more influential these discourses become within the communities in which meaning, aesthetic value, and historical legitimacy are negotiated.² These dynamics are particularly evident in music and its long-debated capacity for meaning.³ A persistent tension exists between musical practice and the interpretive frameworks accompanying it. Throughout modernity, these frameworks have undergone continuous reorientation, especially during the two major waves of avant-garde innovation in the early and mid-twentieth century.

The New Music of the postwar period, particularly in German-speaking Europe, cultivated forms of discursive self-definition to an extraordinary degree. The early phase of serialism was followed by processes of differentiation and reorientation in which debates over aesthetic legitimacy, historical continuity, and compositional innovation increasingly became constitutive of the musical field itself. Few composers have shaped these debates as profoundly as Helmut Lachenmann. His oeuvre and extensive writings have become central points of reference within the discourse, while the language used to describe his work has itself become part of the construction of his artistic significance.⁴ The publication under review offers a revealing example of this constellation,

as the following passage from a text by the Salzburg political scientist Romana Stücklschweiger, written for the “Helmut Lachenmann Tage” at Mozarteum 2021, illustrates:

“Helmut Lachenmann can confidently be regarded as one of the most important composers of our time [...]. His rebellion against the ‘aesthetic apparatus,’ against the mere euphony of music at a time when the familiar defined the very notion of beauty, was more than revolutionary. [...] Lachenmann liberates perception and restructures it anew in a reflective manner. [...] Helmut Lachenmann exemplifies the modern concept of progress, a profoundly experimental approach to the disruption of comforts and the familiar. [...] The radical thoroughness of his works, the highly precise compositions, and the exact tracing of how sounds come into being are characteristic of the sonic repertoire from which the Lachenmannian world is constructed, a universe dedicated to further thought and progress, and which—always imbued with a sociopolitical dimension—offers an optimistic outlook on a better world, even if it initially unsettles some performers or listeners considerably.”⁵

Lines like these aptly summarize the prevailing image of Helmut Lachenmann in the continental European, and especially German-speaking, academic and cultural institutional spheres. If one were to ask a generative AI model today, nonexistent just five years ago, to characterize the composer, the response might be quite similar: noise as an alternative to “normal” sound, the pervasive rejection of the familiar (from the concept of beauty to the “aesthetic apparatus”), an opposition to established norms in every sense, and, not least, an emphasis on the social component. These conceptual fields encompass elements of discourse that the composer himself has shaped and dominated with remarkable rhetorical power.

In her Master’s thesis, “Die Historische Aufführungspraxis im Kontext der modernen Ästhetik” (Historical Performance Practice and the Aesthetics of Modernism),⁶ Lena Dražić critically examines central positions in music aesthetics and, through a comparative analysis of the writings of Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Theodor W. Adorno, identifies similarities between their perspectives.

Her dissertation, *Die Politik des Kritischen Komponierens. Diskursive Verflechtungen um Helmut Lachenmann* (The Politics of Critical Composition: Discursive Entanglements Around Helmut Lachenmann), focuses on one

of the key figures in contemporary music since the 1960s, a composer who remains a defining voice in the field. In his foundational work, *Angebot durch Verweigerung. Die Ästhetik instrumentalkonkreten Klangkomponierens in Helmut Lachenmanns Orchesterwerken* (Offer Through Refusal: The Aesthetics of Instrumental-Concrete Sound Composition in Helmut Lachenmann's Orchestral Works),⁷ which has significantly influenced scientific discourse on the topic. Rainer Nonnenmann analytically elucidates the compositional realization of Lachenmann's aesthetic premises, while simultaneously adopting the composer's terminology and dialectical approach, as reflected in the title of his dissertation. Despite the nuanced distinctions in his analysis, a congruence between Nonnenmann's position and that of his subject cannot be overlooked. For instance, Nonnenmann writes: "[Lachenmann's] aesthetics of refusing the familiar and disrupting automated perceptual mechanisms aimed for an interactive concept of communication rooted in self-reflective perception, whereby the listener, reduced to a passive consumer in the music industry, was meant to experience, through the properties and instrumentation of sound, the personal as well as social, tonal, habitual, and normative preconditions of their own perceptual habits, aesthetic expectations, and longings."⁸

It is evident that even in Nonnenmann's excellent work, a phenomenon inherent to all art-historical research emerges: the conceptual vocabulary, often coined by the composers themselves or at least implicitly shaped by their influence, is so intricately connected to their artistic production that any discourse about them necessarily employs this terminology, regardless of how critically it seeks to distance itself from it. In her examination of Harnoncourt, Adorno, and now Lachenmann, Dražić examines discursive systems that explicitly position themselves as "critical." Harnoncourt's approach to music-making began by questioning established interpretative practices, leading him to a meticulous examination of sources and, ultimately, to a decisive reevaluation of the very concept of music and its institutional traditions. For Adorno, his philosophical project involved interrogating the linguistic-logical conditions of social frameworks and defining (especially contemporary) art as a refuge of unmediated truth and fulfilled experience. Lachenmann, acutely aware of the contradictions between aesthetic and political demands, aligned himself with Luigi Nono at the end of his studies, advocating for radical innovations both compositionally and discursively. In his early and middle periods as a composer, he declared the "normal"

musical tone an exception, drawing a certain parallel to how Schoenberg, at times, treated consonance according to prevailing conventions. At the same time, he developed a conceptual framework striving for coherence, one that integrated the structural aspects of artworks (a framework he ultimately never abandoned!) with the broader scope of musical practice. Ultimately, this framework formed part of a larger project of transforming human consciousness through acts of listening. This was to be achieved through “music in which our perception becomes sensitive and attentive, fundamentally, to itself, to its own structural nature, and which, moreover, attempts to make the perceiving mind sensitive to those structures of reality to which such composition responds.”⁹

Dražić deliberately considers this topic both as a political act—that is, one tied to a specific power and concrete goals—and within a broader discursive field. She defines critical composition as “the aim of initiating an equally critical listening process in recipients through critical engagement with compositional norms.”¹⁰ Her focus is decidedly on discourse in its “interconnections,” not on music or aesthetics as such. Although the main body of the work is divided into three parts—“Innenansicht” (Internal View), “Ideologie” (Ideology), and “Außenansicht” (External View)—the author remains fully aware that this separation cannot be strictly maintained. Consequently, her text introduces a productive flexibility into its own rigid structure and strives to expose discursive premises as thoroughly as possible so as to liberate itself from them. Even the immanent assertion that music is inherently social is not taken at face value. From this perspective, the central tenet, that art must adopt a negative stance towards society and should never be affirmative, emerges as an ideological component of some high-profile academic texts.

Dražić aptly observes that even in authoritative and groundbreaking publications on Lachenmann, constants of reception have been reinforced, such as Nonnenmann’s reference in another text to a “breaking of conventional mechanisms of perception.”¹¹ In contrast, she seeks the greatest possible analytical distance for her argument: “Unlike Nonnenmann, the intention here is not to develop normative criteria by which existing critical composition could be measured or future phenomena of this kind could be oriented. Rather, the aim is to examine those discursive statements that ascribe such a critical intervention in society to certain musical phenomena.”¹² In doing so, she builds on Reinhold Brinkmann’s observations: “Fundamental aesthetic declarations and the presentation of compositional principles,

often combined with extra-aesthetic reasoning, social criticism, or religious commentary, primarily serve authors as a means to shape their reception and, by extension, their artistic and historical legitimation.”¹³ Methodologically, she adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), rooted in Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse, particularly in the form of historical discourse analysis as developed, among others, by Achim Landwehr.¹⁴ Dražić traces how the texts surrounding Lachenmann’s work and discourse have clearly evolved in recent years from critical engagement to a phase of consolidation. In both the composer’s own primary texts and the journalistic and scholarly discourse, she identifies the persistence of certain formulas and clichés, such as the idea of “refusal,” which she systematically deconstructs, revealing their interconnections.

Overall, Dražić analyzes the internal logic of Lachenmann’s writings, with their references to thinkers like György Lukács and Adorno, situating the idea of “critical composition” within the context of bourgeois ideals and values. She highlights an ambivalent relationship, neither concealing the Eurocentrism embedded in the texts, nor the marginalization of the feminine in music, nor the occasionally overt sexual metaphors. Although the application of Critical Discourse Analysis may result in a certain degree of redundancy, Dražić develops a compelling and consistently insightful analytical perspective. Her book thus makes a valuable contribution to questioning musicological discourse on contemporary music, with its inevitable jargon and its often, despite the best intentions, excessively close alignment with its subjects.

Beyond its monographic focus, the study also demonstrates broader potential of discourse-analytical approaches. Applied comparatively to larger corpora of musicological and aesthetic writings, such methods could illuminate the implicit norms, ideological commitments, rhetorical strategies, and regimes of value through which composers, works, and aesthetic positions are canonized, legitimized, or marginalized. At the same time, they offer a means of examining the extent to which musicological writing reproduces, rather than critically interrogates, the aesthetic and ideological premises of its objects of study. In this respect, Dražić’s book points beyond Lachenmann, suggesting a productive methodological perspective not only for investigating the discursive construction of contemporary music, but also for critically reassessing the discursive practices of musicology itself.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
2. See, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Revised," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 29–73.
3. See, e.g., Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2002).
4. See Reinhold Brinkmann, "Der Autor als sein Exeget. Fragen an Werk und Ästhetik Helmut Lachenmanns," in *Nachgedachte Musik. Studien zum Werk von Helmut Lachenmann*, ed. Jörn Peter Hiekel et al. (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 2005), 116–127; and Jörn Peter Hiekel, "Lachenmann verstehen," in *Der Atem des Wanderers. Der Komponist Helmut Lachenmann*, ed. Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich (Mainz: Schott Music, 2006), 11–25.
5. "Helmut Lachenmann kann ruhigen Gewissens als einer der bedeutendsten Komponist*innen der Gegenwart [...]. Sein Aufbegehren gegen den „ästhetischen Apparat“, gegen den reinen Wohlklang der Musik zu einer Zeit, in der das Gewohnte den Schönheitsbegriff definierte, war mehr als revolutionär. [...] Lachenmann befreit in einer mehrdimensionalen, perspektivischen Auseinandersetzung die Wahrnehmung und strukturiert sie neu und durchdacht. [...] Helmut Lachenmann steht exemplarisch für den modernen Fortschrittsbegriff, ein zutiefst experimentelles Herangehen an das Aufbrechen von Bequemlichkeiten und Gewohntem [...]. Die radikale Durchdachtheit seiner Werke, die höchst präzisen Kompositionen und das exakte Nachzeichnen, wie Klänge entstehen, sind charakteristisch für das Klangrepertoire, aus dem die Lachenmann'sche Welt erbaut ist. Ein Universum, das dem Weiterdenken und Weitergehen verschrieben ist und das – immer auch versehen mit einer gesellschaftspolitischen Note – einen optimistischen Ausblick auf eine bessere Welt gibt. Auch wenn es so manche Interpretinnen und Interpreten oder Zuhörerinnen und Zuhörer erst gehörig erschüttert." Romana Stücklschweiger, "Das Helmut-Lachenmann-Moment," *Salzburger Uni Nachrichten* 4 (December 2021), 3; also available online at: <https://www.moz.ac.at/de/news/archiv/2021/12/sn-das-helmut-lachenmann-moment>.
6. Lena Dražić, "Die Historische Aufführungspraxis im Kontext der modernen Ästhetik" (Master's Thesis, Vienna University, 2010).
7. Rainer Nonnenmann, *Angebot durch Verweigerung. Die Ästhetik instrumentalkonkreten Klangkomponierens in Helmut Lachenmanns Orchesterwerken* (Mainz: Schott Music, 2000).
8. "Seine Ästhetik der Verweigerung des Gewohnten und der Störung automatisierter Wahrnehmungsmechanismen zielte auf den interaktiven Kommunikationsbegriff einer sich selbst wahrnehmenden Wahrnehmung, wobei der im Musikbetrieb zum passiven Konsumenten herabgewürdigte Hörer anhand der | Eigenschaften und Besetzungen des Klingenden auch die persönlichen wie gesellschaftlichen, tonalen, habituellen und normativen Präformationen seines eigenen Wahrnehmungsverhaltens, seiner ästhetischen Erwartungen und Sehnsüchte erfahren sollte." Nonnenmann, *Angebot durch Verweigerung*, 295–6.
9. "Musik, bei welcher unsere Wahrnehmung sensibel und aufmerksam wird im Grunde auf sich selbst, auf die eigene Strukturhaftigkeit, und die darüber hinaus versucht, den wahrnehmenden Geist sensibel zu machen für jene Strukturen der Wirklichkeit, auf die ein solches Komponieren reagiert." Helmut Lachenmann, "Hören ist wehrlos – ohne Hören. Über

Möglichkeiten und Schwierigkeiten," in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung. Schriften 1966 – 1995*, ed. Josef Häusler (Wiesbaden: Insel-Verlag, 1996), 116–135, here 135.

10. "den Anspruch, durch die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit kompositorischen Normen bei den Rezipient*innen ein ebenso kritisches Hören in Gang zu setzen." Dražić, *Die Politik des Kritischen Komponierens*, 9.
11. "Brechung gängiger Wahrnehmungsmechanismen." Rainer Nonnenmann, "Die Sackgasse als Ausweg. Kritisches Komponieren: ein historisches Phänomen?," *Musik & Ästhetik* 9/36 (October 2005), 37–60, here 37.
12. "Im Unterschied zu Nonnenmann wird hier nicht beabsichtigt, normative Kriterien zu entwickeln, an denen ein bereits bestehendes Kritisches Komponieren zu messen oder zukünftige Phänomene dieser Art auszurichten wären. Vielmehr sollen jene Sprechhandlungen untersucht werden, die bestimmten musikalischen Phänomenen eine solche kritische Intervention in der Gesellschaft zuschreiben." Dražić, *Die Politik des Kritischen Komponierens*, 14.
13. "Ästhetische Grundsatzserklärungen und die Darstellung kompositorischer Prinzipien, oft beides verbunden mit außerästhetischem Rasonnement, gesellschaftskritisch, religiös, dienen den Autoren dabei vorzüglich zur Lenkung ihrer Rezeption und damit ihrer künstlerischen und geschichtlichen Legitimation." Reinhold Brinkmann, "Der Autor als sein Exeget," in *Nachgedachte Musik. Studien zum Werk von Helmut Lachenmann*, ed. Jörn Peter Hiekel et al. (Saarbrücken: PFAU, 2005), 116–127, here 118.
14. Achim Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008).