

Cause and Curiosity

Walter Zimmermann
in conversation with
Richard Toop

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Walter Zimmermann, 2024

Preliminary Remark – “with a boundless curiosity”

Shadows of Ideas: on Walter Zimmermann's Work Work is the title of a lecture Richard Toop gave in November 2002 at the XVI Weingartener Tage für Neue Musik and the Berlin University of the Arts.¹ At least in general terms, Toop already seemed rather familiar with Zimmermann's musical oeuvre at that time. Both knew each other from Cologne, where Walter had lived from 1970 (until 1985) and Richard had taught as Stockhausen's assistant from 1972–74.

Richard Toop had a profound knowledge of music history, stretching all the way back to the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. He nonetheless focused his attention on the music of the present, with an unflagging curiosity and the ability to penetrate the works analytically from the roots of the creative process and the respective questions of their composers. Born in Chichester, southern England, on August 1, 1945, he encountered Berio, Nono, and Maderna at the Dartington Summer School in 1961, and Lutosławski a year later. A radio broadcast of Stockhausen's *Momente* (1962), which he heard at a WDR late-night concert in London, inspired him. At that time, he was also composing, and he was learning German – mainly so he could read *die reihe* a magazine essential to serial music. As a pianist in London in the second half of the 1960s, Toop played Cage's Piano Concert and from La Monte Young's *Compositions 1960*, as well as, in October 1967, a 24-hour performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations* (possibly the first complete performance by a single player on record).

When Toop returned to London from Cologne, he learned from Roger Woodward that there was a vacancy at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, now the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. He taught there from 1975 and became a willing discussion partner and admired role model for generations of composers and musicians. We are in Toop's debt for authoritative texts: on serial music (on Olivier Messiaen and Karel Goeyvaerts, Michel Fano and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez), on Brian Ferneyhough, on New Complexity in Michael Finnissy, James Dillon, Chris Dench, and Richard Barrett, a monograph on György Ligeti (London 1999), and *Six Lectures from the Stockhausen Courses Kürten 2002* (Kürten 2005).²

The fact that Toop returned to Germany as a lecturer at Stockhausen's summer courses from 2002 to 2008 also made it possible to meet Walter Zimmermann again in Berlin. Toop was convinced that the unique tone that Zimmermann unfolds in his music deserved more attention than was the case in Germany. The idea of a monograph, which had the working title *Schatten der Ideen: Zur Musik Walter Zimmermanns*,

1 Cf. the print version of this presentation on pages 263–276.

2 For more details, see Rachel Campbell's obituary, pp. 277–280.

thereby took shape. The conversations that Toop had with Zimmermann for this project began in 2003 – in the chapter *Exposition 2003*, themes are echoed that recur in more detail in the subsequent conversations, most of which took place in 2004.

The conversations are not linear or chronological; nor were they conducted with the intention of publication in the present form. What was intended, as Toop put it in an exposé addressed to Peter Mischung and Wolke Verlag, was “a book about Zimmermann’s music, but also about the thoughts behind it. Biographical material also plays a role, not as an independent, anecdotal life story, but as an illuminating background to intellectual developments or strategies.”

At my first meeting with Richard Toop in November 2002, he was already a contributor to the loose-leaf encyclopedia *Komponisten der Gegenwart* [Composers of the Present]³, for which I am responsible, but it was already clear at that time that, due to the multitude of his commitments, it would be difficult to win him over for more detailed presentations. (In his fax letters he had regularly “justified” delays with quotations, for a while from Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1628, later from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr*, 1819/21). The audio recordings of the conversations with Walter Zimmermann remained unedited until I decided to write them down in a place far from Berlin, in Essaouira in Morocco. Even during this transcription in April 2012, which was not verbatim, but metaphorical, Richard sent me from Australia several new tape findings, which he had divided into about ten-minute sections. At that time I agreed with Toop that I would edit the conversations while he himself would contribute analytical remarks on the music, which were to be inserted into the dialogues like mosaic stones. However, Toop, who was already suffering from his cancer, then began sorting excerpts from the text chronologically, so that the process of publication stalled again. Meanwhile Albert Breier’s monograph *Walter Zimmermann: Nomade in den Zeiten (Nomad in Times)* was published in 2014 as volume 14 of the series “Archives on 20th and 21st Century Music,” also by Wolke Verlag.

In 2016, I took another run at preparing the manuscript for print. Walter Zimmermann produced a first edited version, while Toop had to write the sentence: “The disease has returned”. Richard eventually passed away in June 2017. He would have been pleased that the conversations, albeit without analytical digressions, are now coming to print after all. The result is a volume on Walter Zimmermann and the genesis of his music, which weaves an unexpectedly rich tapestry of contemporary and cultural history; it is published in memory of Richard Toop.

Indirectly, it was Toop who, through his reference to the *seconda pratica*, and to monody, invalidated Walter Zimmermann’s skepticism about the medium of songs for voice and piano. Thus, the song cycle *Vergebens sind die Töne* (on poems by Mikhail Lermontov and Osip Mandelstam, 2015/16) could come into being. This cycle is the subject of an eleventh conversation I had with Walter Zimmermann in 2017. A twelfth conversation *Gleanings Musings (Nachlese)* followed in 2018. Finally, the publication

3 The standard work on new music has been published by edition text + kritik in Munich since 1992 and comprises more than 13,000 pages in ten volumes.

is rounded off by Zimmermann's lecture *Composition as Transcription* (1996), which forms the core of his poetics.

The seemingly paradoxical title "Ursache und Vorwitz" (Cause and Prejudice) was inspired by Walter Zimmermann's life partner Nanne Meyer, an established visual artist. It goes back to a composition of the same title by Zimmermann, who replaces "effect" with "Vorwitz" (now translated as "prejudice") in the causal relationship of "cause and effect". What is implied here is that the desire for knowledge is bound up in a dialectic and in a cycle.

At the same time, this duality points to an essential aspect of Walter Zimmermann's music, which is often based on complex relationships, for example, on mythologically as well as cosmologically founded emblems and figures of thought from antiquity and the Renaissance. In addition, there are no less demanding mathematical operations to produce music in the form of meaningful works. Zimmermann transforms his sources of inspiration, draws from them and finds ways of formalising them, from which his compositions grow.

This idealistic as well as material, computational-mathematical background, in turn, contrasts somewhat with Zimmermann's external activities, which he pursued with great energy. Zimmermann was one of the first to champion composers such as Cage, Nancarrow, and Feldman in Germany. He founded the Beginner Studio in Cologne, where he performed unconventional concerts (1977–84), organized, among others, the *Musicircus* in Bonn in 1979 and 1980, the Cage Festival in Frankfurt in 1992, acted innovatively as editor of interviews with numerous American composers (*Desert Plants*, 1976) and *Essays* by Morton Feldman (1985), and more recently discovered niches such as the Chinese *Chan Mi Gong* textbook by Liu Han Wen, whose translation he suggested and in whose editing he participated, and the *Novalis ABC*, which puts Novalis's fragments of an encyclopedic project in the alphabetical order originally intended. Zimmermann's social commitment to Herbert Henck and the archiving of his work in the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, must also not be forgotten.

Walter Zimmermann's 70th birthday on April 15 2019 was the external occasion for the appearance of this volume. If its contents can contribute to a more nuanced perception of Zimmermann's musical oeuvre and its background, the book would have served its purpose.

Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer

Neither Tribute nor Preface

That you, the reader, have this book in your hands is the result of a series of interventions and surprises. That I, not meant to be a participant in it, despite being aware of it from its earliest days, am involved at all is merely another of life's unforeseen detours. Let me explain.

Walter-Wolfgang Sparrer, to whose tireless devotion this project owes its current incarnation, and whose involvement cannot be overstated, tells most of the story in his introduction. What may be helpful for the reader to know is that this long-overdue English version is a completion of the circle, since the conversations were with an Englishman and a bilingual publication would always have served to expand the potential audience and to enrich the literature of two languages. As Richard Toop explained to me when I inquired about "the language question" in 2008:

In German, though in the interests of getting things done quicker, I imagine substantial parts will be written in English and then translated (by me).

The original scheme, therefore, entailed some combination of the original conversations in German with commentary in English and German. Alas, as is known, ill health prevented Richard from completing the project as intended, despite his efforts – in either language, in any form. Years went by, and after some improvements, which proved to be too brief, Richard was again prevented from making progress. I mentally assigned this project to the list of chimeras that would never see the light of day.

One can thus imagine the surprise when, not long after Richard died, Walter Zimmermann informed me that a variation on the original project from a decade or so earlier had been compiled and published. He then approached me to supervise an English edition, for the translation of which I take no credit: while I was presented with a raw text, one in need of polishing and refining and tackling of various odds and ends, I did not work from a tabula rasa. I completed my work in 2021, in Hong Kong.

Agreeing to undertake this labour invariably raised questions: was I meant to help Richard realise what time and circumstance had robbed of him? Was I here to see that the work, regardless of author, reaches English readership wearing its best face? Did the work involve, to any extent, speculative theology?

I soon decided that my role was not to imitate Richard, or to guess at how he would have rendered given passages into English, or to nitpick for the sake of some spurious notion of authenticity. No, my role was much more to get out of the way, to intervene as little as possible, to adhere to the general principle that sentences need be no more and no less convoluted than required. I naturally opted for British English spellings in

all instances except when Americanisms or titles are concerned, but everything else is self-explanatory. The text is dense, the form rather elliptical, yet maximal readability is attainable. One must remember that conversations, which are the backbone of this project, differ greatly in both style and content from texts, and the thanks go to Walter-Wolfgang for giving the text before you its cohesion.

Richard would have done it differently, throughout, and the world is poorer that he did not have a chance to complete his vision. But, as I subscribe to the doctrine of achieving what is possible within the limitations with which one is confronted, the something here is truly better than the alternative nothing.

For his precious research, and fact-checking, and cross-referencing, and general indefatigability, Nils Günther deserves full credit. On my side, I especially thank Jeffery Kwok Ka Yong, whose patience, warmth and wit entrance, and whose continued presence in my life I also attribute to the hand of chance.

Dan Albertson, Vilnius, 4 November 2022