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Sonja Huber: Das zeitgenössische Klavierkonzert

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Das zeitgenössische Klavierkonzert. Analysen zu M. Feldman, M. Jarrell, G. Kühr, H. Lachenmann, G. Ligeti und W. Lutosławski
by Sonja Huber
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[1] While compositional technique and aesthetics underwent radical changes in twentieth-century music, the principal sound-producing media have remained largely unmodified since the "optimization" of instrument making and the consolidation of the symphony orchestra in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whereas some composers have struggled with this "presence of the past" in sonic terms and turned to electronic sound production or the invention and manufacturing of new instruments, those composers who faced this situation head-on by continuing to write for what Helmut Lachenmann called the "aesthetic apparatus" [ästhetischer Apparat] proved, broadly speaking, to be more influential and recognized both by audiences and music historians. It is quite obvious, however, that this continuity in the field of musical instruments did not imply composers' simple acceptance of the system of musical genres, which historically was closely connected to the evolution of instrumental (and vocal) media and techniques. Quite on the contrary, there are clear traces of an erosion of genre as a dominating discourse as early as 1850. Carl Dahlhaus even went so far as to argue that the declining importance of musical genre was the decisive factor that marked off the second half of the nineteenth century as an independent musical period differing from the Classical and early Romantic periods.[1] And while it is clear that composers kept producing operas, symphonies, concertos, and string quartets without interruption from early musical modernity until the immediate present, music historiography has either evaded the more conventional of these works almost entirely or in other cases (as, for example, in reference to John Cage's *Concert* for piano and orchestra or Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*) attributed their historical significance not to a replication or restoration of genre but rather to these works' genre-related "metaization," their self-reflection of genre history and genre-oriented audience-reception. To be sure, such a "modernist" concept of music historiography based on the idea of a permanent innovation, re-invention, and re-consideration of form and genre has been severely criticized by "new" musicologies. Also, it arguably is impossible to ultimately and fully distinguish between works that turn to established genres as a kind of "lion's den" (Lachenmann), critically reflecting their continuing impact on the contemporary understanding of music, on the one hand, and a neo-traditionalist restabilization of genre-based composition on the other.[2] Still, one has to acknowledge that these two tendencies should not be conflated entirely and that they mark different modes of reaction to historically sedimented forms of musical communication both in more remote and more recent historical contexts.

By focusing on works for solo piano and orchestra since the 1970s, Sonja Huber's book documents an ongoing interest of composers from different schools and diverse national traditions in the genre of the "piano concerto"—a genre particularly charged with stereotypes and (European) "cultural" implications such as the emancipation of the individual from collective forces or a specific kind of "transcendental" virtuosity. Comparing works completed between 1975 and 2001 by six eminent composers (Morton Feldman, Helmut Lachenmann, György Ligeti,

Witold Lutosławski, Gerd Kühr, Michael Jarrell), Huber sets out in her dissertation to provide a diverse, yet necessarily incomplete historical snapshot of this genre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The author aims to discuss the composers' differing concepts and strategies towards the discriminability of solo and orchestral parts—a criterion she proposes at the outset as the main factor characterizing the genre (8), since all other indicators, such as three-movement form or a virtuosic solo part, have been abandoned by many and thus have become insufficient for defining the genre as a whole. Huber hopes that her analytical findings will help to specify the composers' perspectives towards the concerto genre and its presence in contemporary concert life (10).

Prior to the six analytical chapters, the author presents a very short and fragmentary overview of works for solo piano and orchestra or chamber ensemble since the 1940s (10–16) that is irritating for at least two reasons. First, its geographical bias is obvious: works by five Austrian composers are found alongside an almost complete omission of, among others, British or Russian composers, who stand out in their continuing effort to write piano concertos throughout the twentieth century; a concerto by Philip Glass, in turn, referencing Tyrolean folk songs as part of a commission from the Tyrolean tourist office is—seriously—listed as an example of the broad "spectrum" the genre has covered in the past decades (16). Second, this overview betrays a methodological problem that repeatedly resurfaces during the book: the different works are introduced consecutively (in a somewhat uninvolved style) in a puzzling order and selection and, more problematically, without any significant overarching hermeneutic or analytical focus. It becomes clear that the main recurring criterion, the relationship between soloist and orchestra, is ill-defined, as are terms such as "dialogue" (12), "confrontational dispute" (12), or "virtuosity" (8f.), which are discussed merely superficially or simply taken for granted. While this overview is thus limited to the demonstration of a hardly surprising stylistic diversity, more extreme aesthetic positions are evaded: Cage's 1957/58 *Concert*, a highly influential genre-subversion, is not mentioned once, nor are straightforwardly genre-conservative piano concertos such as those by Dmitri Shostakovich (Second Piano Concerto, 1957) or Peter Maxwell Davies (1997), nor are the genre-transformations taking place in pieces like Olivier Messiaen's *Turangalîla* Symphony (1946–48) or Luigi Nono's *Como una ola de fuerza y luz* (1971–72). By thus implying that the simple fact of instrumentation suffices for inclusion in the genre "concerto," Huber ignores the self-reflexive aspects of several included composers who in one way or another intended to mark their critique of the concerto genre—if only by discarding the word "concerto" in the title, in most cases, however, by deconstructing, evading, or ironizing features such as virtuosity, dialogue, or "competition" that characterize pieces of the canonized repertoire. That all this is of course indicative of a self-reflexive "dealing with tradition" (17) and that all these works necessarily in one way or another have to come to terms with the relationship between soloist and orchestra is self-evident, and thus throughout the book these categories prove to be far too general to generate valuable historiographical or analytical insight. This impression is enhanced by the short conclusion at the end of the book (259–261), where the author summarizes the different ways in which soloist and orchestra relate to one another in the six selected pieces, without providing a sense of what the preceding detailed analyses have actually contributed to these findings and how each of the discussed works relates to broader developments within genre-affirmative or genre-critical compositional history.

[2] The six analytical chapters have their merits in introducing works which have received little musicological attention so far to an expert readership—with the important exception of Lachenmann's and Ligeti's pieces. The analytical procedures, however, can hardly be called

innovative. They almost exclusively rely on score-based analysis, supported by an at times highly selective use of research literature and without any consideration of sketch material. The decision to omit sketch studies (17) is likely to be accepted by most readers as a pragmatic solution for a survey of this kind, yet in many cases a more prominent inclusion of existing research into composers' working processes, such as Zink's account on Lachenmann's *Ausklang*[3] or Steinitz's study into the genesis of Ligeti's concerto,[4] would have surely helped to contextualize and focus the analytical methods. The structuralist approach to the selected works further suffers from incomplete references to important research in the field. The almost complete omission of Anglophone literature is particularly detrimental in the cases of Feldman and Ligeti, where a large corpus of musicological studies exist that has evolved tremendously over the past decade[5] (the most recent Feldman study considered dates from 2001!), though some omissions of basic literature, such as Willmann's book-length analytical monograph on Ligeti's piano concerto, are probably even more disappointing.[6]

Huber's intention to consider the individual premises and aesthetic attitudes of the individual composers prominently (17) tends to turn the book into a sequence of six rather isolated studies of divergent works that in many respects seem to share nothing except for their instrumentation and their thus necessary and inevitable "dealing" with tradition. Through most parts of the book, it remains unclear what else the author might have in mind when referring to "comparable criteria" supposedly connecting the analyses of the selected works (17). The tendency towards a text-centered perspective also limits the author's contextualization of the selected works within a composer's œuvre. In the case of Feldman, for example, the explanation of the compositional preconditions of *Piano and Orchestra* (1975) is limited to the information that the instrumentation of Feldman's pieces grew in size from the late 1960s, due to the composer's rising fame and an increasing number of commissions to write for orchestra (23). In contrast, a stylistic contextualization of the 22-minute work—composed two years before the completion of the opera *Neither* (1976–77), often considered as a watershed announcing the more radical pattern-oriented style of the later works—is conspicuously missing, as is the elaborated listener-oriented perspective that in the introduction was announced as a main objective of the analytical method (17). A perception-centered perspective rooted in the findings of music psychology indeed is a requirement if one sets out to grasp the complex effects emerging from the irregular organization of events, patterns, and silences in Feldman's music and the composer's intention to systematically "disorient" listeners' memory functions. Thus, Huber is of course right when she summarizes her analysis by concluding that this music does not follow a coherent logic and does not present predictable developments (45) or that it allows for multiple "individual" auditory interpretations (36). The problem, however, is that her descriptive analysis does not really provoke such conclusions as it is concentrated on demonstrating structural coherence by accumulating largely uninterpreted facts about tempo and rhythm (25–26), instrumentation and ensemble interaction (27–29), musical material (29–32), form (32–36), dynamics (37–40), and harmony (40–45), without sustained attempts at interrelating these stratified perspectives.

Largely the same procedure is applied throughout the subsequent chapters. In the case of Lachenmann's *Ausklang* (which, like Feldman's piece, emphasizes instrumentation rather than genre by its subtitle "Musik für Klavier und Orchester"), the taxonomic listing of materials and formal sections is somewhat less prevalent than in the other chapters, surely due to the fact that Lachenmann's music does not lend itself well to these conventional structural categories. Huber's interpretation of the listening experience is noteworthy in ignoring most of the structural findings she assembled before and declaring "sounds between sounds" to be the essential quality of the

work, requiring a presentist listening focusing on “states” rather than on developments (77–78). The analytical terminology, however, referring to “points,” “lines,” and “planes,” is hardly more adequate than the composer’s famous categorization of “sound types,” discarded by Huber due to its supposed lack of comprehensibility (84). While such a tentative criticism of Lachenmann’s own categories gives the reader hope for a more critical engagement with the composer’s system of thought, which in the past has too often served as an unquestioned base of analysis, the remaining part of this chapter as well as the other chapters in general betray a high dependency on composers’ self-interpretations: the “intentional fallacy” might not have gained much ground in musicology generally and in new music discourse in particular, but Huber’s work- and text-dependent methodology is surely not the right way to change this situation. In the case of highly eloquent composers such as Lachenmann or Ligeti, this might be hard to evade, and the author is actively aware of this shortcoming. However, she does shy away from the methodological consequences, in turn accepting that—in the case of Ligeti—the composer’s self-interpretations are continuously replicated even when not quoting the composer himself, since Ligeti-exegesis depends so thoroughly on the composer’s own writings and remarks (93).

The chapter on Ligeti’s *Piano Concerto* (1984–86) adds no substantial findings to existing analytical literature on the composer, while extending the taxonomic approach to sometimes absurd dimensions. Multiple tables and synoptic musical examples aim to explicate the complex pattern-based harmony, polyrhythm, and polymeter of Ligeti’s late style. However, despite these efforts, the polymetric structure is insufficiently grasped in its perceptual relevance[7]—again the reason for this is Huber’s restraint towards an interpretation of her analytical inventory and a predominant reliance on valuable but dated monographs such as those by Burde and Dibelius from the early 1990s. The harmonic analysis in the case of Ligeti’s concerto as well as in many other instances in the book would have profited from an at least occasional consideration of set theoretical methods (which are entirely absent from the book); many harmonic sequences and connections (e.g. in the final movement of Ligeti’s concerto, 132–133) could thereby have been explained much more clearly and coherently.

[3] Lutosławski’s concerto (1988) surely is the most conservative of the pieces discussed, blatantly and continuously evoking romantic pianism and only occasionally inserting more dissonant sections of “aleatoric counterpoint,” which the composer had developed in the early 1960s in response to Cage’s iconoclastic *Concert*. The unmotivated comparison to Feldman’s “anti-concerto” *Piano and Orchestra* at the beginning of the chapter (135) is thus surely misleading, as is, among others, the lengthy discussion of unevenly distributed sections in the first movement—since it is obvious that this movement follows the model of a two-part form as it was employed by Lutosławski continuously from the 1960s on, constructed from a listener-response–oriented schema of introduction (expectation) and main section (fulfillment), rising to a climactic moment near the end of the piece. Lutosławski’s listener-oriented aesthetic is referenced in its poorly defined notion of an “ideal listener” (who upon closer scrutiny appears simply as the composer himself, 137), while no references to a musicological discussion of listener-sensitive analytical methodology are provided, which may have helped to elaborate this problem.[8] In her analysis, Huber uses “expectation” and “fulfillment” as seemingly unproblematic categories as if they could be generalized for all listeners and simply “read” from the score (147–149). A more substantial path is suggested by the discussion of intertextual connections of Lutosławski’s concerto to Chopin’s e-minor piano concerto (179–180), although again this fragmentary survey would have profited much from references to the elaborate discourse on musical intertextuality, in which Lutosławski’s works have played a prominent role.[9]

In the case of Gerd Kühr's *"… à la recherche…"* (1995) and Michael Jarrell's *Abschied* (2000/2001), secondary sources are scarce, and Huber's reliance on text-based analysis and the composers' self-interpretations thus even increases in these final chapters. In addition, the reasons for selecting these two works are, again, entirely unclear, for Kühr's genre-skeptical contemplative, sparse, and concentrated structure seems to share virtually nothing with Jarrell's highly virtuosic and craftmanship-based, timbre-oriented, and densely polyphonic composing. Huber's structural approach in general seems more fitting in Jarrell's case than in Kühr's, where a dispensable "chronology" of the piece amounting to a total of twenty pages of technical description (204–224) will probably provoke serious doubts about its futility in the mind of even the most dedicated reader.

In conclusion, what is lacking in Huber's account is a concisely genre-related perspective—a bewildering fact for a book that sets out to review a genre. The reason for this surprising omission is given in a footnote right on the first page, arguing that genre-related research puts its focus mostly on the eighteenth and nineteenth century and implying that a general knowledge of the genre is sufficient for understanding the present account. While it is surely true that new music is an oft-neglected area in broad historical surveys of musical genres and while it is pertinent to observe a dispersion and pluralization of genre-related composition in twentieth-century music, the lack of a broader discussion of genre-related issues curtails quite a few analytical insights and narrows down most of the text to conventional score-based structural analysis without broader historical or stylistic contextualization. Even though some analytical insights emerge in the course of the study that can claim relevance for auditory perception or historical contextualization, neither a listener-focused methodology nor a sophisticated comparative analysis between the selected works or their historical surroundings can be identified. Huber's book thus risks confirming the dubious reputation of structural analysis in musicology. While it shows tentative efforts to contextualize the structural approach through discussions of aesthetics and listening, these realms are scarcely integrated with the analytical agenda. Finally, aspects of performativity, performance practice, and the history of interpretation—areas highlighted by many recent trends in musicology and so intimately connected to the concerto genre—are entirely absent. Thus, while Huber's basic project to re-focus genre as an ongoing decisive category of contemporary music discourse is valuable and identifies a desideratum, her method proves inadequate to embrace the broad perspective such a project requires.

References

1. Carl Dahlhaus, "Zur Problematik der musikalischen Gattungen im 19. Jh.," in *Gesammelte Schriften* 6, (Laaber: Laaber, 2005), 381. ↑
2. Cf. Tobias Janz and Christian Utz, "Gattung," in *Lexikon Neue Musik*, ed. Jörn Peter Hiekel and Christian Utz (Stuttgart and Kassel: Metzler and Bärenreiter, 2016), 243–244. ↑
3. Michael Zink, "Strukturen: Analytischer Versuch über Helmut Lachenmanns 'Ausklang'," *Musik-Texte* 96 (2003), 27–41. Huber takes up Zink's study at only one point (73–74), without providing details about the consequences of the compositional process for the structure of *Ausklang* as analyzed in the preceding and subsequent sections of this chapter. ↑
4. Richard Steinitz, "A qui un hommage? Genesis of the Piano Concerto and the Horn Trio," in *György Ligeti. Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*, ed. Louise Duchesneau and Wolfgang Marx (Woodbridge:

Boydell, 2011), 169–212. ↑

5. In the case of Feldman, at least Dora A. Hanninen's numerous studies on a perception-sensitive analysis of Feldman's music would have been worth considering; among others, "A Theory of Recontextualization in Music: Analyzing Phenomenal Transformations of Repetition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 25/1 (2003), 59–97; "Feldman, Analysis, Experience," *Twentieth-Century Music* 1 (2004), 225–251; "Associative Sets, Categories, and Music Analysis," *Journal of Music Theory* 48/2 (2004), 147–218. ↑
6. Roland Willmann, *Gebannte Zeit. Studien zum Klavierkonzert György Ligetis*, Wort und Musik 61 (Anif/Salzburg: Müller-Speiser, 2006). ↑
7. Cf. the detailed analysis of polymetric layers in the third movement of the concerto in Christian Utz, "Bewegungen in der 'Raum-Zeit' des Ligeti-Kosmos. Modelle von Polymetrik und Konfliktmetrik in historischen und kulturellen Perspektiven," in *Kunst und Wissen in der Moderne. Festschrift Otto Kolleritsch zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Andreas Dorschel (Wien: Böhlau, 2009), 187–233; also in: *Komponieren im Kontext der Globalisierung. Perspektiven für eine Musikgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 283–316. A substantial attempt at connecting analytical methods with basic categories of perception derived from music psychology is provided in Emilios Cambouropoulos/Costas Tsougras, "Auditory Streams in Ligeti's *Continuum*: A Theoretical and Perceptual Approach," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Music Studies* 3/1 (2009), 119–137. ↑
8. Cf. Markus Neuwirth, "Das Konzept der Expektanz in der musikalischen Analyse. Möglichkeiten und Probleme einer kognitiv orientierten Musikanalyse," in: *Musiktheorie im Kontext. 5. Kongress der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie Hamburg 2005*, ed. Jan Philipp Sprick, Reinhard Bahr, and Michael von Troschke (Berlin: Weidler, 2008), 557–573; Christian Utz, "Das zweifelnde Gehör. Erwartungssituationen als Module im Rahmen einer performativen Analyse tonaler und post-tonaler Musik," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie* 10/2 (2013), 225–257, accessed April 20, 2016, http://www.gmth.de/zeitschrift/artikel/720.aspx. ↑
9. Cf., for example, Michael L. Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), in which Lutosławski's Fourth Symphony is used as one main example. ↑