

Dieter Schnebel and Volker Straebel in Conversation

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Straebel: Dieter Schnebel, we want to talk about *Maulwerke* for vocal organs and recording devices, which was written between 1968 and 1974 with various parts premiered on different occasions after 1971. I would like to know something about the artistic context in which this piece came into being.

Schnebel: It continues my earlier series of vocal compositions. At the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s, I composed a cycle of three choral pieces with the title *Für Stimmen (missa est)* [For Voices]. It consists of three musical works of a religious nature. What is new about the pieces is that they have to do with phonetic methods.

The avant-garde choral music of the 1950s – by Stockhausen, Nono, Berio, and everyone else, also my piece *dt 31,6* – already was using sounds and syllables. Nono, for example, had taken the texts he was setting and reduced them into the elements that made up the syllables. In my own piece, *dt 31,6*, I went further and worked primarily with phonemes. Phonetics was then something entirely new; the phonetic alphabet had then just come out, and I had also been pouring over phonetic books.

In these phonetic books, the production of vocal sounds was also analyzed and described. For example: "Mouth wide open, tongue lying low," which will produce with some certainty an "ah". A piece occurred to me where I would not only, as in previous pieces, define the sounds to be used as compositional material with the help of phonetic symbols, but in which the movement of the articulating organs would themselves become material for the composition. This inclusion of breathing in the music was somewhat shocking in those days and caused some

uproar. I am in some ways very influenced by the 1968 Movement, whose members accused us avant-garde composers of being "elitist." And then I thought, I'll make something involving an activity that everyone does – namely, breathing – and compose something everyone can understand. I was completely mistaken. People took offense and in performances reacted angrily; the critics laid into me and said the piece was sexual when, for example, rather fast breathing occurred and that, even, with sounds! I really just wanted to bring into music something quite ordinary. Something else happened in almost all the performances: people got up and left. That's rather normal at New Music events. But they didn't just go out and slam the door; they slipped out quietly, and the decisive thing was that they later came back and apologized to me. They explained that the breathing activities, which the players were performing, had moved them so much that they began to perform these actions as well to the point where they couldn't take it anymore and had to go out.

Straebel: What did it mean for the idea of the body at that time or your idea of the body on which you based the composition when the performers read in the score that the actual performers in the piece are the organs of articulation and that the person of the interpreter almost disappears?

Schnebel: Yes, it was important to me to show what is organic in the production of sounds, and that has something about it which is disturbing. We all like to look in a mirror, but when our mirror image stands before us it's often somewhat embarrassing. So it is with these phenomena of sound production. With this work, I went still more, speaking figuratively, into the depths and noticed that in the use of the organs of articulation a person descends into psychological depths. And this caused me to also organize the entire *Maulwerke* working process psychoanalytically – as I called it. A kind of psychoanalytic music, in which the work

– one shouldn't actually say work – rather, the activity of the Ego, the Super Ego, or the ID takes place.

Straebel: You said later in an interview that you were working on a theory of psychoanalytic music.

Schnebel: Yes, I once wanted to do that. And the beginnings of this theory do exist. Also in the Foreword to *Maulwerke*, but a person always wants to do something which then can't be done; and I'm not a professional psychoanalyst. I know psychoanalysis very well, also from my own experience, but I lack the theoretical background. And actually the psychoanalytic vocabulary used in *Maulwerke* is rather amateurish, I have to admit.

Straebel: From today's perspective – where we are so busy with music outreach programs, trying to bring new and larger audiences to New Music – is it possible to say that *Maulwerke* was a kind of early attempt to establish this connection between experimental music and the public, in that it may have offered another form of participation or do-it-yourself activity? You can also almost read the score as a piece of domestic music.

Schnebel: Yes, that was in fact one intention in my work, which was also influenced by the events of 1968. For me, it was simply problematic for the composer to sit at his writing table, just think up things, and put them on paper for other people to perform, and then not to concern himself with how these things, these compositions, would be brought to the public. And then in the 1970s, it became a very conscious part of my work that, at a high school in Munich, I had a working group for New Music with which we also appeared in public concerts;

these had a big effect inside the school and on the parents and friends who came to the concerts.

Straebel: What was the significance of the introduction of blindfolds and earplugs? Is that an influence on the communication processes, which are a central theme in *Maulwerke*?

Schnebel: Yes, exactly. There is also in *Maulwerke* another important aspect: namely, that of translation. So for example, two participants face each other, and one or the other performs very specific but mute sound-producing activities with the mouth. The second participant should then translate these motions into sound. This person only looks the first participant; in fact, can in any case only see, because what the other person performs is mute. And that means then, that the performers sometimes only audibly translate sounds or what they have seen, or they work purely optically in that they do not listen to the other performer, but only imitate what the other person does visually.

Straebel: Does that emphasize for the public a function that would not otherwise be so easy to decipher? Or does it have to do essentially with the conditioning of the performers through the concentration on certain sensory levels?

Schnebel: The public should get this. The organs for articulation serve communication; they are a communicating structure, where the most various forms of communication are performed.

Straebel: The score of *Maulwerke* is actually less a finished performing score and more a collection of materials from which, through a process of formation developed during rehearsals, etc., a version evolves, which then can be performed,

though performance is not required. You say specifically in the Foreword to the score that it is possible to use the score simply as an experience for concentrating on one's own body and becoming sensitive to one's own body and organs. What does that mean for your position as author? You said in a text from 1970, and I quote, "This kind of music consists of processes, which form themselves and in turn produce other processes. This is of course no longer a work of art, but rather a process, which perhaps has a certain catalytic function to activate something else." Doesn't the composer disappear in this situation?

Schnebel: In a certain sense, yes. And that wouldn't bother me, because in this act of disappearance I am the one who precipitates such processes.

The Maulwerker (Henrik Kairies, Christian Kesten, and Ariane Jeßulat) in Conversation with Dieter Schnebel and Volker Straebel

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Kesten: The score presents one with a very concrete working process or requires such a process. It begins with the Exercises, which are literally things to practice where you learn the articulation material.

When you have done that, you move on to the next process, which is called Productions; these are formation procedures with which you first create small solo segments out of the exercise models. And once you've got this part behind you, you go on to the Communications. That's the point where you meet up with the other performers. These "communications" are structured according to a psychoanalytic system of coordination; this means that there is an Id level, a Super Ego level, and an Ego level. The Id, the processes that bring out the Id aspect, is the A level which involves the more impulsive, urge-like, or physical elements. The B level has the more conventional models to which one conforms, such as form, rhythmic patterns, and structures. The C level is the independent, individual Ego, which expresses itself; the conscious formulations are more encouraged here.

Straebel: Don't you feel a bit left alone by the composer?

Jeßulat: You can't really say that. The composer could be exceptionally present, if in fact you try to realize all the things offered in the score. If you take what is proposed really seriously, what's really there, then the procedure of doing the Exercises, the practicing, would have no end. You shouldn't forget there's the next step to the Opera section which comes out of the Productions section; the extent to which these "operas" derive from a Beethoven paradigm – whether you really

should have a clear beginning, a middle, a conflict, a thickening of the plot, and a solution – is really left open. There are however a number of hidden instructions, which indicate: "Perhaps you shouldn't do it; let the form as a whole not be so accomplished." That's difficult to understand. But I don't consider that being "left alone". Rather, you are confronted by a problem that can finally be solved not alone, but only as a group – though not very quickly.

Kairies: It could be that each person would solve this problem in a different way, that one ensemble would go at it differently from another, and that later entirely different pieces would be performed, all of them called *Maulwerke*. If that were so, then one could say that one had indeed been "left alone." But my experience has been – at least with us – that strangely enough this is not the case. We have now for the third time worked out a version in detail. We also have some improvised versions, and I always have the feeling that what we arrive at in the end is absolutely *Maulwerke*, without question. How is that possible? Perhaps this is the result of some essential requirements in this only seemingly open score. Still, how does this happen? Or is it different for you? One has the feeling that one always hears *Maulwerke*.

Schnebel: Our colleague Spahlinger once said, concerning another of my pieces, *Glossolalie*: "That always works, because it's a good concept." And I believe that's the secret. What fascinated me with this concept, and also gave me a certain satisfaction, is that the different versions breathe the spirit of the times. So, my own large version for Donaueschingen is symphonic, which was clearly typical of the 1970s. And when I think of your version of *Maulwerke* – doesn't that come from the 1990s?

Jeßulat: I have a question which is related to that: This B level, the Super Ego aspect: in some of the detailed instructions, there are various attributes that read a bit like value judgments. I believe in the "Simultaneous Duet" it says, "Derived Material". This suggests that tonal elements can be used. Now in the film version, which we worked on, I've compared our treatment of this section with the 1995 version and have noticed that we treated the section as a parody in 1995, so we used tonal elements really in the narrowest sense of "derived". Oddly enough, in this new version, we didn't treat this element in the same way. There are in fact tonal elements, but they're not pejorative derivations; they simply stand as quotations – I would say, neutrally – in the text. And that would now be the question: What did you have in mind in the 1970s regarding the B level? Was there an esthetic position which might today be different or which no longer exists?

Schnebel: Naturally, because when you work with derived materials, there is a difference whether you work with materials that were common in the 1970s or with those which come out of the 1990s. I integrated these psychoanalytic levels into *Maulwerke* in the 1970s, admittedly, under the influence of my own psychoanalysis. Today, I don't think I would do that. Nowadays, I suspect I would tend to give rather pedagogical instructions.

Kairies: But nonetheless, the instructions are stimulating, and I think that it's important for such a piece to have material which causes you to go in directions which without this material would never have occurred to you. That's how I view a large part of *Maulwerke*.

Schnebel: For me as a composer, I have no doubt that I would do it differently today. Nevertheless, I would not want to revise *Maulwerke*. That's the way things

were back then, and it had its meaning then, and I believe there's enough strength in the concept that for the most part something intelligent emerges.

Kesten: When I work with *Maulwerke*, the basic question for me is: do I concentrate more on sound or on expression? The Exercises and the Productions, the first steps, really have to do with working with sound, becoming acquainted with the physical material and sensitizing the body, but of course with an eye on the results. You're very much in the sound, and as soon as the Communications come into play, you're involved with what will be expressed through the sound. Would it be possible to make a version of *Maulwerke* which only draws on the Exercises and Productions?

Schnebel: Of course. That would then give, so to speak, a rather abstract *Maulwerke*. Somewhat like a picture by Paul Klee. It could be nice.

Jeßulat: I find that a very interesting question. Especially if you've been a musician for a long time, you develop another kind of Super Ego, which tends to control almost every sound that you make. And that doesn't always produce the most intensive and unanticipated moment for the playing situation and the listening circumstance. If I only played what I imagine in the moment or what I particularly like, then the situation would also lack a good deal of freedom or room to maneuver. For me, the psychoanalytic level actually accomplishes a great deal. It is of course very difficult to distance yourself from everything associated with the Freudian terminology – which actually seems quite remote for people of our generation – so that one can in fact accept what this offers. But sometimes, I think we had a version in 2006 that, for me, seemed to go in the direction of a radio play. I liked that, but I'm happy that now we again have a version which was put together with a stronger consideration of psychoanalytic principles.

Schnebel: I'm very eager to see what that's like.

Straebel: I would like to ask how you put together the large form. How did you decide in the current version in which sequence individual segments were to be played, and what were the decision-making processes in the group in order to agree on this form?

Kesten: Yes, that's interesting. The trio version from 1985 and then also from 1988 (which we later played again, and which you [to Schnebel] prepared – perhaps constructed like your 1974 symphonic version) tried from the beginning to achieve a large form. The trio version had three parts: Body, Spirit, and Soul. That would be equivalent to the Id, Super Ego, and Ego levels. This version tried, so to speak, to focus in the different sections on these three different aspects. Actually, we never made such preliminary decisions. When we work, we initially approach each module in a very playful way, in the individual parts; and then the question is really which esthetic decision occurs to you. I believe there is a lot of intuition involved in the way you put it together, how it all proceeds from one thing to another. And then sometimes, large connecting arcs appear, or sometimes they don't. Our 2006 version was in this sense much more abstract. We put really abstract materials next to each other, and then we cut very abruptly. Now with this version, I believe, there's again more flow. Really, we just collect single pieces. This doesn't mean that all of them have to be included. Sometimes things happen in this individual work that you try one after the other, so they become a bit larger. From that, sometimes a larger form is created from the inside. But on the other hand, we do have certain points of emphasis; this time we agreed from the beginning that breathing should also remain a central element in this big form. By the way, I consider that a very important subject, especially for our group. There were often phases where we had

the feeling we were hanging a lot of little "operas" on to each other, all of which had their own development. And then there's the next development, and then there is often the question of how the large arc is suppose to appear. The large arc is also a thing that I partly regard as somewhat irrational, because if you try to build it in sometimes it just disappears.

Kairies: Breathing is a central aspect of *Maulwerke*; that's a thing we discussed, and breathing is indeed usually a very regular, periodic matter. In many of these preparatory tables, you find that there are periodic models. If you carry this over into the Productions, it is something very different. There, you have the feeling that some of the Productions demand that this periodicity be carried even further, in that I repeat "a-a-a-a" or perhaps sometimes "a¹ "; others lead you strongly in another direction. But if you ask yourself, what remains of all that in the performed version, how important to you is the work with these periodic levels? Which role does that play for you, if you think about *Maulwerke*, or about your own experiences in preparing and working out the piece?

Schnebel: I have in my own versions really paid attention, so that there would be a controlling periodicity, a phase where the periodic aspect might unfold very slowly, or where it would be very hectic. And when I think about the original *Atemzüge* [Streams of Breath] version from 1970, it was also important for me then, for the structure of the piece, that there be quiet phases in which the performers would simply breathe normally and almost fall into a state of sleep.

Kesten: But that has almost something minimalistic. That's really a very repetitive music.

Schnebel: That's surely no wonder. The first minimalistic pieces by the Americans reached us around 1970, and that certainly influenced me. I still work very happily with minimalism.

Kairies: It's also interesting that this comes up again and again as a principle in the large form: quiet phases, exciting phases. That's then a representation of life, how sometimes things stay the same, and sometimes go off in unexpected directions.

Schnebel: That's the way music is and how music should be.

English translation by John Patrick Thomas and W. Richard Rieves