The qualitative intrinsic tension of the notes to be played

or

Notes are entities that can have an opinion.

A musical conversation with Dr Michael Kopfermamm, director and founder of the Munich-based experimental music ensemble Phren.

By Uli Aumüller

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Speaker 1:

Although the Munich-based Phren ensemble has been in existence since the early 1960s and has been working continuously, with changing line-ups, on an aesthetic that seeks to combine the theories of John Cage and Arnold Schoenberg, which at first glance seem so different, this ensemble has so far remained largely unknown outside very narrow insider circles. We can only speculate as to the specific reasons for this. The adepts of John Cage may have found the ensemble's method of experimental improvisation insufficiently free, while the followers of serial and post-serial trends may have found this method too free. Festival organisers may have missed having written musical scores in some form – and no one wanted to take the trouble to read through the very idiosyncratic music-theoretical writings that the ensemble published in parallel with its compositional work. And since this ensemble saw no reason to revise the fundamental positions of musical modernism in order to pay homage to postmodern neo-traditionalism, for example, it will find it difficult to win friends in this camp. Thus, the Phrenensemble has always sat and continues to sit between two stools, which has not prevented its members from consistently developing the insights they have recognised as correct for themselves – and this over a period of more than 35 years. Incidentally, this applies not only to the Phren Ensemble, which collectively composes chamber music on prepared instruments, from duos and trios to sextets, but also to the Phren Music Theatre, which implements similar methods on stage. Uli Aumüller spoke with the director of the Phren Ensemble, Dr Michael Kopfermann.

Music recording:

Music example no. 4

DAT 4. Piece 17.44 - 20.00

Analytical duos

Original sound:

KOPFERMANN: Yes, the ... first considerations that clearly focused on sound came to me during my studies in the USA with Rudolf Kolisch, where I also had a whole host of other inspirations, for example percussion lessons, basic lessons in playing percussion instruments, and where, for certain reasons that I may discuss later, there was a particular interest in strengthening the anharmonicity of the strings of a string instrument from a physical point of view, so to speak. It came to pass that, for other reasons as well, but also because of this, it seemed good to me to replace the strings normally used on the cello, which was my instrument, with thick gut strings. Also considering that when strings are thick, the overtones undergo a peculiar shift, as physicists say, they speak of anharmonicity, i.e. the overtones somehow move a little away from the places where they would be placed in a simple case.

Music recording:

Music example no. 11

Record Colloseum F 669.335 A Side 1 Mensa I 1984 Beginning

Experimental music on prepared string instruments and wind instruments (quintets)

From: Three Pieces 1984, Mensa I

Original sound:

AUMÜLLER: You went to the United States, following your teacher, or did you apply to go there? Rudolf Kolisch had to emigrate and continued teaching in the United States, and your intention was actually to become a professional musician. A professional cellist in an orchestra...

KOPFERMANN: No, no, no... that was no longer the case. Instead, I wanted to write a doctoral thesis on Beethoven, and I wasn't as skilled at reading music as I should have been, and I wanted to go to Kolisch so that, as agreed, he could teach me about the music of Schoenberg and Beethoven. And that's what happened. And for a few years I actually did my doctoral thesis on Beethoven, but the great experience was, of course, having Kolisch demonstrate Schoenberg's 12-tone music. For example, he played Schoenberg's violin concerto with the university orchestra, conducted by Leibowitz. And then Cage came into the picture, not in person, but through reading Silence, or through conversations with one of his students, Elsbeth Schneider, and there's a manifesto, Credo in the Future of Music, where noise comes up. And I learned about percussion, and I had the suspicion that what Helmholtz said about overtones was not true. And this, as I always express it, is the imaginary field of debate between Schönberg, Helmholtz and Cage. That is what occupied me most, apart from Kolisch's lessons, and my idea was that noise must be integrated into the tones themselves. Integrated into itself. The tones themselves, that's Cage's vocabulary, so to speak. And integration is what Schoenberg means by music, and it was already clear to me that Cage didn't have such intentions with integration.

Music recording:

Music example no. 6

LP Collosseum SM Piece no. VI approx. 5 min.

Pieces 1976

Original sound:

KOPFERMANN: Yes, so I have to come back to this strange constellation of Schönberg-Helmholtz-Cage. So I thought, Helmholtz, that can't be true. That the fundamental tone depends on the fundamental frequency and the colour depends on the spectrum, instrumentally depends on the spectrum, and I thought that if you gain anharmonicity, then the fundamental tone vibrates in a different way than before, and that was imagined in a certain way independently in a speculative sense, perhaps even a little bit glossed over this point. The articulation of the tone was not specifically considered. So how long does a tone last when it builds up its own tension, which is not the normal overtone tension, i.e. the qualitative intrinsic tension of the tones to be played? We mentioned this at the beginning; it is in the text, Freiburger Texte, which Fjodoroff and I wrote.

That is a very clever idea. If you now relate the qualitative intrinsic tension of the notes to be played to the length of these notes to be played, then something strange comes out, (long pause) yes, how can one describe it most simply. Then the beginning of the note takes on a special place in the paradigm, because it is particularly unstable. So the note must be brought into full swing in the shortest possible time. And so it doesn't stand there. That means if you include the scratching in the sense of noise inclusion or noise integration, then the beginning of the note scratches particularly strongly on average.

AUMÜLLER: You mean the scratching of the bow on the string and ...

KOPFERMANN: No, the noise. If you play a note very noisily. When you bring a note into resonance very pronouncedly, what happens is that at the moment when you are bringing it into resonance, it is not yet clear what the note will become, so it's as if something is hidden that only opens up in the course of the note, where you can still intervene.

Music recording:

Example No. 7

LP Collosseum SM Piece No. VII 4.15

Original sound:

AUMÜLLER: We have this disharmony. This means that other overtones arise in the overtone range, which can be detected by hearing or by Fourier analysis, whatever the case may be, other overtones are present than the fundamental tone would actually suggest, at least according to Helmholtz. So a completely different spectrum arises than would be expected on the basis of the fundamental tone. This simultaneity of a certain fundamental tone with a deviating or shifted spectral colour or overtone spectrum, as you have described it, is what interests you now. What I did not quite understand was this concept of the intrinsic tension of the tone. Do you mean precisely this relationship between the fundamental tone and the anharmonic spectrum ...

KOPFERMANN: Yes, yes ...

AUMÜLLER: That is the intrinsic tension.

KOPFERMANN: So to speak, yes. And this can now be observed not only in a proportionally shifting relationship to imagined overtone points, but also in the course of the tone.

AUMÜLLER: That means that the volume of this tone changes over time. Or does this volume...

KOPFERMANN: First of all, over time. And this becomes particularly clear when you bring in the quality of volume. It means that suddenly there is also a dimension of volume to the sound. I don't think that's normally the case. And now you realise that volume has to do, for example, with a quality that can be read from the size of the instruments producing it; it's not a definition. There are fine, thin tones, and there are thick, voluminous tones. I can't say what the spectrum is in detail, only that paying attention to volume is different from paying attention to scratching. Or rather, the scratching now goes into the beginning of the tone, and thus the volume is also a component of the noise.

Music playback:

Music example no. 2

Analytical Quartets 1996 from 2.3.96 max. 5.37

S A St K

Original sound:

KOPFERMANN: During my studies at the conservatory in 1959/60, there was an anecdote going around that the cellist Pablo Casals had retired for 10 years to study settling processes. That naturally made quite an impression, and at the time I was experimenting with individual notes, which I played for many hours, days and weeks with only slight variations, and I was also trying to explore the settling processes in relation to how they influence the note that follows, using my string instrument, the cello, which was my speciality. So that's one point that

then faded into the background for me when I thought about the qualitative intrinsic tension

of the notes to be played. So originally, I was definitely interested in observing what happens over time, depending on how you stroke the bow. And Casals was a leading figure in that. It's just an anecdote about him.

AUMÜLLER: You never checked it out, you never met Casals and asked him.

KOPFERMANN: And I wasn't interested in that in the recordings either. And he didn't mean it that way either. He didn't want to compose with it. He just wanted to have more unwieldy material. And ...

AUMÜLLER: If it's true at all.

KOPFERMANN: If it's true at all. And now the question (pause) in this Freiburg text that Fjodoroff and I wrote, there is also talk of the volume of the tone as a separate characteristic. So we noticed that, but it could also refer to something independent of time. So the loudness and volume are the two parameters of the size of the tone, so to speak, which can be viewed separately; that's an idea that keeps cropping up, and I don't know how it will turn out now. I'm still missing a link, namely... And if you imagine that by lengthening the sound at the beginning, something can be achieved that only has an effect later on in the sound.

AUMÜLLER: That is, by deliberately lengthening the attack phase...

KOPFERMANN: Yes, so to speak. Then one realises that one can also achieve fluctuations in pitch and fluctuations in the value of the tone and fluctuations in the volume of the tone and the loudness, so that the individual tone now has no fixed pitch, perhaps a position but no constant position on the vertical. In other words, our tones are not normal tones with scratching or noise added to them, but rather, if there is scratching or noise, it is already organised within the individual tone.

Music playback:

Example No. 8

CD PHV 9403 Tr. 5 0.00 - 03.36

Original sound:

AUMÜLLER: Why take this step, why improvise?

KOPFERMANN: Because musical notation didn't seem suitable.

For example, if the pitch is subject to fluctuations, as it is in our case, how can you notate the notes? It makes no sense.

AUMÜLLER: You didn't make any attempts in that direction either. You simply made an observation.

KOPFERMANN: Practically no, no. It became clear very quickly that it wouldn't work. In any case, it would set us back if we did it. And so it remained improvisation. Experimental improvisation.

AUMÜLLER: By that you mean something specific again. It is composition, ...

KOPFERMANN: Of course.

AUMÜLLER: Composition actually means – well, does it mean that: when I hear composition, in the common sense...

KOPFERMANN: Then you mean the composer who writes music.

AUMÜLLER: Then I think of something that is fixed. A text. A text in some form. In your experimental improvisation, do you have something comparable, like a fixed form?

KOPFERMANN: The fact is that there are a number of people, be it two or up to six, who work together on the compositional process. So they compose in a certain sense. Without any notes having been used. Or being used. And now the question is, what is a text between so many brains. And or organisms that execute it. So the composition and the performance coincide in time. And of course there are phases where you get into a certain state. So now people know how the others play, how they react, what they like, what they intend, yes, so the text is not written.

AUMÜLLER: How does that differ from free jazz?

When I go to a free jazz concert, there are also string jazz musicians, to put it bluntly, who scratch wildly on their instruments, instruments that are out of tune or scordatura. They call themselves free jazz musicians, there is no recognisable rhythm or anything like that, there are no recognisable harmonies...

KOPFERMANN: Is there an analysis?

AUMÜLLER: It's actually obviously avoided. Perhaps.

KOPFERMANN: What analysis do they make of the thing they want to do?

AUMÜLLER: Is that the difference, the thing they want to do? The analysis. That kind of feedback.

KOPFERMANN: Well, analysis and composition are two aspects of the same thing. We talked for quite a while earlier about what's going on with settling phases; that's an analytical programme that I've been incorporating since the very beginning, since 1959, and

which occasionally recedes and then reappears. And when you have reached a stage where the investigation of such a factor is interesting, for example, that naturally presupposes a structural, yes, a formal structure to which it can be attached. And how this happens, that one can gradually enrich, formally enrich,

cannot be explained without this interplay between analysis and composition, just as, conversely, it cannot be explained without the structure.

Music playback:

Music example no. 3

DAT 3 12.58 - 17.09

Analytical Quartets 1995 from 18.10.95

Original sound:

But the crossover is an essential point that must be taken into account when arranging the instrumentation. For example, with this title, we have now adopted a method that is partly provisional or externally determined, namely analytical duos or analytical quartets, which we have made into duos with two violas. And we have made quartets with low-pitched instruments, which means a small cello and a small double bass as string instruments and a tenor horn and a helicon, i.e. a small tuba, as brass instruments. The small cello and the tenor horn are the higher-pitched instruments, and the double bass and the tuba are the lower-pitched ones. And it's important to be able to cross over. So that, virtually speaking, the double bass and tuba can meet at a similar pitch. Yes, and now here's the peculiar thing: when you take two instruments that are comparable in this way, say the double bass and the helicon, and they play at the same point vertically, at the point where the crossing over turns into an overlap, a qualitative leap occurs, suddenly you are no longer quite so sure of the authenticity of your own tone, because now it is not at all clear what the product of two intersecting, ultimately overlapping and thus indistinguishable tone values is. That is something that must always be kept in mind, and it is surprising to realise that I can only claim that the tone I played there it came about, or that it has a share in coming about, because the other is also involved. That is a question of connection.

And what to do with the fact that there seems to be a qualitative leap when there are crossovers is a very complex matter, but it also has to do with the fact that one wants to show off with the note, i.e. to be present at this point. And then it turns out that the other is also there, and the selfhood of the note undergoes a change there. I don't know if that makes any sense.

Music playback:

Music example no. 5

Analytical Duos NB K 1994 from 10.12.94

23:34 - 26:55

Original sound:

On a string instrument, for example, you can develop a kind of double-stop possibility on two different strings where the notes are very close together, so you can't say whether they cross over each other, you have to say, And that doesn't work on a wind instrument. This double-stop playing is a very exciting possibility, especially in the duets I have done with Ms Berninger for viola and tenor horn, where it is clear that the primary double stops are used on the viola, i.e. notes that are very close together or intertwined, and the opinion would of course be that this relationship could now be achieved proportionally throughout the tonal range. And we noticed that the slowness of the movement is one

way of achieving a proportional intensification. So there must be movement, but it must be slowed down so that the interlocking of notes becomes very sharp.

Music recording:

Music example no. 9

CD PHV 9403 Tr. 1 00.00 - 02.50

Analytical Duos January 1994 from 17 January 1994

Original sound:

KOPFERMANN: Well, it's a well-known fact that someone who holds a note must be able to say with that note, ‘Here I am, so to speak.’ And if, for example, someone else crosses into this spot and the first person doesn't hold their ground, it may be that they jump away to somewhere else, for formal reasons, or because they don't hold the emotion of ‘here I am’, for example. In this case, you have a very peculiar connection between emotion or psychology, or whatever you want to call it, and form. It may be right to move away at the moment when someone else enters the same corner. But if it only happens because someone else enters and you don't want to assert your place, then it is musically unsatisfactory. That's where it starts, that notes – well, notes are structures that can have an opinion.

So they say. So when you play something you don't mean, it sounds different than when you play something you mean. And a sound should also adhere to that, so that the way it continues, in itself, corresponds to what you mean. And there again is the connection between the outside and the inside.

AUMÜLLER: You just dropped a word: right. That may be right. That plays a big role in your work. This distinction between right and wrong.

KOPFERMANN: Yes, well, those are two poles of determination with which one can appear strange in today's experimental music scene. I once said in a discussion, for God's sake, you see, it can't just be the criterion of free or unfree that determines, but also right and wrong. And a very complicated programme to stick to. But to distinguish only between free and unfree is a deviation from Cage's musical thinking, which is difficult.

AUMÜLLER: You probably mean, first, a misunderstanding of Cage and, second, a dead end. Or a wrong turn.

KOPFERMANN: Or vice versa, an interesting point, but a mistake on Cage's part. It could also be, and I think this still needs to be investigated, that enlightenment plays a very important role here, which Cage presupposes, so for him it's not free or unfree but enlightened or unenlightened. And if you translate that as free or unfree, well, I mean, it's also relatively well known that right and wrong are just the poles of this field I'm talking about, but they are included, so there are sounds that come as if they were there, as if the whole thing had never been made so that they could come. So a structure builds itself up, and suddenly there is a sound that cannot be related to anything. Of course that can happen.

AUMÜLLER: And for that reason, it is then wrong?

KOPFERMANN: Yes, yes. And so, virtually, one has to say that mistakes, i.e. errors and wrongness, are not quite the same thing, that mistakes can be made, blunders can happen, wrong sounds can be included, that is a whole range of values that one has to – it has to do with logic, one says, the distinction between wrong and right. Relevance. Usefulness, too. Yes, how do we come up with that now?

Because of emotions. Yes, in principle, the settings are also dry in one respect, like something that can be calculated, it is

also said that they are to be related, like mathematics, and at the same time, since there are four players who have to do this, or six or two, depending on the individuality of the players, something matters here, not the identity that one has in the classical score of the string quartet, where the first violin and the second violin play the same thing, we don't have that, and now, with that, the

resemblance can be almost the same, it is also necessary that it can correspond to the conviction of both players who collide with each other, so identity becomes a very complicated idea here. And now, however, the statement applies that by not insisting on one's own identity or ego identity, one does not achieve true identity either. This is the condition for playing together. Or if one imagines it in terms of the continuity of the state in which one can play in harmony with oneself.

Moderation:

The qualitative tension of the notes to be played

A conversation with the director of the Munich Phrenensemble, Dr Michael Kopfermann

A program by Uli Aumüller

You heard excerpts from the following compositions

Analytical Duos December 1994, Three Pieces 1984, Pieces 1976, Analytical Quartets 1996, Analytical Trios 1993, Analytical Duos January 1994

Performed by: Carmen Nagel-Berninger, Inge Salcher, George Augusta, Peter Fjodoroff, Eckhard Rhode, Wilhelm Riemenschneider, Michael Steimer and Dr Michael Kopfermann.