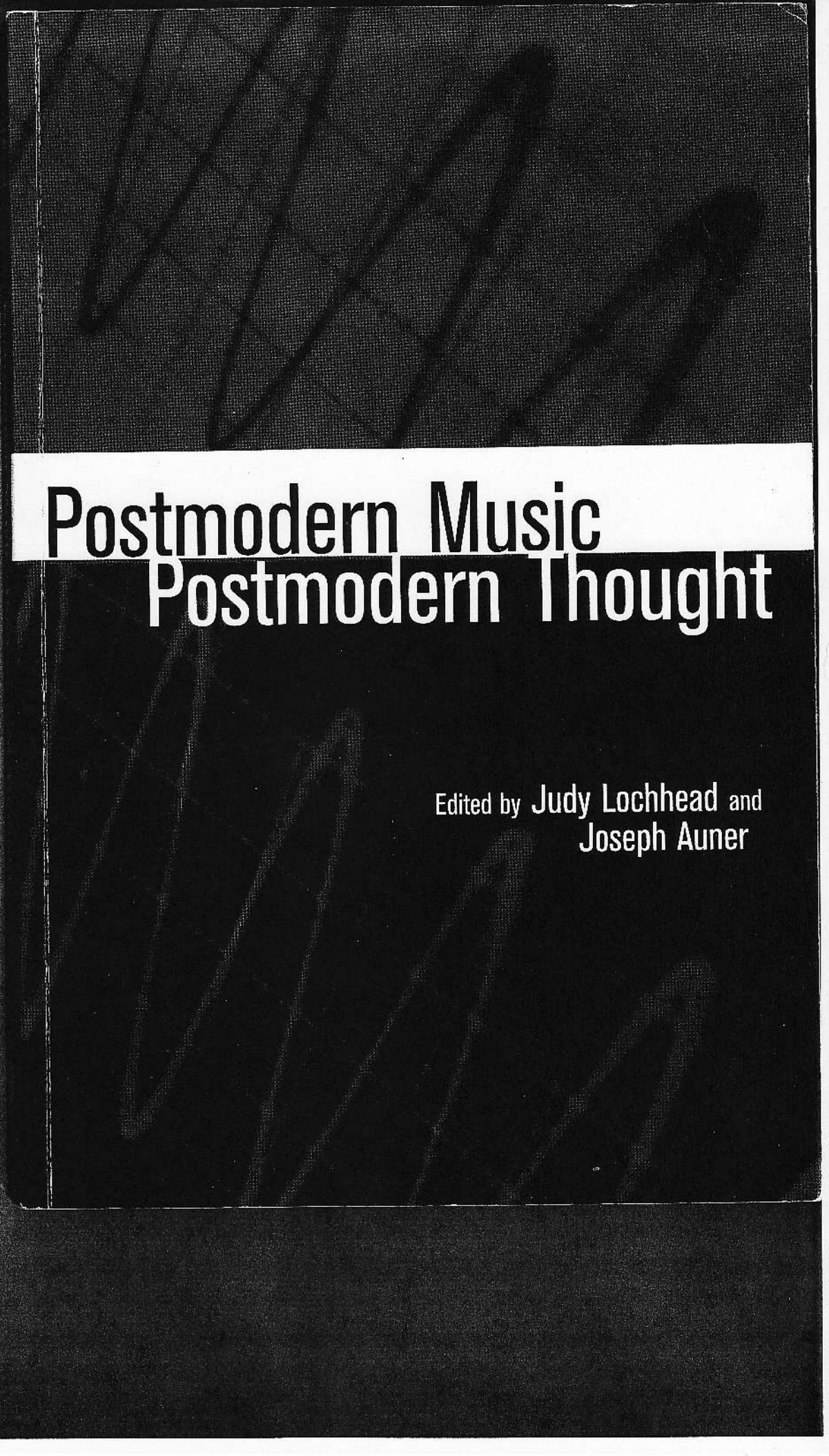
Postmodern Music
Postmodern Thought
Edited by Judy Lochhead and
Joseph Auner

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CHAPTER 12

Resistant Strains of Postmodernism:

The Music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough

Ross Feller

In the 1960s, as the hegemony of total serialism waned, the German composer Helmut Lachenmann and the British composer Brian Ferneyhough began writing pieces that posed extreme solutions to the compositional cul-de-sac young composers faced at that time. John Cage had already "invaded" Europe with his ideas about indeterminacy and aleatoricism in music. His presence at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik at Darmstadt in 1958 encouraged many European composers to question and re-examine certain types of modernist practice such as serialism. Many opted to explore indeterminate forms and other types of perceived freedom. Lachenmann and Ferneyhough, however, pursued different paths in their respective efforts to move beyond the serial impasse. Each sought to reinject vitality back into the idea of closed-form composition through integrating excessive, unstable, and chaotic structures. Almost three and a half decades later, they continue to develop these issues in their work, issues that foreground qualities that make art a human endeavor.

Throughout this essay several binary distinctions are employed, not in order to demonstrate invariant separation, but instead to unleash the friction or contradiction that results from their points of contact. Rub two sticks together long enough and you'll begin to see a fire.

THE MILLENNIAL DIVIDE

On one side there are dreamers, poets, and inventors whose activities demonstrate a commitment to transcendence, infinity, and the sublime. They may resist pressures to quantify, package, and sort, by creating things that quantify, package, and sort in the extreme. Thus, opportunities are created for breakdowns and failures, requiring new categories, languages, and thoughts. On the other side are bureaucrats, preachers, and a few old-school scientists, who pay homage to the concept of truth, in a world which they see as moving toward total explanation and accountability.

Quantification and packaging are also their tools, but they use them to erect the ultimate reductionism. Millennialism is once again upon us, demonstrating, in full force, the ancient bifurcation between those who aggressively seek the salvation of a secure and comprehensive view of the world, and those who realize that the impossibility of such a program has caused much bloodshed, strife, and poverty.

THE SHIFT

The new music world is populated with a heterogeneous mix of musicians, some with very little in common. One possible subgroup of this world contains composers, performers, and listeners who try to resist the confines of slackening, pastiche, and reified appropriation. On one level they are part of a larger cultural move toward radical expression (e.g., extreme sports), ever faster forms of artistic communication (e.g., speed metal and rap), risk-taking (e.g., tornado following), and wider sexual boundaries (e.g., gender bending). On another level their "resistance" requires an aesthetic of excess, which is, according to Jean-François Lyotard, a condition of postmodernism ([1979] 1984, 81).

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism, as has been often pointed out, is a term fraught with contradiction. If modernism can be characterized as an ideology of constant crisis and transgression what would it mean to move beyond it? The inherent contradictions in the term "postmodernism" have spawned a plethora of competing definitions. Part of the problem is that there are at least as many types of postmodernism as modernism. We should recall that modernism itself was vast and by no means consistent. Some types of modernism are easier to grasp, less controversial or contradictory than others. Some are readily accepted as mainstream beacons of their represented objects, while others float toward the margins, resisting the pull toward the center. In perhaps its best-known form, as put forth by the art historian Clement Greenberg, modernism was a defense against what we now call postmodernism (see Silliman 1990, 84). Thus, it laments the erosion of the distinction between high culture and commercial or popular culture. This explains Lyotard's well-known, paradoxical claim that postmodernism does not signal the end of modernism but rather a new beginning (Lyotard 1984, 79).

So, what *is* the definition of postmodernism? Hal Foster and others (e.g., Norris 1990) have parsed the term according to a fundamental opposition between a "postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo," and a "postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter" (Foster 1983, xi). The former strategy which he calls a "postmodernism of resistance" appropriates modernist devices or

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materials and transforms them by deliberately exposing the inherent contradictions they contain. This strand is thus more closely related to the experimental writing of the Language Poets than to the pop art of Andy Warhol. It attempts a critical deconstruction of tradition wherever it is found, explicitly following Lyotard's motto that "invention is always born of dissension" (Lyotard 1984, xxv). The latter strategy, which Foster calls a "postmodernism of reaction," accuses modernism of being unnatural or elitist and blames it for the unfortunate consequences of modernization. It seeks an absolute break with modernism. Paradoxically, a defining characteristic of modernism is that it is necessary to break with the old in order to initiate the new. According to Lyotard the break required of a postmodernism of reaction is simply "a way of forgetting or repressing the past" (Lyotard 1993, 75), often repeating rather than surpassing it. In its most sinister form it can be characterized, as the Australian musicologist Richard Toop said in regards to the New Simplicity composers, as a "longing for a new millenarian totalitarianism, in which the works of radical and even semiradical modernism can once again be proscribed as 'decadent art' (definitively, this time)" (Toop 1993, 53). Whatever the case, before taking up arms one should remember that the two aforementioned types of postmodernism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Most composers, in fact, partake of aspects of both.

LACHENMANN AND FERNEYHOUGH

Compositions by Lachenmann and Ferneyhough are largely incomparable, yet they do share some common ground. Adorno differentiated types of music by their relationship to their status as a commodity, some accepting this fate, others rejecting it. Both Lachenmann's and Ferneyhough's compositions reside within the latter type. In a world where almost everything is susceptible to commodification their intentional resistance stems from an idealistic, utopian vision about what music could become.

Both composers have developed consistent, personal styles, consciously reassessed tradition, and critically deconstructed performance practice. Both also incorporate counter-intuitive or counter-habitual mechanisms within a framework that nourishes the chaotic and the complex. Elke Hockings has pointed out that often the stimulus behind Lachenmann's and Ferneyhough's music is a contradictory impulse. They are careful to compose structures that nourish contradiction rather than "solve" it with some kind of false synthesis. Their work thus bridges the philosophical gap between German generalizing and English positivism (Hockings 1995, 14).

This contradictory impulse in their use of rigorous compositional procedures may be linked to their studies with unorthodox serialists. Lachenmann studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono, and was very much taken with the latter composer's vision of what Western music

might become in the aftermath of the Holocaust, *the* pivotal demonstration of the failure of reason to stand up to fascist power. Lachenmann was influenced by Nono's rejection of nineteenth-century bourgeois elements and his basic concern for the social and political functions of music. In Lachenmann's own compositions the result is, according to David Alberman, "nothing less than a Cartesian reassessment of Western music and art in general. Central tenets such as the unconditional pursuit of beauty, standardised definitions of beauty, or the notion that music should only soothe the human mind, and not disturb it . . . come under critical scrutiny" (Alberman 1995, 15).

Ferneyhough studied with the Swiss composer Klaus Huber and was influenced by Huber's sense of transcendentalism. Ferneyhough, according to Toop, is one of the few composers to "remain faithful to the idea of art as the endless search for the transcendental, and of music as potential revelation" (Toop 1993, 54). Unlike some of the orthodox serialists, his compositions don't seek to exhaust material but rather to unleash its future potential. Speaking in general terms, a total serial piece, like much process-oriented music, begins with the initiation of a process and ends when the process ends, usually after most, if not all, permutations have been used. Ferneyhough's compositional approach is much broader in scope and more narrowly focused on systemic procedure in order to create, or uncover, inherent contradictions in the system itself. It is certainly true, as Jonathan Harvey puts it, that "Ferneyhough has absorbed the discoveries of total serialism to a profounder degree than almost anyone else of his generation, without actually subscribing to its orthodoxies in his music" (Harvey 1979, 123). Ferneyhough distinguishes between three types of serialism (Ferneyhough 1995, 227). The first is simply used to generate the material of a piece. The second involves a kind of sedimentation process from a given set of initial elements. The third type, in which he includes his own works, involves a pressurized channeling of materials through a series of gridlike filters. The pressure is caused by resistance as one element is pressed up against another. Often in his music one can locate a dichotomy between strict or automatic and informal or intuitive structural approaches. For example, complex webs of polyphony are harnessed with organic, high-profile gestures. The friction between these approaches results in the extreme types of musical expression for which he is known.

Both composers appropriate some accoutrements of serial and avant-garde practice, but compositionally integrate them through decentering and dispersion, two hallmarks of postmodern technique. For example, they often utilize extended, instrumental techniques as an integral part of a work's fabric, rather than as special effects. With the possibility open for any sound, they meticulously shape their respective sound worlds with a variety of resources, excluding only reified takes on previous styles. It is instructive to repeat Ferneyhough's take on the post–World War II move to

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aleatoricism, which he discusses in an essay entitled "Parallel Universes." In it he says that the assumption that "the increasingly threatening discrepancy between process and perception which lay at the heart of advanced serial practice could be annulled via recourse to the blatantly uncritical mimeticism of the aleatoric, in which the problematic nature of the fracture was naively celebrated rather than rigorously probed" (Ferneyhough 1994, 18). He goes on to link this assumption with a kind of postmodern powerplay in which one metadiscourse of repression merely replaces another (20). The work of Ferneyhough and Lachenmann is often mistaken for serialism or avant-gardism but it more closely resembles Foster's postmodernism of resistance.

Lachenmann and Ferneyhough are controversial figures bent on making the most out of music. They employ a diverse range of instrumental and compositional techniques. In their music one frequently encounters what Ferneyhough has called "too muchness" (Ferneyhough 1995, 451). In reference to Lachenmann's music, instruments are played in every conceivable manner. In a sense his music is about the collision between performers' bodies and their instruments. His performers must learn how to connect anew with their instruments. In Ferneyhough's music, "too muchness" is brought about through the intentional overloading of informational/instructional layers. In both cases the performer's responsibility increases.

Both composers privilege the act of writing and are fastidious notators. But, whereas Ferneyhough minutely details almost every musical parameter, Lachenmann is more concerned with detailing the methods for producing sound. Their *écriture* (that is, the act of writing/notating musical ideas) points to Jacques Derrida's notion of *play* which he defines as the disruption of presence (Derrida 1978, 292). Things are rendered unstable through processes of substitution, leading to the excessive, overabundance of the signifier. Signifiers are literally the basic sonic stuff of music. Lachenmann's and Ferneyhough's scores require that their performers *play*, not merely play.

By injecting their music with excesses of all kinds, Lachenmann and Ferneyhough attempt to forestall the closure inherent in all acts of recognition. One primary example involves the concept of noise, whether sonic or semiotic. Sonic noise masks or mutates sound and is a primary tool of Lachenmann's compositional technique. One might think of semiotic noise as involving interference in the process of signification itself. They both incorporate this noise in their music.

LACHENMANN

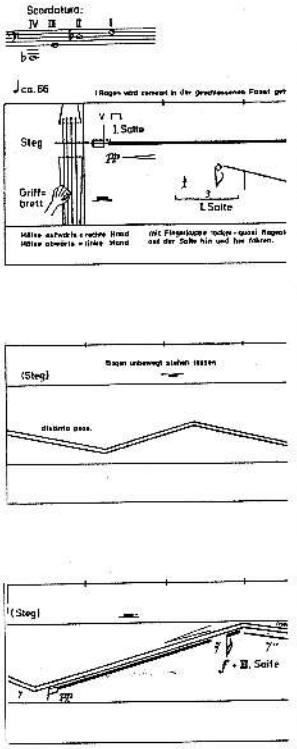
Lachenmann's early work was in a post-Webern, serial style. Although he borrowed Nono's pointillist technique, his primary focus was on the sonic potential of his materials (see Gottwald 1980). In the late 1960s he began to explore radically unconventional instrumental writing, and developed a compositional technique that he calls "rigidly constructed denial"

(Lachenmann 1989b, 8). At its core it involves the intentional exclusion of unquestioned or habitual standards, brought into *play* through the use of devices such as fragmentation and masking. But, what is ultimately impressive about his music is the powerful demonstration of expression and the personal vision behind it. Thus, his negative dialectic is transformed into a positive affirmation of the human spirit.

Much of his recent work is involved with forms which reintegrate historical convention. On occasion the pressure of tradition surfaces as an audible reference point. For example in works such as *Mouvement* (1982–84) for mixed chamber ensemble, or *Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied* (1979/80) for orchestra and string quartet, folk music, the German national anthem, and J. S. Bach serve as a kind of naked frame on which to hang his idiosyncratic sound material. Each reference is transformed via scratching, breathing, and drumming, so that only the rhythms remain partially recognizable.

In Lachenmann's compositions noise is so well integrated that distinctions between noise and music break down. For him composition involves "a confrontation with the interconnections and necessities of musical substance" (Clements 1994, 13) through a re-examination of the fundamentals of sound production. He foregrounds the act of making sound, exposing rather than concealing the effort and technique of production. At times the instruments he writes for seem to take on human qualities, sounding as if they breathe, shout, and groan. And as they do this they become part of new virtual instruments compositely mixed in order to, as he puts it, "fracture the familiar" (13). The Russian formalist Viktor Schlovsky has described this process with the term *ostranenie* (making the familiar strange). The principle aim of poetry was, for him, to use language in order to defamiliarize that which we don't "see" anymore (Hawkes 1977, 62). Translated into musical terms this concept is behind much of Lachenmann's compositional practice.

Like many contemporary composers, Lachenmann's acoustic, instrumental writing is indebted to the groundbreaking experimentation of electroacoustic music, itself born of technological necessity. Transferred into the acoustic realm, a new type of *écriture* is born that doesn't fit comfortably with traditional instrumental design or technique. He calls this simply "instrumental *musique concrète*." It is defined in his music through timbre, tone, and the concept of echo (see Hockings 1995, 12). For instance, in *Dal Niente* (1970) the clarinet soloist performs as a kind of airflow filter. In *Pression* (1969) the cello is used as a transmitter of different kinds of pressurized noise. Figure 12-1 contains the first page of *Pression*. The notation indicates physical movements and rhythms, coordinated spatially with a "bridge clef," which depicts the strings, fingerboard, bridge, and tailpiece of the cello. More recently in *Allegro Sostenuto* (1986/88) for clarinet, cello, and piano he employs the instru-



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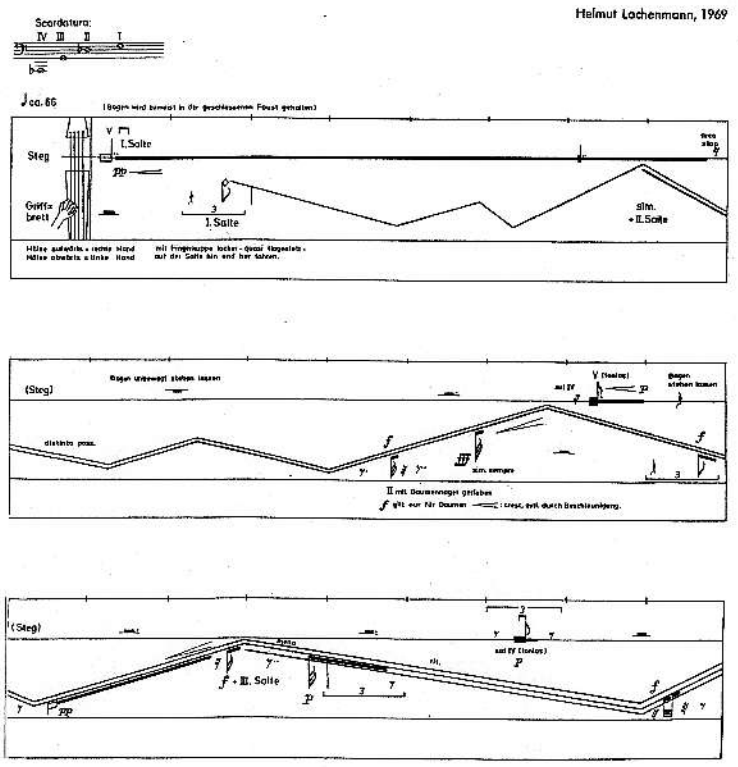

Figure 12-1. Helmut Lachenmann, Pression (1969), p. 1. Used by Permission of Breitkopf & Härtel. © 1969 by Musikverlag Hans Gerig, Köln. 1980 assigned to Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

ments in combination to make a single virtual instrument by mixing their attacks and sustains. Interestingly, the clarinet and cello are used to defeat the piano's natural *diminuendo* characteristic. This piece partakes in instrumental *musique concrète*, but also uses triadic harmonies as a foil to the more unfamiliar sounds.

In *Gran Torso* (1971–72, 1976, 1988) for string quartet Lachenmann explores an almost inaudible region as the players bow virtually every part of their instruments. In the process of composing it, the structural areas for this piece became so overdeveloped that it would have been impossible, given a concert performance, to perform them all. Thus, he utilized only the torso of the piece. Here we encounter an especially potent form of Derrida's notion of *play*, put into practice. Figure 12–2 shows a section of the cello part. Once again he utilizes the "bridge clef" in addition to rectangular notes to indicate approximate finger locations; hollow, diamond

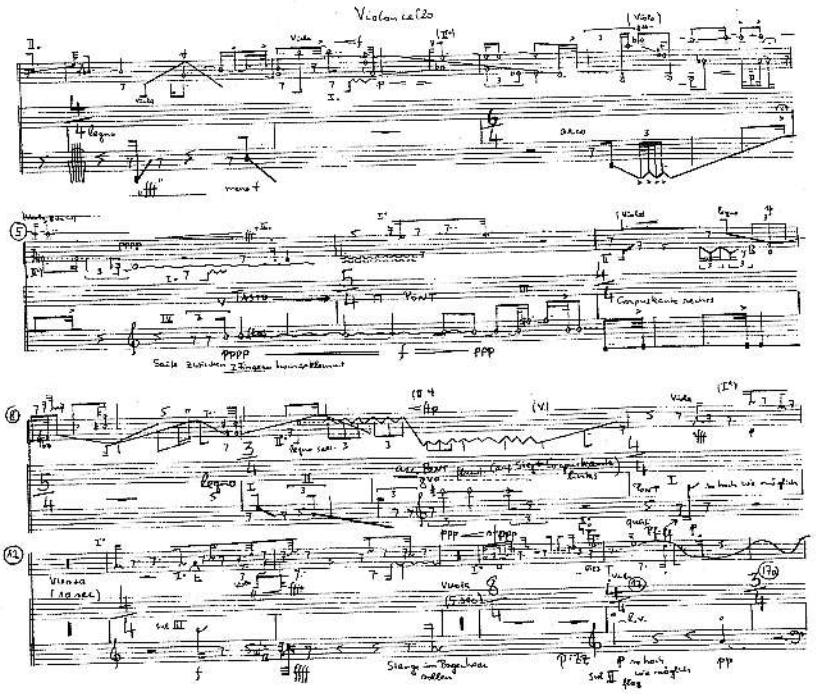

Figure 12-2. Helmut Lachenmann, Gran Torso (1971–72, 1976, 1988), excerpt of cello part. Used by Permission of the Paul Sacher Foundation.

notes to indicate a pinched string, noise harmonic; and many other graphic notation conventions.

Lachenmann's predilection for breaking music down into its basic components is manifest in his incorporation of childlike gesture. In *Pression* it is not hard to imagine that what we hear is the result of the first meeting of a very inquisitive child with a cello. *Ein Kinderspiel* (1980), a set of seven short piano pieces, was written for his own children. In it he combines structural, acoustic processes with pre-existent materials such as children's songs, dance forms, and simple fingering exercises. For example, in one of the pieces he incorporates a compound-duple dance rhythm played loudly on the top two notes of the keyboard. As the hammers hit the strings one's attention is drawn to the action of the instrument and the sounding board. In another piece from this collection, a chord in the upper register is initially struck and sustained. Then, one finger at a time is lifted from the key-

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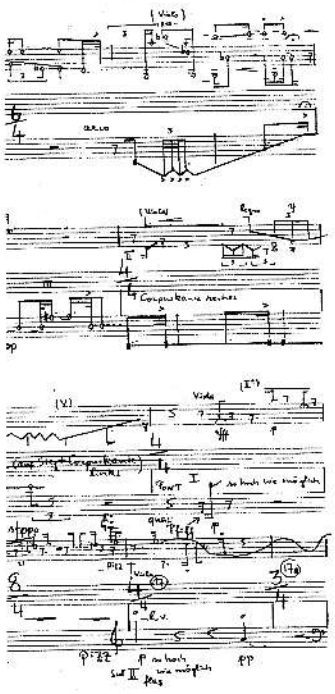

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board causing the harmonic content of the chord's decay to vary. These pieces do not only serve pedagogical purposes, nor are they only for children. As Lachenmann points out, "childhood and musical experiences related to it are an essential part of every adult's inner world." One of his most recent pieces is an opera based on a children's story by Hans Christian Andersen called *The Little Match Girl*. According to Alberman, Lachenmann's "life's work as a compose . . . has always been to open up a dialogue between the child and the adult in all of us (Alberman 1995, 16).

FERNEYHOUGH

Since the late 1960s Ferneyhough's work has come to "embody the energy of dichotomy or contradiction" (from the sketches for *Mnemosyne*, Paul Sacher Stiftung Collection). For example, there's often tension between strict or automatic and informal or intuitive approaches to composition. Complex webs of polyphony and parametric subdivision are combined with organic, gestural, or sonic development. The friction between these approaches results in extreme types of musical expression. Ferneyhough is clearly influenced by the hyper-expressivity of the early music of Pierre Boulez, but also by the static sound blocks of Edgard Varèse. Like most postmodernists Ferneyhough seeks to project actively the idea of multiplicity in his work. He does this, however, through incorporating competing, occasionally contradictory, layers of material.

At its best, Ferneyhough's music includes what Jonathan Kramer has called "multiply-directed time" (Kramer 1988, 46). This is a musical motion that is continuously interrupted in an effort to present the unexpected. One of the ways Ferneyhough achieves this is through what he's called "interruptive polyphony" or "interference form," a device employed in his solo works, or for solo parts in ensemble works. Figure 12-3 contains the first page of *Trittico per G. S.* (1989) for solo double bass wherein this device is consistently and comprehensively employed. It involves two or more separate layers of material each notated on its own staff. The staves are arranged in a variable but hierarchical order. The materials from one staff interrupt those from another, shortening the durations from the first staff. In order to clarify these points of interruption he draws horizontal lines to indicate the flow of events, and vertical lines to show interruptions to the flow. This device has clear psychological, implications, for as Ferneyhough claims, "a note begun *as if* it were going to continue for its full written length . . . is going to have a considerably different effect when interrupted than a note written as having an identical real duration" (Ferneyhough 1995, 5). The layers shown in Figure 12-3 are further distinguished through the application of contrasting texture types. At the beginning the top layer contains only double-stops while the bottom layer contains glissandi. He also uses dynamic, registral, and rhythmic contrasts to achieve the same effect.

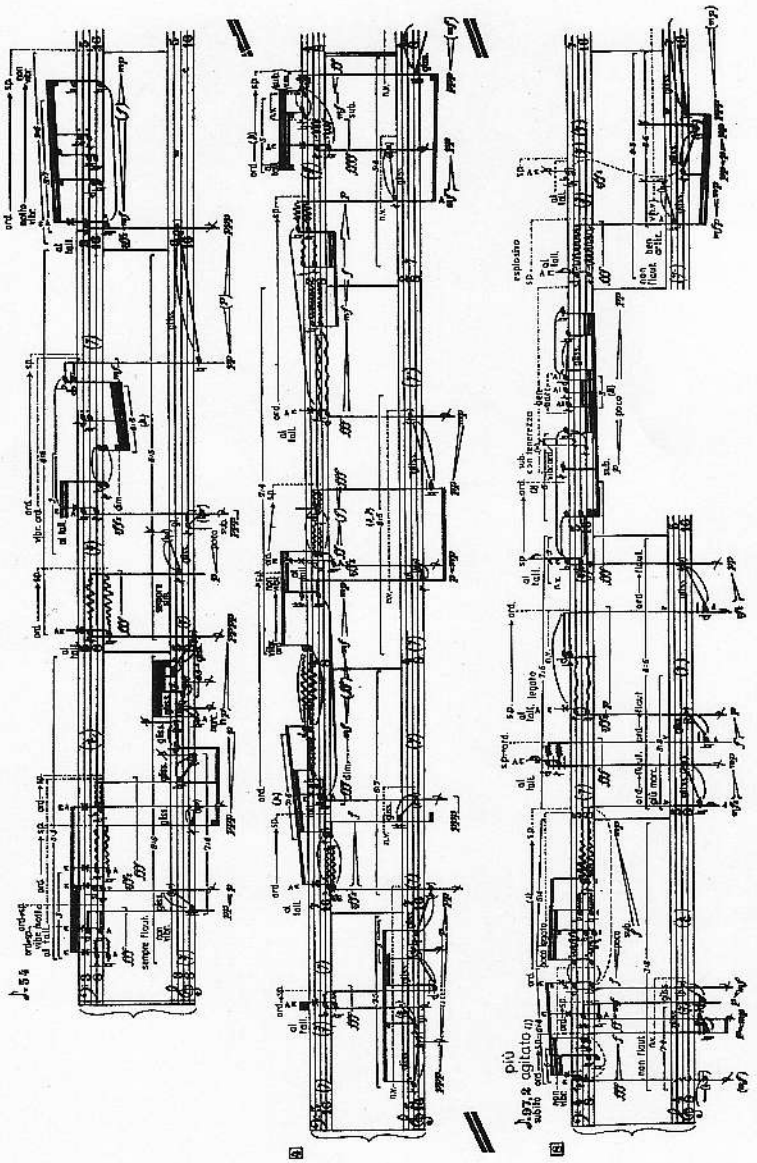

Figure 12-3. Brian Ferneyhough, Trittico per G.S. (1989), p. 1. © 1989 by Hinrichsen Edition, Peters Edition Limited, London. Reproduced by kind permission.

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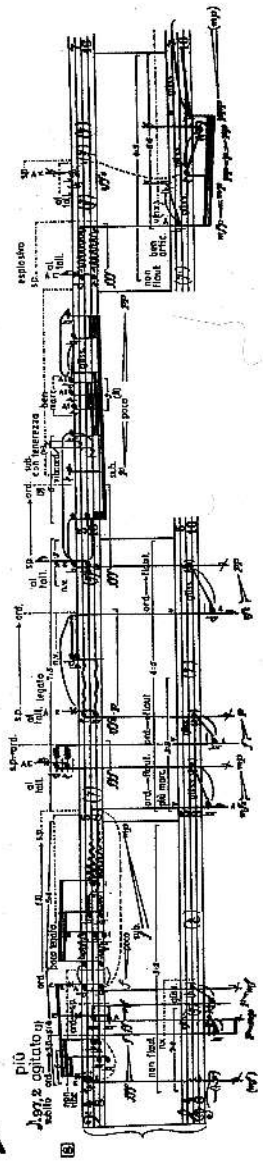

Figure 12-3. Brian Ferneyhough, Trittico per G.S. (1989), p. 1. © 1989 by Hinrichsen Edition, Peters Edition Limited, London. Reproduced by kind permission.

Ferneyhough has employed multiple-line projection in other solo works such as *Time and Motion Study I* and *II* (1971–77, 1973–76) for solo bass clarinet and solo cello, and in *Unity Capsule* (1975–76) for solo flute. But in these pieces the lines work together, in tandem, whereas in his more recent work the lines almost always interrupt each other. Figure 12-4 contains the first page of *Time and Motion Study I*. Here he oscillates between two contrasting types of material. The first is characterized by static, fluid, perpetual motion, the other by dynamic, diverse, and expansive motives.

Ferneyhough's music resists sightreading. Thus, performers must take a step back before learning to play his music. From this very basic point Ferneyhough's performers face the question of how to reintegrate their bodies into radically unfamiliar gestural profiles. Ferneyhough's overnotational practice slows down the process of decoding, thereby delaying habit formation. His performers are enticed into developing unique, strategic approaches in order to overcome the disorientation they face. Percussionist Steven Schick and cellist Taco Koostra have both said that the effort to work through and execute Ferneyhough's complex rhythmic subdivisions results in intense, razor-sharp performances. The point is not merely to play the so-called exact notated rhythms (which any computer could do) but instead to have a human performer make the attempt. Of the standard objections to Ferneyhough's music and notational usage, perhaps the most common is the vehemently held belief that the whole endeavor is pointless because many musical details are inaudible. But, as many writers point out (for example, Dahlhaus 1987; Kramer 1988) what is audible is often illusive and in no way absolute. There are many degrees of audibility, each dependent upon psychological, physiological, and aesthetic factors. It may be difficult to tell the difference between what is completely inaudible and what is barely perceptible. Some music is intentionally pushed to the periphery of consciousness to do its work. The complex rhythms Ferneyhough uses such as a nested tuplet three or four levels "deep" clearly is impossible to sightread but is it really also impossible to perform or hear? One must separate the physically impossible from the merely difficult. According to Henry Cowell, any three-level nested tuplet could be accurately produced if a performer would simply devote fifteen minutes a day, for five months, to such matters (Cowell 1969, 64). The gap between score and result, a fact of all live performance, is radically foregrounded in Ferneyhough's music. Performers routinely fill this gap with performance practice. The less explicit a notation is the more performers must rely upon these kinds of conventional supplements. The accusation that artworks contained superfluous intentions, it is interesting to note, was originally part of Classicism's polemic against Baroque or mannered art (Dahlhaus 1987, 54). Symbols that simply illustrated were praised, whereas allegory was rejected. For Ferneyhough, an aesthetically adequate performance of his music depends upon "the extent to which the performer is technically and spiritually ableto recognize and embody the demands of fidelity (*not* 'exactitude'!)" (Ferneyhough 1995, 19; emphasis his).

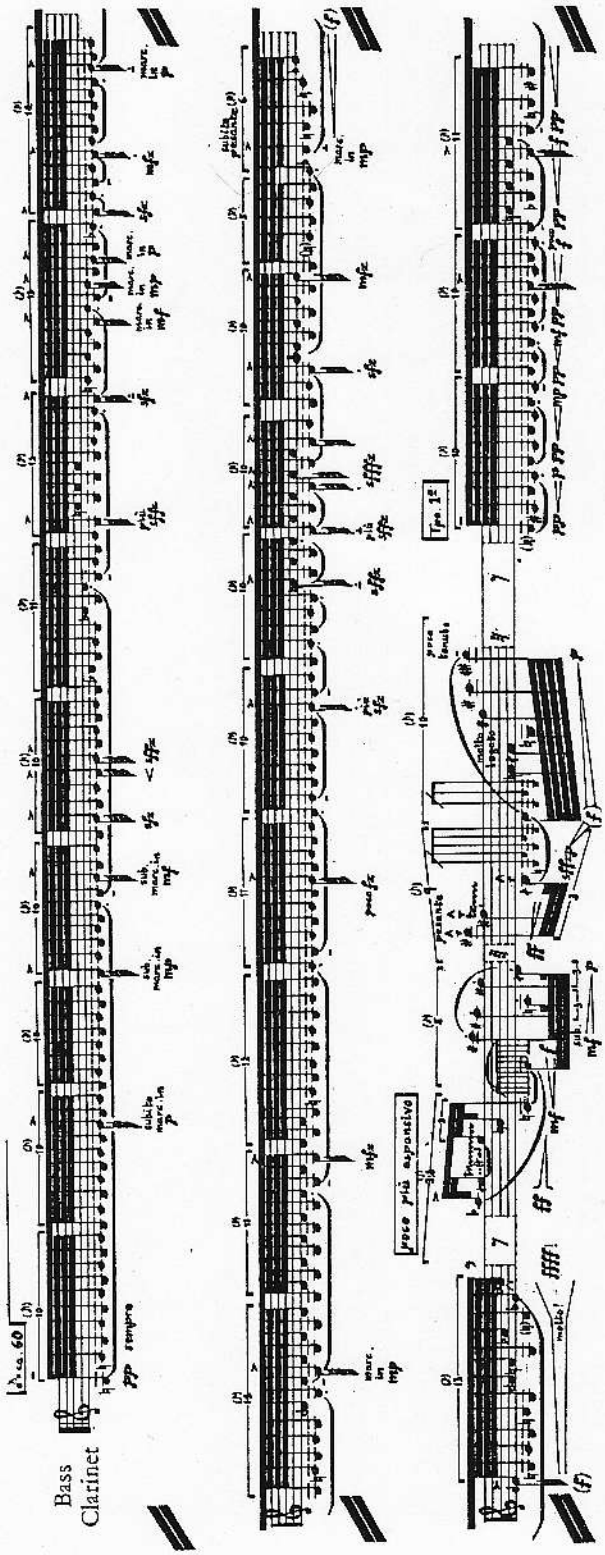

Figure 12-4. Brian Ferneyhough, Time and Motion Study I (1971–77), p. 1. © 1977 by Hinrichsen Edition, Peters Edition Limited, London. Reproduced by kind permission.

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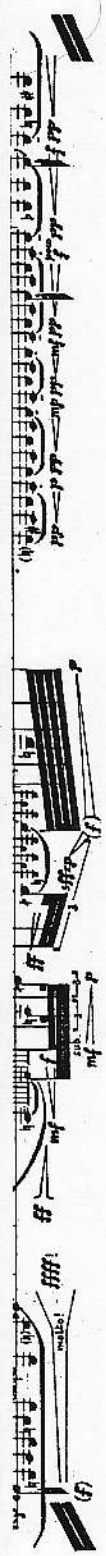

Figure 12-4. Brian Ferneyhough, Time and Motion Study I (1971–77), p. 1. © 1977 by Hinrichsen Edition, Peters Edition Limited, London. Reproduced by kind permission.

The formal principles in Ferneyhough's scores define an environment in which informal, spontaneous generation can re-engage the formal in a meaningful dialogue. His aesthetic emphasizes the human agent not only as the generator of systems, but, also as the catalyst for the system's demise and subsequent regeneration.

CONCLUSION

At its best postmodernism refines our sensibility to difference and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable (see Lyotard [1979] 1984, xxv). If postmodernism compels us to consider pluralism and alternate worlds, then surely this must include all types no matter how difficult they are to comprehend, even forms of postmodernism that break with modernism in complicated ways due to their partially severed ties or close resemblance to modernist practice. As the poet Ron Silliman points it, postmodernism is not necessarily a style but rather a cultural situation wherein very different forms coexist (Silliman 1990, 90).

According to Lyotard the postmodern condition exhibits excess and complexity far beyond that found in any other period in history. Lachenmann's and Ferneyhough's music reflects this condition, demonstrating how the attributes of excess or complexity might be played out in the world of composed sound. Their work is being performed more now than ever before. Perhaps this is because they foreground many important issues relevant to contemporary musicians such as: the role of the score, inventive notational uses, and the significance of closed-form composition to performance freedom.

Lachenmann ultimately desires "a music which is . . . able to reflect everything—including the illusion of progressiveness. Art as a foretaste of freedom in an age without freedom" (Lachenmann 1989a, 9). His statement could easily serve as a maxim for a postmodernism of resistance.

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CHAPTER 13

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Paul Attinello

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present remarkably consi
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