

INTRODUCTION

Wolfgang Rihm: aspects of Unity and Diversity in his compositional processes

Richard McGregor

The fecundity of Wolfgang Rihm's compositional invention allied to the broad sweep and depth of the intellectual engagement that underpins his work means that any attempt to encapsulate the totality of his 'style and idea' is bound to fail. The many facets which interact at all levels in both individual works, and through works that are united within some conceptual framework, are such that analytical exploration will be, at best, partial. Since Rihm's reputation in Germany is now undeniable it is perhaps surprising then that there has been comparatively little English-language analysis of his compositional aesthetic and processes.

Whereas in the 1970s it might have been convenient, and easier, to compartmentalise Rihm within the New Simplicity movement, his subsequent development has defied categorisation, despite attempts to label his compositional processes based on a perception that they are automatic and unplanned, the result of a 'stream of consciousness'. Following on from this perception such analysis as has taken place has, as I have observed elsewhere, largely avoided structural or parameter investigation focussing rather more on the affective, often drawing on the composer's own words as a starting point.

The four authors represented in this special edition have variously attempted to get 'under the skin' of the music itself, while recognising and exploring the broader influences, or as Yves Knockaert puts it, allusions, the compositional imperatives, and the praxis that Rihm brings to each project.

This collection begins appropriately enough with what might be termed a 'hidden' aspect of Rihm's work - his relationship with the music of Franz Schubert. Appropriate, because Schubert was one of the first composers to be referenced in a work, indeed within the title itself, when Rihm wrote *Erscheinung: Skizze über Schubert* in 1978 (and by implication in *Ländler* the following year). Rihm's interactions with the music and ideas of earlier composers, particularly those of the Romantic period have continued to baffle some commentators who might want to dismiss such an idea as somehow vaguely postmodern. Yet as Alastair Williams' article shows, in passing, such allusions to composers of the past – not just Schubert, but Strauss, Mahler, Brahms and Schoenberg – do not just find their way into his more recent music drama *Dionysos* but are an essential part of the overarching conceptual framework of the music.

Knockaert's view is that, in the case of Schubert, there is more to be understood about the way in which the essence of the earlier composer's musical persona, though veiled within later works, still exercises an influence in ways that can be objectified and understood. That this objectification could be more generally understood in relation to other composers had already been suggested by Alastair Williams in his 2006 article 'Swaying with Schumann: Subjectivity and Tradition in Wolfgang Rihm's *Fremde Szenen I-III* and Related Scores'. Williams concluded that article by suggesting that 'the flow of this music suggests that the future and the past can intersect on multiple horizons by placing the familiar and the unfamiliar in a dialogue capable of turning the one into the other'.¹

These 'intersections' are not defined by quotation: literal quotation occurs very

rarely in Rihm's music. It is, rather, that Rihm alludes to different composers or styles because in the context of a particular work the allusion functions as a 'sign', requiring interpretation within the work itself.

Rihm's musical language does not only borrow such 'signs' from other composers or past eras, he equally re-envisages ideas taken from the graphic arts, and painters in particular who have influenced him, particularly from the early 1970s onwards. It is the relationship of ideas to each other that fascinates him as a composer and he has, for a long time, effectively viewed himself as a sculptor in sound.² In an early essay he articulated his conception of sonic relationships as 'a sound, which temporally follows another sound, really transforms its predecessor'.³ His interest in the creative mind spills over, as is discussed in both my article and that by Alastair Williams, into his choice of texts – his clear preference is for authors being those whose minds were troubled, particularly the schizophrenic.

It is therefore very apposite that the continuing presence of the interacting joint influences of Artaud and Nietzsche on Rihm's compositional aesthetic is explored in works separated by nearly 40 years. In my article dealing with the year 1981 and the various works that were written or projected in that year I suggest that a cross-fertilisation of ideas is evident in both the works of that year and in the existing sketch material which, unusually for the composer, is quite significant. Rihm's engagement at that time with Nietzsche's poetry is detailed in an Appendix and the recurrence of the same texts in *Dionysos* (2010) is just one element in the multi-layered network of connections, not just with other composers, but with his own previously written-works. In *Dionysos* it is *Verwandlung* 3 and 4 which are prominent through their (re)use in this non-narrative opera: they function as 'generating poles' though far removed from the original context in which that term was coined.⁴

Such re-envisioning of an idea, whether musical, or from another art form,⁵ is an abiding feature of Rihm's aesthetic which manifests itself in, for example, the creation of a longer work out of previously written components as in *Tutuguri* (1980-2), or the creation of a cycle, such as the *Chiffre* cycle, or the *Vers une Symphonie fleuve* sequence which Rihm describes as 'a kind of Spring. Tributaries flow together in the direction of a (perhaps never realised) "Symphonie fleuve" a flowing symphony; and like a "Roman fleuve" (flowing novel) figures and situations appear, disappear and reappear again...'.⁶

Verwandlung 1 reappears in *Verwandlung* 6, the two works explored by Barbara Zuber. More precisely, both works proceed from shared musical substance. Her sights, however, are not on the links/reiterations themselves so much as to Rihm's approach to the musical shapes [Gestalts] in these works and how the transformation(s) of these Gestalt complexes create both unity and diversity at one and the same time. As in all Rihm's work the organisation of material, far from being random and 'spontaneous', reveals deep intellectual processes at work: his approach to the Gestalt complexes can therefore be viewed as yet another manifestation of the 'generative pole' idea.⁷

It is in the projection of multiple layers of meaning and significance that Rihm's music continues to invite such diverse lines of enquiry as displayed in this volume: perhaps that is the least that can be expected of a composer, who, very early in his career, declared that 'tradition' could only be "my tradition".⁸

¹ Williams, A. (2006). 'Swaying with Schumann: Subjectivity and Tradition in Wolfgang Rihm's *Fremde Szenen I-III* and Related Scores'. *Music & Letters*, vol. 87 no. 3, pp 379-97.

² 'I am, then, a sculptor who takes material in his hand and must bring it to life.' Wolfgang Rihm, 'Improvisation über das Fixieren von Freiheit', *ausgesprochen. Schriften und Gespräche*. U. Mosch (ed.), Winterthur, Amadeus vol. 1, p. 94, quoted by Alastair Williams in his article 'Voices of the Other: Wolfgang Rihm's Music Drama Die Eroberung von Mexico'. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 129 no. 2, 2004, 240-71 at p. 247.

³ 'Ein Klang, der einem anderen Klang zeitlich folgt, formt seinen Vorgänger wirklich um' from 'Mutation (Exkurse)', in, Rihm, *ausgesprochen, op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 159.

⁴ Rihm, see the programme note for *Chiffre* [I] in Rihm, *ausgesprochen, op. cit.*, p. 328.

⁵ As for example in Rihm's exploitation of Arnulf Rainer's *Übermalung* (over-painting) technique within the 'sound space' [Klangraum] of a musical composition.

⁶ Rihm programme note for *Vers une symphonie fleuve* III: <https://www.universaledition.com/composers-and-works/wolfgang-rihm-599/works/vers-une-symphonie-fleuve-iii-5630> (accessed October 2017)

⁷ Since it is not strictly developmental in the traditional meaning of that term I would refer to this as 'repoling'. See Richard McGregor, (2007). 'Interpreting Compositional Process in Wolfgang Rihm's *Chiffre* Cycle'. In: *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, Online-Publication, pp. 29, 31, 33, 40.

⁸ Wolfgang Rihm, 'Musikalische Freiheit' in *ausgesprochen op.cit.* Vol. 1, p. 23

McGregor, R. (2007). Interpreting Compositional Process in Rihm's *Chiffre* Cycle. *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, 10, pp. 26-70.

Rihm, W. (1997a). Musikalische Freiheit. In U. Mosch (Ed.), *ausgesprochen: Schriften und Gespräche* (1, pp. 23-9). Winterthur: Amadeus.

Rihm, W. (1997b). Improvisation über das Fixieren von Freiheit. In U. Mosch (Ed.), *ausgesprochen. Schriften und Gespräche* (1, pp 90-8). Winterthur: Amadeus.

Rihm, W. (1997c). Mutation (Exkurse). In U. Mosch (Ed.), Rihm, *ausgesprochen*, (1 p. 159-67). Winterthur: Amadeus.

Rihm, W. (1997d). *Chiffre I* für Klavier und sieben Instrumente(1982-1983). In U. Mosch (Ed.), *ausgesprochen. Schriften und Gespräche* (2, p. 328). Winterthur: Amadeus.

Williams, A. (2004). Voices of the Other: Wolfgang Rihm's Music Drama *Die Eroberung von Mexico*'. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 129/2, pp. 240-71.

Williams, A. (2006). 'Swaying with Schumann: Subjectivity and Tradition in Wolfgang Rihm's *Fremde Szenen I-III* and Related Scores'. *Music & Letters*, vol. 87 no. 3, pp. 379-97.

Website:

Rihm W., programme note for *Vers une symphonie fleuve* III: <https://www.universaledition.com/composers-and-works/wolfgang-rihm-599/works/vers-une-symphonie-fleuve-iii-5630> (accessed October 2017)