

Our lack of context for interpreting recent German music made Aktive Musik's concerts October 2, 5, 6, 10, 11, and 19 (I attended the first four) both a treat and a challenge. Part of Goethe House's ongoing Ruhr Works festival (co-sponsored by Composers Forum) at Weill Recital Hall, Greenwich House, Grace Church, and elsewhere, the series debuted more than a dozen composers from the Ruhr Valley, an industrial area the size of Delaware. Most of the works were solos and duets, whetting our desire for more ambitious examples, but the performers—cellist Frances Marie Uitti and pianist Susanne Achilles among them—included spectacular virtuosos.

Aktive Musik, as its name implies, focuses on politics. The pieces they played didn't all fit that theme, but they did all use the dialectical language of contrast and confrontation that distinguishes European political music from the cooler American variety. The assumptions of that language have been in place since Stockhausen, and the New Tonality has affected them about the way a canoe affects the continental drift. Only Wolfgang Hufschmidt's Brecht and Heine lieder were tonal, in the obligatory Hanns Eisler style. Like America, Germany has its cadre of what I call the conservative avant-garde, people who think noise and discontinuity—new in the '60s—automatically mean revolution. So we heard some grad-school music: quad tapes whooshing from speaker to speaker, huge percussion assemblages hit all at once. One work, *Konzentrationsdiminuendo* for piano, by Kunsu Shim, was old-fashioned if elegant, its Boulezian serialism held together with delicate melodic threads and distanced by finger taps on the body of the instrument.

More often, though, noise and discontinuity formed the end point of a spectrum, used to create contrast. The most distinctive spin on the language came from Nicholas Huber (no relation to Swiss se-

Aktive Musik

Roars From Ruhr

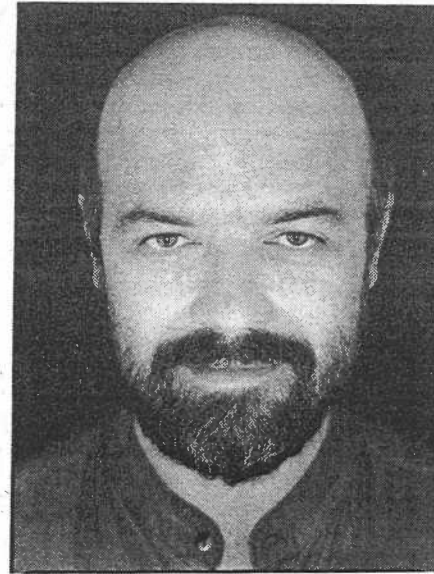
BY KYLE GANN

riologist Klaus Huber), whose *On Wings of the Harp* for accordion opposed violence with tenderness. Pumped out with phenomenal oomph by Teodoro Anzellotti, the banal gestures—repeated notes, breathing sounds, massive chords—seemed patternless at first, but they came back and back again until they made

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sense. In *Dream Mechanism* for percussion (Thomas Witzmann) and piano (Daniel Ott), a fragile chromatic motive, plucked on the piano strings, emerged from chaos to ask a question. Judging from these and the scores I've seen, Huber appears to have transformed Stockhausen's abstract moment-form into something intuitive, capable of more specific expression. If so, that's the first big advance in German music in 20 years.

Falling, Falling... and Lying and Falling by Huber's student Gerhard Stabler (Aktive's director) used nonpolitical poems by Paul Celan, but politics was implicit in the music. A tape of marching and chanting crowds bombarded the performers: singer Beatrice Mathez-Wüthrich, accordionist Anzellotti, and tubaist Klaus Burger (who often blew two notes at once). In further movements, a "cage" (this was explained to me) of tones was imposed from which the players gradually freed themselves, and the piece ended with a desolate soprano solo, like the last gasp of an escaped prisoner. Implicit here was the Cage/Adorno idea that musical structure makes an analogy, intended or not, to social structure. The danger is



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Stabler's music had implicit politics.

that the analogy can backfire even when the music succeeds: the disintegration of Stabler's tense sonorities was more poignant than liberating.

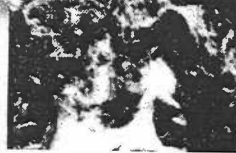
Of the musical devices that evoke political significance, perhaps interruption is the most overt. In Ott's *Molto Semplicemente*, Anzellotti stopped, began explaining something in Italian, then drowned out his own words with deafening wheezes. Interruption recurred in *Liberation Cantata I*, which Stabler played on organ, by Frank Abbinanti, an associate of the late Cornelius Cardew and Chicago's token political composer. This cut a hymn-like background with strange chromatic segments, and at the end, a frail melody

suspended precariously over a pedaled bass many octaves away (a reference to Beethoven's Opus 111?) pointed a finger to the tenuousness of freedom, or something. The sharpest manifesto was Stabler's own *Heiss* (Hot), which brought home how easily the boundary between life and art is manipulated. He used the organ only for noises, pulling stops and knocking pedals. At first the noises seemed to echo from the cathedral's rear, but it turned out they were taped, coming from two women who walked in carrying concealed boomboxes.

Such works seemed obsessed with emphasizing the thing-ness of the musical instrument, to defuse the German idealist tradition by denying the instrument's spiritual (i.e., privileged) status. Hufschmidt's *Lieder ohne Worte*, however, fled to the opposite corner. These 24 miniatures for *taped* piano played in original ways with contrasts of distance and nearness of the sound, and occasionally inserted tones recorded backward, and so could have been presented no other way. Hammering repetitions, muffled notes, and sympathetic vibrations (à la Stockhausen's *Klavierstück VII*) assembled themselves into engaging, primitive dances, and one movement incongruously tapped out the rhythm of "The Blue Danube" in damped wrong pitches. Political warning or just a joke?

Such ambiguity abounded. In his *Dr. Hasso Wolf*, a hilariously miniature *Le Sacre*, Witzmann grunted loudly as he banged drums, while Burger's tuba puffed an atonal march. "Any similarities with real persons or dogs," read the program, "are purely coincidental but intended." However one construed that, the festival was an enlightening change from the dry Rihm/Ferneyhough mainstream that usually flows from Germany. We need these reminders that the new music universe is not exhausted by minimalism, serialism, neoromanticism, and improvisation, as it too often seems to be here. ■

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