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Lachenmann's *Serynade* – issues for performer and listener

A performer or listener first encountering Lachenmann's major works is likely to be initially drawn towards the bewildering range of inventive and wholly distinctive sonorities and techniques involved. As such the primary impact at first (for those relatively unfamiliar with the idiom) can be one of estrangement and mental/sonic disjunction. Yet upon repeated listenings, the thorough integration of these sorts of sounds and gestures into the totality of the musical argument shows itself to be highly coherent in a quasi-symphonic manner that can even recall Beethoven or Brahms (as distinct, say, from aleatoric works or those written in 'moment form').

It is my considered conviction that Lachenmann is on one hand a pioneering radical as a composer, but also that his work would be unthinkable without the Austro-German tradition that precedes it (which is not to discount other influences from further afield). Such a tradition does not represent for Lachenmann some mythical and unbreachable canon of timeless, organic, totally self-contained, masterpieces upon apprehension of which a modern-day composer can do little more than gaze in awe and attempt to slavishly imitate. Rather Lachenmann engages with tradition as *process*, with the manner in which the 'great works' of the past engage dialectically with the conventions they inherit and inhabit, and attempt to enter into an equally self-reflexive, sometimes negational, interaction in the musical and aesthetic climate of his own time. If Lachenmann is engaged in a mediatory process of continual oppositions and negations of numerous conventions, as well as entering into self-negation even during the course of a piece, then perhaps his structuralist interactions are not so fundamentally different from those of late Beethoven. It is for these reasons that those who crib the sonic and structural attributes of Lachenmann's work as pre-formed, well-tested tools of composition will rarely approach the white-hot immediacy of Lachenmann's music, just as his work relates much more intensely to the tradition than that of any number of neo-traditionalists and neo-tonalists.

These aesthetic issues are of great importance to performers of the work seeking an alternative to the false dichotomy often proffered in terms of performance practice: between a 'modernistic' approach on one hand (emphasising disjunction between all elements to the maximum, resisting all sense of line, and above all free from any stylistic baggage obtained from older practices) or a 'musicianly' approach on the other (foregrounding to the maximum all aspects of the music that resonate with earlier traditions, avoiding terrifyingly loud or ear-stretchingly soft dynamics, finding ways of creating continuity and some degree of seamlessness even when presented by violent oppositions between material types, thus containing the musical experience within manageable boundaries). These are caricatured positions, perhaps, but nonetheless seem to have a fair amount of truth in them.

Lachenmann's *Serynade* (1997/1998, revised 2000) was composed nearly 20 years after his previous piano work, *Ein Kinderspiel* (1980), and while the differences between it and the various earlier piano pieces are striking, the idiom is not so strange to those familiar with the piano concerto *Ausklang* (1984/1985, revised 1986) or the clarinet, cello and piano trio *Allegro Sostenuto* (1986/1988, revised 1989, *passim*). If anything, the writing in *Serynade* seems somewhat distilled and pared-down in comparison to the earlier works: the rate of change between gestural types is

considerably less rapid and extended techniques only occur properly at one passage towards the end of the work (scraping the fingers across some lower strings, and also stopping some strings so as to produce harmonics). However, the pedalling is extremely intricate and precise throughout, leading at one point to a passage for 'solo pedal', and the use of silently depressed keys to produce resonances and harmonics (a feature of Lachenmann's pianistic idiom ever since *Echo Andante*, 1961/1962, and *Wiegenmusik*, 1963) are present throughout.

Serynade presents little in the way of pianistic challenges that the performer familiar with the earlier piano works or *Ausklang* will not already have encountered. In some ways the much shorter *Echo Andante* presents greater pianistic demands, demanding as it does the most meticulous choreography of fingering and hand distribution for almost every note, in order to maintain the fantastically complex play of sonorities throughout (similar difficulties occur, though much more succinctly, in *Wiegenmusik*). *Guero* (1970, revised 1988) requires an acute ear for the quality of the sound of the plucked keys, the contrasts in sound between the key glissandi effects produced by different means. This is a piece worth amplifying in performance in a relatively large hall (this has the composer's sanction, as does the amplification of *Serynade*). Lachenmann's isolation of the sound of key noise in *glissandi* serves to foreground this always present but mostly ignored parameter (as with the passages played purely on the surface of the keys in Sylvano Bussotti's *Pour Clavier*). A performer who has worked on either of these pieces will most likely be more acutely aware of how to control such aspects of the 'total piano sound' when playing music that uses notes and glissandi in more 'conventional' manners. One might bear this in mind when playing the *glissandi* in *Serynade*.

In *Serynade*, as in many of Lachenmann's works featuring piano, the performer is continually paying as much attention to depressing silent notes and chords, for the purposes of creating harmonics and resonances, as playing sounding notes. Aside from the obvious care required in order to ensure that no extra notes sound accidentally from a too-rapid depressing of the silent chords, the pianist also needs to consider the theatrical aspects of the actions they will make.

Lachenmann's unusual (when compared to conventional 'classical' piano writing) techniques are in no sense designed to be hidden; on the contrary, their explicitness to the listener/viewer constitutes one of the most fundamental ways in which the music avoids the sensation of having been produced 'from on high'. The performer is able to project an artisan-like demeanour in performance, methodically and calmly enacting the motions to produce the fantastical range of sounds that Lachenmann employs in full view of the audience. However, this in no sense is the same thing as a quasi-hysterical type of theatre, in which the pianist manically flails around the keyboard desperately trying to move their hands into the correct position in time for the next action. One can find such a thing in the hyper-nervous writing in Beat Furrer's piano piece *Phasma* (2002) or piano quintet *Spur* (1998), where the performer is given fractions of a second to navigate their hand into the piano to stop a string before returning equally rapidly back to the keyboard – the nature of the physical configuration almost necessitates a level of tense theatrical virtuosity in this respect from the performer, but Lachenmann's writing here is quite different, and designed as such. While the physical choreography is by no means simple, and requires a high degree of inner absorption prior to performance, there is practically

nothing in this respect in *Serynade* which cannot be executed idiomatically and with a reasonable degree of ease and effortlessness.

A good example of how this becomes an issue is presented from the very beginning of the work, in which silently depressed notes, chords and clusters occur in most bars of the first page (Figure 1).

Figure 1 *Serynade*, p. 1, mm. 1–5. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

The notation could perhaps be interpreted theatrically so as to imply that the silent chords should only be depressed at the very point where they are first notated in the score, but when working with the composer, I realised this was in no sense necessary and indeed counterproductive to the musical flow. The chord in m. 5, for example, can be depressed right at the beginning of the bar, before the right pedal is released. Similarly, ‘preparatory’ chords such as the silent cluster at the very beginning of the work, or that in m. 47 can be depressed and sustained with the middle pedal as early as one likes. Lachenmann also made clear that it was perfectly fine to catch the silent E in m. 4 with the pedal in advance of the third crotchet beat of the bar, so one need not rush to the low silent cluster and rush back to the *ff* played clusters afterwards. In all these cases, this pragmatic approach serves to avoid an unwarranted level of theatrical tension caused by too rapid a transference between playing sounding and silent notes.

It is easy to see the numerous filigree passages in hemidemisemi-quavers as totally maniacal, hyper-tense rushes of activity in hyper-distinction to what has preceded, and perform them accordingly. Such gestures have become something of an avant-garde cliché in music forever presenting unreconcilable extremes (where dynamics, tempi, register, etc., forever inhabit the outer edges of their spectrum). It would be disingenuous to deny that this quality has its place in Lachenmann’s work, but presented with a much greater level of subtlety and complexity (Figure 2).

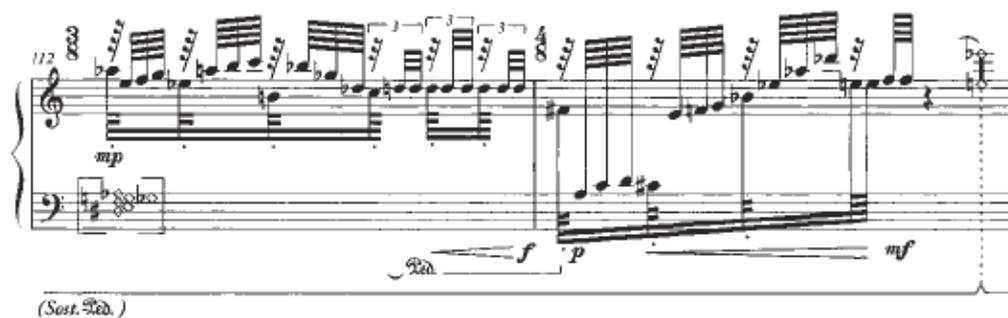


Figure 2 *Serynade*, p. 11, mm. 112–113. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

To view Lachenmann's use of highly contrasting material as a phenomenon whereby the nature of the juxtapositions count for much more than the individual elements concerned is to take a highly partial view of the work. Whilst aware of potential banality in some of the rather overworked gestures he uses (and continues to use in multiple pieces), Lachenmann still strives to find some new possibilities of beauty, expressiveness, even lyricism in them by a combination both of their configuration and their context. For this reason, adopting a rather one-dimensional attitude towards the filigree fragments is likely to downplay such a possibility, focussing attention away from the intrinsic nature of the material as it manifests itself in its context in favour of an all-purpose 'characterisation' applied in a blanket manner. Some degree of *rubato* within the rapid groups is by no means at odds with the spirit of the music, nor a degree of dynamic variation within the ranges specified by the notation. It should be pointed out here that the use of *staccato* markings in the left-hand notes at the beginning of groups of four does not really in this case imply a sharp articulative distinction between these individual pitches and the other groups of three in the right-hand; the markings are more for technical purposes and the performer will usually find that with a basic conception of the gestures as a continuous line, the division of the hands will itself provide sufficient articulation in this respect.

For the many arm clusters in the piece, some of them rather more huge than violent (though there are of course moments of violence), it is for similar reasons often better to press down firmly on the keys rather than attack them from a distance (perhaps the interruptions in mm. 197 and 218 suggests more choppy physical motions, also the accented cluster in m. 214. Once more, the cumulative effect depends on a combination of both sound and theatre.

182 $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$

ffff (γ) γ \dot{z} *pp* *ff* γ *f* *ffff* (\dot{z} γ) γ \dot{z} *ffff*

ppppp kaum hörbar quasi tonlos

ffff *pppp* *ppp* *pp*

(Sorz. 2da.)

185 $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$

(-) *p* *ffff* (γ) *ff* (\dot{z}) γ *ffff* (\dot{z} γ) γ \dot{z} γ *ffff* (-)

(2da.) *p* *mf* *ff* *p*

(Sorz. 2da.)

188 $\frac{4}{4}$ $\frac{6}{4}$

pp *poco meno* *ffff* γ \dot{z} γ (\dot{z} γ) γ γ *f* (γ) γ γ *meno f* (- \dot{z} γ) γ -

(2da.) *mp* *mp* *mf* *f* *ff*

(Sorz. 2da.)

Figure 4 *Serynade*, p. 19, mm. 182–192. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

By the time of p. 21, the pedallings are not just highlighted, but seem to attain a quasi-autonomous role of their own over and above their sustaining function (Figure 5).

206 $\frac{6}{4}$ (Ab hier wieder chromatische Clustern, mit beiden Armen auszuführen.) $\frac{4}{4}$

209 $\frac{6}{4}$ a tempo $\frac{4}{4}$ loco

212 $\frac{5}{4}$

(Sost. Ped.) Sost. Ped. (Sost. Ped.) Sost. Ped. (Sost. Ped.) Sost. Ped.

Figure 5 *Serynade*, p. 21, mm. 206–215. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

This continues to develop in parallel with the other processes occurring with respect to pitch, rhythm and dynamics, until these other layers recede into silence, leaving only the sound of the pedal (Figure 6).

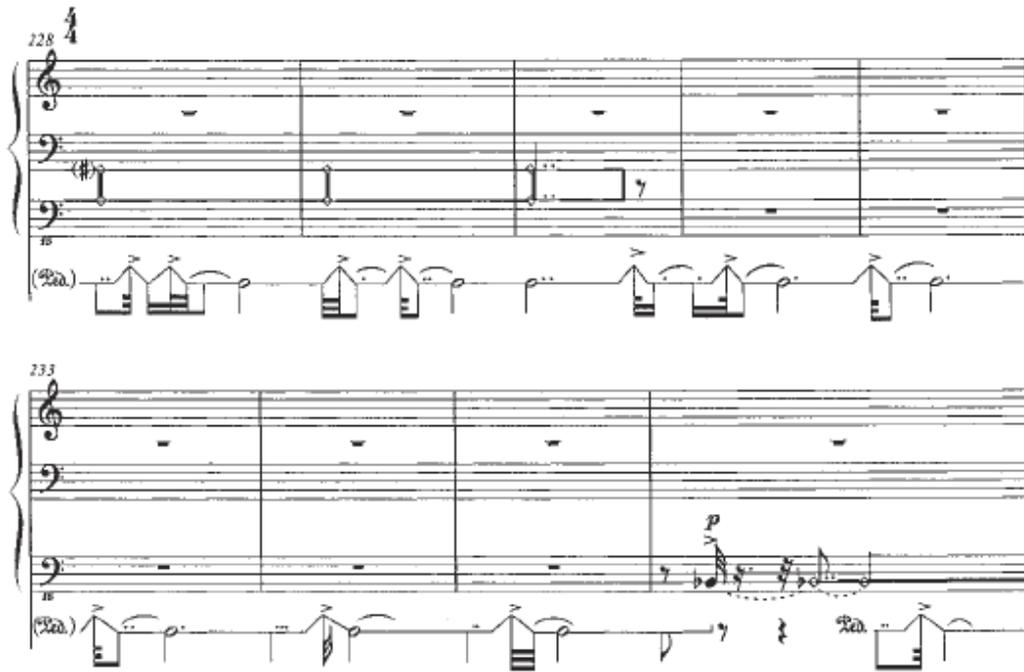


Figure 6 *Serynade*, p. 24, mm. 228–236. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

After the intensity of the climax built from the previous reiterated chords and clusters, this creation of an extra parametric dimension is precisely what enables Lachenmann to transcend the pitfalls of an all-too-obvious simple dying away of all activity. The development of the pedalling is slightly out of phase with that in the sounding notes and resonances (which is quite complex in its own right, incorporating a return to the filigree figurations and a hidden chorale ‘discovered’ in notes extracted from clusters towards the end – mm. 219-226, though this has also been prefigured in other ‘discovered’ harmonies before), so by m. 229, there is the sense of another ‘climax’ having been reached. It is an intensely dramatic moment, which serves to heighten the impact of the ghostly harmonics used immediately afterwards. This was not of course the first time Lachenmann had foregrounded the pedal (this had been done in some of *Ein Kinderspiel*), but the new-found intricacy of this particular occurrence is quite breathtaking.

In the hands of a lesser composer (such as George Crumb, for example), these sorts of instrumental sonorities would be likely to function more as novel effects, akin to similar usage of exotic instruments and sounds in film scores. Lachenmann’s ability to integrate them into a total musical narrative (while always omnidirectional and operating dialectically between layers) and sense of timing and pacing demonstrates a much more acute compositional craft and depth and ensures that the sounds and gestures he uses do not sound hackneyed when the initial novelty has worn off.

I scarcely need to stress the extent to which a fully functioning middle pedal is absolutely paramount for a successful performance of the work (I have had more than a few stressful dress rehearsals when insisting on getting a technician in at the last moment to sort out such a pedal for this and other works – even then some such pedals may never be totally reliable). The regular use of this pedal does present some more heightened difficulties of physical balance with both feet forward (which can cause an unwanted tension in the more rapid passages) – I find that an adjustment of

the heel so the foot ‘points’ more in the direction of the keys to be played can usually help this.

Lachenmann rarely if ever indicates the use of the left pedal or *una corda*, but this should not be taken to imply that it is never a viable option. The *Calmo, quasi misterioso* passage from m. 83 onwards would seem an ideal place for the use of that pedal, particularly when trying to play the chords very quietly but as evenly as possible – the regulation on the piano can affect the facilitation of this quite pronouncedly!.

Western notation contains a range of symbols pertaining essentially to the beginning and middle of notes (staccato dots, wedges, *portato*, *tenuto*, markings such as *sfz*, *sfffffz*, *mfz* or even *pz*), but very few to indicate the nature of the release. Yet the abruptness or otherwise of the end of a note is absolutely intrinsic to the means of producing degrees of *legato* between groups of connected notes, affecting as it does the level of blending between consecutive pitches¹.

There are a few places in *Serynade* where the endings of notes come most prominently to the surface, first in m. 109, and towards the end of the work, from m. 338 onwards.

The manner in which the fingers leave each key at these moments will have an important effect on how these note-endings are perceived. If there is a gradual upwards wrist motion during the course of the successive releases in m. 109, then the effect will be more of each note sinking away into the resonance, as the damper release will be more gradual. If on the contrary (and I would advocate this manner), the fingers are released more abruptly, without noticeable cushioning by the wrist, the endings will have a more accentuated quality, approaching a little the residual sound of dampers hitting strings that is almost always present when playing early Viennese fortepianos. This type of technique is paralleled in the one-note-at-a-time releases of pitches at the beginning (and elsewhere) of Sciarrino’s *Vanitas* (1981) – a cushioned release here is likely to suggest a melancholy dying away of each note, rather than the more powerful connotations of maggots eating into the texture that I believe comes closer to Sciarrino’s conception.

Throughout *Serynade*, or indeed any piece for piano where pedal is used selectively, the player is forever releasing notes; the attitude taken to this parameter is worth approaching in a non-arbitrary manner. The imaginary *crescendi* that Lachenmann notates continually in the chords extracted by silent notes (a technique he used rather more didactically in ‘Filter-Schaukel’ from *Ein Kinderspiel*) are made much more vivid if thwarted by an abrupt ending.

More obviously, the potency invested in each harmony creates a great importance for maximum evenness of touch in striking chords. Regularity of voicing in the reiterated chords from section D (m. 145) onwards makes this particularly essential. For this effect, I strongly recommend the use of the ‘Thrust’ technique as described by Sándor (1981, pp. 108-114).

¹ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Sándor (1981, pp. 66-70).

Now that many of the sorts of techniques that Lachenmann uses (in most of his instrumental music) have entered common compositional parlance for a wide range of contemporary music, it is a little more difficult to argue that they draw attention to themselves by virtue of their unusual nature in such a subculture. An audience member whose standard concert fare is Beethoven, Liszt or Debussy will indeed be struck by the contrast when faced by a pianist continually playing silent clusters and chords, negotiating intricate middle pedalling and eventually moving inside the piano to scrape the strings (which is usually foreshadowed by the fact that the performer will have the music stand placed further back within the instrument). However, when in the context of music of Cage, Stockhausen, Kagel, Schnebel, Ferneyhough, Holliger, N.A. Huber, Furrer, Sciarrino and many others, such performance attributes will hardly be noteworthy in and of themselves². The question of the extent to which Lachenmann's music is able to maintain its 'earthy' quality, where sounds are firmly grounded in the means of their production, when the techniques used become so common as to attain a degree of transparency, is one for future generations of listeners to ponder.

The position that Lachenmann's music inhabits with respect to tradition and the ways the notation works both to emphasise both the traditional and extra-traditional factors present further challenges for the performer. It should never be assumed that various attributes of more conventional stylistic practices are to be wholly jettisoned, but neither that these should ride roughshod over the specificities of the notation.

Lachenmann's musical language is fractured, often very much so, but that doesn't imply that a sense of line isn't important. The passage from mm. 74-77 (Figure 7) presents unusual and counter-intuitive dynamics – making palpable a sense of an accent on the first notes of the slurs from the end of m. 76 onwards is certainly tricky when one considers that the succeeding chords are indicated at a higher dynamic. Throughout these bars, the dynamics have a certain defamiliarising effect (which is one reason why they and others should never be casually skimmed over in favour of a more intuitively 'musical' attitude), but nonetheless their impact would be much lessened without the performer maintaining a sense of line and continuity within and between groups. This can be achieved in various ways: through a definitive non-slackening of the pulse to give the music drive (it might not even be out of the question to make the tiniest *accelerando* towards the end of m. 77, then compensate by holding back a bit there), by maximising the *legato* continuity between the groups, or simply by the player's body language in live concert.

To these options can be added the possibility of 'shaping' various of the filigree figurations, as mentioned earlier, other subtle use of agogics (mm. 18 and 23 might be good opportunities for this), as well as the older pianistic practice of marginal desynchronisation between parts notated simultaneously – in rehearsal Lachenmann

² Sciarrino's music is particularly interesting in this respect, because of the wholly different role that extended techniques play, as it seems to me, within his aesthetic world. Sciarrino's music if anything creates a world even more phantasmagorical than is usually found within rarefied conventional music, which by its very hyperbolic nature has a self-reflective quality. For this reason, I believe that a performer should attempt to make their physical actions in bringing about extended techniques as unobtrusive and transparent as possible, quite distinctly from how one might approach similar questions in the music of Lachenmann.

advocated the playing of the F and F# at the beginning of m. 36 fractionally before the inner chords, and has suggested similar things in the context of other works.

Serynade is a piece in which every little detail has an importance to perhaps an even greater extent than in some notationally more complex works of Ferneyhough and others. The difficulties are not insubstantial, but as with all of Lachenmann's music, they can all be addressed and solved logically and practically so as to be able to maximise the performer's attention towards the larger musical qualities. A great deal can be learnt from paying acute attention to all the types of detail I have delineated, which can pay dividends in terms of one's sensitivity to such areas in all sorts of piano music, old and new.

Reference

Sandor, G. (1981). *On piano playing*. New York: G. Schirmer.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece *Serynade*, pages 8, measures 74-77. The notation is written for piano and includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The first system (measures 74-76) begins with a 3/4 time signature and features complex rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes, and rests. Dynamic markings such as *ff*, *p*, *f*, *fff*, *mf*, and *f* are used throughout. The second system (measures 77) continues the complex rhythmic and dynamic structure, with dynamic markings including *p*, *ff*, *mp*, *fff*, and *f*. Both systems include performance instructions like *(Sost. And.)* and various articulation marks such as accents and slurs.

Figure 8 *Serynade*, p. 8, mm. 74–77. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.