

The widening, destruction and fusion of sounding bodies.

The significance of the body in “experimental
chamber music” works by Jörg Widmann

Blurring of sounds

Merely one single tone introduces the *Fünf Bruchstücke* (*Five Fragments*, 1997) for clarinet and piano by the German composer Jörg Widmann (*1973).¹ However, this single tone may represent one of his aesthetical focuses, namely the inconsistency of sounding bodies. Since in this plain beginning the sounds of both instrumental corpora are merging imperceptibly, it would seem that the body of the clarinet is incorporating the reverberation of the extreme short-stricken note of the piano, whereas the disruption of the clarinet sound reverberates by the soundboard of the grand piano at the beginning of the second staff. The actual distinct timbre of the instruments appears to fuse into one unique body of sound (see Ex. 1). In the second movement both instruments' corpora are initially perceived separately, with the characteristic tone of the instruments: the noise made by the clicking of the keys is central, instead of the regular warm sonority of the clarinet, which will be confronted by a “clanky” phrase played by the “prepared” piano.² Similar reconnoitring of sounding bodies can be found in nearly every work by the young composer Widmann. Two works that demonstrate best Widmann's exploration and destruction of the sound, or the already mentioned fusion of sounding bodies, are *Hallstudie*

¹ JÖRG WIDMANN, *Fünf Bruchstücke für Klarinette (in A und B) und Klavier* (1997), Mainz [etc.], Schott, KLB 54, 2004. One can account for more than 40 public performances of the piece in the last ten years alone. Two recordings are available with Widmann interpreting the composition himself, together with the pianist Silke Avenhaus (WERGO, © 2003, CD, 65552) and furthermore with Heinz Holliger (ECM New Series, © 2010, CD, 2110).

² In this context, “prepared piano” means that the pianist has to put jewel cases for CDs on a given area of the low strings (A₀-E₁). See also the excursus about conventionalism in the choice of instrumental corpora in Widmann's composition below, where the term of “preparing” a piano / an instrument is exemplified, too.

(*Reverberation Study*,³ 2003) for piano solo and *Skelett* (*Skeleton*, 2004) for one percussionist, which will be the focus of this article.⁴

Ex. 1: Simplified excerpt from the beginning of Widmann’s *Fünf Bruchstücke*, p. 3. © Schott, Mainz.

Attempts to expand or to dismantle sounding bodies are not necessarily a contradiction. This can already be seen by looking at the given example of the second movement of the *Fünf Bruchstücke* (see Ex. 2). On the one hand, the aspiring New York composer, Christopher Cerrone, called the beginning a “gradual deconstruction” of the clarinet playing, because keys and airflow should be coordinated completely independently.⁵ On the other hand, the sonority of the clarinet is extended through the composer’s emphasis on the “unmusical” adventitious sounds produced by the clarinet, such as the clicking of the keys or breathing. By these means, it is also perfectly possible to treat *Hallstudie* and *Skelett* as two sides of the same coin.

³ Widmann sets great value upon reverberating sounds in general. This can be seen not only in his multiple compositions for piano (see, for instance, his *Lichtstudie III* for piano solo from 2002) but also, for example, in his piece for horn solo, where «the horn player should play the whole piece while blowing into an open grand piano. The pedal of the piano remains pressed by a wedge or a pair of scissors during the whole duration of the piece», JÖRG WIDMANN, *Air für Horn solo*, 2005, Mainz [etc.], Schott, COR 17, 2006, p. 4.

⁴ For both pieces, the video recordings and some interviews with the composer and the performers are available: JÖRG WIDMANN, *Experimentelle Kammermusik. Musica viva – Forum der Gegenwartsmusik*, film by Peider A. Defilla, Wergo, © 2005, DVD, NZ 52. The film about the *Hallstudie* is also available on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=99HZkersN4 (last consultation date 2013/09/23).

⁵ «In the second piece, he gradually “deconstructs” clarinet playing. What initially appears to be a single figure – a repeated and jittery melodic line – actually becomes two separate ideas: one being clicking keys, the other being his breathing. They are movable parts that can be separated and put back together», CHRISTOPHER CERRONE, *Making Music: Jörg Widmann*, in Playbill to the concert *Making Music: Jörg Widmann*, New York City, Carnegie Hall, 2013/05/03, pp. 27-38: 30.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Jörg Widmann's 'Fünf Bruchstücke' (1997). It features two staves: 'Key noise' and 'Clarinet (Bb)'. The tempo is marked 'Presto possibile' and the piece is repeated 'ca. 13x'. The Key noise part has instructions: 'legato sempre breathe ad lib.', 'sempre *fff*', and 'only key noise etc.'. The Clarinet part has instructions: '> fingering, but always without the left thumb (on the underside)', '*fff*', and 'without air current'. The dynamic markings are '*fff*' and 'al niente'.

Ex. 2: Simplified excerpt from the opening of the second movement of Widmann's *Fünf Bruchstücke*, p. 4. © Schott, Mainz.

Sounding bodies? – Widmann's conventionalism in the choice of instrumental corpora

First and foremost, the term “sounding body” has to be shaped or to be modified for the later use in relation to Widmann's compositions. How complicated it is, to define what a “sounding body” could potentially be, can be seen by consulting Mario Bertoncini's dialogue about *Arpe eolie e altre cose inutili*, where the composer discusses differences between terms like “instrument” or “sound-sculpture” for his own sound aggregation.⁶ Due to the fact, that Jörg Widmann adherents to common instruments as polymorphic and polyvalent acoustic bodies, which are always played by humans, in his pieces musical “instruments” are used as “sounding bodies”, rather than a kind of chiming installations. Playing techniques are purposefully instructed in order to avoid fortuitousness. This is the discrepancy between Bertoncini's “sound aggregations”, like his Aeolian harps, and the piano piece *Aeolian Harp* (1923) by Henry Cowell, for example. Cowell noted his piece exactly down and added some precise introductions about how to play the “Aeolian harp effect”.⁷ Equally to this, Widmann handles the instruments as “corpora”, which can only be transformed into “sounding bodies” by the operations of a musician. The same holds true for Widmann's handling of a prepared piano: he never requires a “prepared piano” for a complete composition, but rather instructs the musicians to prepare their instruments only for some single sound-occurrences, without losing their specific characteristics in general.

⁶ A shortened version was first published in German: MARIO BERTONCINI, *Äolsharfen und andere nutzlose Dinge*, transl. Christine Anderson, «MusikTexte. Zeitschrift für Neue Musik», 96 (February 2003), pp. 46-57: 48 f.; the entire discourse is now also available in English, in MARIO BERTONCINI, *Arpe Eolie*, Milano, Die Schachtel, 2007. For a particularised treatise, see *Klangkunst. Tönende Objekte und klingende Räume*, hrsg. Helga de la Motte-Haber, Laaber, Laaber-Verlag, 1999 (Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert, 12).

⁷ Cf. HENRY COWELL, *The Piano Music*, ed. Oliver Daniel, New York – London, Associated Music Publishers, 1960, I, p. 10.

Continuing this attempt to define what a “sounding body” is in Widmanns works, another composer should be consulted: Helmut Lachenmann, one of the most prominent German avant-garde composers, also discussed the meaning of “sounding bodies”. The importance of the instrumental *corpora* can be located for instance in his *Pression* for cello solo (1969) or *Guero* for piano solo (1969/88). Furthermore, his *Gran Torso* for string quartet (1971/76/88) is notably interesting, because here the instrumental “bodies” shall impersonate the common conventions of a concert. However, alienations from traditional sounds are just being created by the use of innovative playing techniques, while – even though Lachenmann wants to articulate social criticism in this music – reverting to usual instruments.⁸ Why this conventionalism in the choice of musical instruments?⁹ It seems that composers try to call attention to contemporary nuisances of society (especially concerning cultural institution) with anachronisms. This can be done by reverting to traditional forms, well-known compositions or exposing new sounds inside common “sounding bodies”. The

⁸ «*Gran Torso* [...] gehört [...] zu einer Werkreihe, deren Materialbegriff sich von der Konvention zu lösen versucht, indem er statt vom Klang von den mechanischen und energetischen Bedingungen bei der Klang-Erzeugung ausgeht und von dort strukturelle und formale Hierarchien ableitet. [...] Der Apparat, die vorgegebenen Mittel, der Klangkörper selbst als Verkörperung von Konventionen sträuben sich (die verfremdeten Spieltechniken markieren nur die Spitze eines Eisbergs von tiefgehenden Widersprüchen, wo der bürgerliche Künstler sich am eigenen Schopf aus dem Graben ziehen möchte). [...] “Torso” heißt das Stück deshalb, weil all die strukturellen Bereiche, die berührt werden, deutlich die Möglichkeit in sich tragen, selbständig in sich weiter fortentwickelt zu werden. Auf diese Möglichkeit, die jeglichen realistischen Rahmen einer Aufführung im Konzert sprengen würde (wo es doch seine Wirkung tun soll), wird gleichsam “widerstrebend” verzichtet: deshalb “Gran Torso”», HELMUT LACHENMANN, *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung. Schriften 1966-1995*, hrsg. Josef Häusler, Wiesbaden, Breitkopf & Härtel – Insel Verlag, 1996, p. 386. Compare Lachenmanns introduction to his concerto for clarinet *Accanto*, too, where he is speaking about a “concrete corporeality” during “musicking”: «Klang nämlich wird hier nicht mehr erfahren als selbstverständliches Resultat des üblichen Instrumentalspiels, sondern als Resultat eines spezifischen Umgangs mit diesem Instrument, der die konkrete Körperlichkeit, die Härte, die Weichheit, die energetischen Bedingungen beim Hervorbringen des Klangs oder Geräuschs bewußt macht und in geordneten, musikalisch erlebbaren Zusammenhang bringt, so daß der gewohnte, schöne Klang hier keine Selbstverständlichkeit, sondern im Gegenteil ein Sonderfall wird», *ivi*, p. 169. Dieter Schnebel exaggeratedly elucidates, that some composers want to provoke by refusing new instruments, cf. DIETER SCHNEBEL, *Übers Drum und Dran der Musik*, in *Anschläge – Ausschläge. Texte zur Neuen Musik*, München – Wien, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993, pp. 206-212: 206.

⁹ «Steht Musik die, wie verstörend auch immer, auf Holz und gewundene Schnecken, auf Darmsaiten und gleißendes Messing angewiesen ist, also rein optisch auf barocke Ornamente und Stoffe [verweist], nicht quer zu Klängen und Materialien, die die heutige Welt kennzeichnen?», MARTIN KALTENECKER, *Substraktion und Inkarnation. Hören und Sehen in der Klangkunst und der «musique concrète instrumentale»*, in *Musik als Wahrnehmungskunst. Untersuchungen zu Kompositionsmethodik und Hörästhetik bei Helmut Lachenmann*, hrsg. Christian Utz und Clemens Gadenstätter, Saarbrücken, Pfau-Verlag, 2008, pp. 101-126: 104 (musik.theorien der gegenwart, 2). In addition compare Henry Cowell’s program notes to a concert in New York City on February the 2nd, 1926, where he points out the advantages of his handling of the “stringpiano” compared to the invention of new instruments, *Henry Cowell Collection* of the New York Public Library; reprinted in MARIA CIZMIC, *Embodied Experimentalism and Henry Cowell’s The Banshee*, «American Music», XXVIII, 4 (2010), pp. 436-458: 438.

occurrence of experience of foreignness amidst familiar objects encourages the contemplation easier, than totally abstract conceptions.¹⁰

The capabilities of astonishing the audience to rethink their dealings with cultural assets are not nearly exploited. Lachenmann's title *Gran Torso* refers to this circumstances and invokes successors, which try to let the institutionalised expectations down. However, Jörg Widmann first and foremost, as a next generation's composer, wants to expand the possibility of creating new sounds with common instruments. Due to the fact, that he genuinely thought about studying composition with Lachenmann,¹¹ it does not surprise, that Widmann also tries to transfer innovative sonorities to traditional "sounding bodies" – according to this the usual musical instruments –, likewise to whose idea of a "musique concrète instrumentale".¹²

Similarities and antagonisms – Does "toccare" mean to hit or to touch?

The renunciation of common playing techniques may be exemplified by the idea behind the "skeleton" piece, which is based on the humdrum dismantling of the percussion instruments after a concert. An ambience is created where the percussionist is left alone with his beloved instruments, while the concert audience and the colleagues are already in restaurants or pubs. However, far from feeling lonely, he has now the possibility to enjoy the variety of his tools. Being all by himself, there is no need to beat his instruments with different sticks; instead, he finally has the possibility to "fondle" them. Such behaviour seems very exceptional for ordinary "drummers". The demeanour appears nearly as autistic features, while the same passion presented by a string player, for example, would – without

¹⁰ See for example Wolfgang Rihm's spontaneous introduction to his *Fremde Szenen*, where he is delighted by the props on stage: «Wenn ich ein Klaviertrio schreibe, weiß ich genau, daß das Klaviertrio ein anachronistischer Besetzungssessel ist. Deswegen finde ich das gar nicht schlecht, daß hier allein die Bühne sich schon so möbliert gibt. Daß die Dinge aufeinanderprallen, Sitze in Stilformen, denen sie als Konstruktionen nicht mehr angehören; die Lampen in anderen Stilformen, die Notenständer, auch der einsame Notenständer hier in der Ecke...», WOLFGANG RIHM, *Auch über Robert Schumann* (1987), in *Wolfgang Rihm "ausgesprochen". Schriften und Gespräche*, hrsg. Ulrich Mosch, Winterthur, Amadeus Verlag, 1997, I, pp. 234-236: 235 (Veröffentlichungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung, 6/1).

¹¹ Cf. *Im Sog der Klänge. Gespräche mit dem Komponisten Jörg Widmann*, hrsg. Markus Fein, Mainz, Schott, 2005, p. 27.

¹² Concerning the question of expanded musical material, see Helmut Lachenmann's conversation with Heinz-Klaus Metzger "Fragen – Antworten" (1980), in *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*, cit., pp. 191-204: 197 f. For a condensed definition of the term "musique concrète instrumentale", see e.g. PIETRO CAVALLOTTI, *Die "musique concrète instrumentale" Helmut Lachenmanns*, in «Musik & Ästhetik» [32], VIII, 4 (2004), pp. 103-105: 103. You will find a detailed treatise in RAINER NONNENMANN, *Angebot durch Verweigerung. Die Ästhetik instrumentalkonkreten Komponierens in Helmut Lachenmanns Orchesterwerken*, Mainz [etc.], Schott, 2000 (Kölner Schriften zur Neuen Musik, 8).

doubt – not be recognised in the same manner. For a moment, the knocking player of the *Hallstudie* appears like an antagonist of the sensitive percussionist, because she beats her instrument like a drummer. On further reflections, one can see that the piano is not hit in a fierce manner, but rather in a caring way. For an explanation of this seeming antithesis, both works are examined, one after the other, to save the conclusive comparison until last.

For a start, however, a short excursus, which will point out the latent ambiguity of the Italian word “toccare”, will be given, in terms of Widmann’s purpose while composing these pieces. As to that, the circumstances for composing the *Hallstudie* are enlightening: Jörg Widmann composed a solo work for piano as a compulsory piece for the world-renown ARD International Music Competition in 2002. This composition is entitled *Toccata*,¹³ because the young pianists have to treat the grand piano in a gently way, while “eavesdropping” every single resonance, as well as to strike the instrument’s body to create a vibrating echo. This contrast is demonstrated, for instance, in the middle of the first part: even as the pianist has to imitate the reverberation of the gentle ending of the *Papillons*-finale by Robert Schumann, Widmann dictates to force a *ffffz* octave cluster by striking the keys with the elbow (see Ex. 3).

Jörg Widmann, 2002

• ca. 50

ffffz soundless

off

off

off

off

remaining

Sound

Put on the cluster left and right soundless with some cluster caution during the bar; right: only black keys, struck (elbow)
left: only white keys in the indicated tone range.

real

pp

ffffz

quasi ff off

Ex. 3: Simplified excerpt from the first segment of Widmann’s *Toccata*, p. 8, mm. 100-108.

© Schott, Mainz.

Although for a moment the harking returns, the second part (*Presto possibile*) is characterised by virtuosic note repetitions and rapidly striking the keyboard. At the climax of the piece the note repetitions are suffocated by an unexpected bang: the instructions on the second to the last page read as follows (see also Ex. 4):

¹³ JÖRG WIDMANN, *Toccata für Klavier* (2002), Mainz [etc.], Schott, ED 9862, 2012.

left hand prepare already piano-lid, ‘strike out’ about 5 cm towards the body, but in the last moment [...]; bang piano-lid down; starting here no longer on the keyboard; knock with palm at right outside of piano [...]; beat on the piano lid with flat fingers, not with the palm; [etc.].¹⁴

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Jörg Widmann's *Toccata*, pages 158-160. It features a piano (pp) and bass (bb) staff. The tempo is marked 'Presto possibile'. The score includes several performance instructions: 'starting here only right hand', 'starting here no longer on the keyboard', 'knock with palm at right outside of piano (outside visible only for the audience, not for the player)', 'beat on the piano lid with flat fingers, not with the palm', and 'bang piano-lid up and down'. The dynamics range from *pp* to *ffff* *poss. sempre*. The score is credited to Jörg Widmann, 2002.

Ex. 4: Simplified excerpt from the end of Widmann's *Toccata*, p. 19, mm. 158-160. © Schott, Mainz.

In this manner the ambiguity of the Italian word “toccare” is demonstrated in a vivid way, which is also incorporated in the following solo pieces, in which the handling of the instrument's body is extended ever further.

Hallstudie for piano solo (2003) – Discovering a well-known body

The circumstances of the premiere of the *Toccata* were discussed above, because the winner of the “special prize for the best interpretation of Contemporary Music” of this competition in 2002 was the Italian pianist Irene Russo, by whom Widmann was inspired, and hence tailored the *Hallstudie* completely for her. The way of playing the instrument at the end of the *Toccata* is voluminously expanded to a downright “knocking-study”. The pianist explores the sounding body of the piano by reconnoitring the instrument at the opposite end of the claviature in a specific manner,¹⁵ described here: the first page of Widmann's manuscript (see Ex. 5) shows the setting and the progress of the work. Besides the descriptions of the “sound box”, the two main positions of acting are clearly recog-

¹⁴ Cf. *ivi*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Broadening the brainchild of Helmut Lachenmann's eminent *Guero* for piano solo (1969/88), in which the piano is treated as if it was the “percussion” instrument *Guero* («the fingernails [...] are allowed to glide (without striking any keys) at the prescribed speed over the specified areas on the keyboard»), HELMUT LACHENMANN, *Guero für Klavier*, Wiesbaden [etc.], Breitkopf & Härtel, EB 9018, 1988, introduction text), the pianist of *Hallstudie* has to start from the opposite side of the sounding box. Not the instrument's keyboard is to the fore – to the contrary the complete corpus of the piano is focused by Widmann. A comparison seems conceivably possible rather with Cowell's *The Banshee* from 1925 (cf. H. COWELL, *Piano Music*, cit., pp. 8-9), in which a second player is striking the open strings, while the other player just sits in front of the keyboard and has to hold down the damper pedal (cf. M. CIZMIC, *Embodied Experimentalism*, cit.). In addition, see Kagel's *Transición II* (1958/59), in which two drummers are playing entirely on the grand piano, too (MAURICIO KAGEL, *Transición II für Klavier, Schlagzeug und zwei Tonbänder*, 1958/59, London, Universal Edition, UE 12809, 1963).

nisable. At “position I” the pianist has to stand at the back-end of the grand piano, where she will start to hit the wood’s edge of the instrument in a very percussive manner (see Ex. 6). The composer once compared this beginning with Morse code signals and the imagination of a confined human, who tries to transmit messages.¹⁶ This ensures that the interior of the sounding body stays focused in the *Hallstudie*.



Ex. 5: Extract of the initial page of the manuscript of Widmann’s *Hallstudie* (Freiburg i. B., December 2003). © Schott, Mainz.

¹⁶ Cf. *Im Sog der Klänge*, cit., p. 37.

Rests are to create freely, take your time Jörg Widmann, 2003

Ex. 6: The beginning of Widmann’s *Hallstudie*, mm. 1-9 (simplified transcription of the manuscript by the author). © Schott, Mainz.

Consequently, the purpose of the composition is to produce sound secludedly from the keyboard, namely by creating sounds by the means of the whole instrument.¹⁷ This idea is emphasised not only by the starting position of the performer, but also in the aspect, that the pianist has to lean inside the instrument’s box during the first part of the piece. In order to apprehend the slightest attacks, the loud pedal is locked well-nigh through the entire piece. As a result, even minimal impulses induce vibrations, spreading out into amplified sonority. After a couple of sound experiments, the pianist works her way forward to the claviature, without stopping to throb on the piano’s body. Even when she reaches the front-side of the instrument (position II), she still does not use the keys, but rather continues to explore the possibilities of creating new sounds. After a while, strummed notes follow, but these tone repetitions mingle with the previous world of thuds, since the strings are mostly dampened. In opposition to this, the first struck harmony really appears rather scandalising, as it is treated like an alien element in this context. In the aftermath of the “foreign body”, an A minor chord has to be kept back, which is why Widmann wrote in the score (see also Ex. 7):

Right after playing the chord, jump up like being bitten by a tarantula, and try “to extinguish the fire” by muting the used string sections one by one as quickly as possible.¹⁸

¹⁷ Peculiar to this is the fact that the outline of the grand piano leaves out the depiction of the keys (cf. Ex. 5).

¹⁸ «Direkt nach Anschlagen des Akkord[s] wie von der Tarantel gestochen aufspringen [means: as though she had been stung by a bee] und das “Feuer zu löschen” versuchen durch schnellstmögliches Abdämpfen der verschiedenen beteiligten Saitenbereiche hintereinander», cited after p. 6 in the manuscript of Jörg Widmann’s *Hallstudie*.

their instruments, but the pieces require a specific stage presence, too.²⁰ The score of *Hallstudie* partially resembles choreography, as it prescribes that the pianist should stand on the first position, sit on the second position for some of the time, and even has to kneel under the piano at the end. Otherwise, the target of all this fixations is only the creation of a unique sound. From this point of view, the piece seems even traditional, particularly because it renounces a preparation of the instrument in the conventional sense. The pianist has to produce the different sounds, not the instrument itself. Merely, the mechanically locked pedal functions as an amplifier for the generated sonorities and will be unlocked by the performer at the end of the piece. Thus, the focus is on the interaction between the energetic body of the instrumentalist and the sounding box of the instrument, and not on the required actions presented on the stage.

The classification of *Skelett* presents itself more difficult. In an annotation to the piece, Widmann explains: «The result is not a “piece” in the traditional sense, for certain; not a “performance” either, because it aims for a listener and is much less an “improvisation”». ²¹ Otherwise, the “plot” of *Skelett* was already mentioned above, which again brings up the question about the “type” of such a composition. Due to the fact, that there does not exist a written draft, the problem of a genre discussion exacerbates itself. Until now, there have been, more or less,²² only verbal agreements between the composer and the drummer Stefan Blum,²³ who is so far the sole interpreter of this piece.

Maybe it bears a helping hand in this case, if we attempt to clarify a priori Widmann’s concept of “experimental music” and his procedure while starting a new composition. He often compares his own exploration of sounding bodies with child-like amazement,²⁴ for example how would a person, who has never seen such an instrument before, approach a piano. A child presumably would not be awestruck; *au contraire*, he would

²⁰ For a distinction between “performances of music” and “musical performances”, see LYDIA GOEHR, *The Perfect Performance of Music and the Perfect Musical Performance*, «New Formations. A Journal of Culture, Theory, Politics», 27 (Winter 1995-1996), pp. 1-22 (issue *Performance Matters*). Also confer Nicholas Cook’s study of musical performances, where he distinguishes performance of music, music and performance together with music as performance (NICHOLAS COOK, *Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance*, «MTO. The Online Journal of the Society for Music Theory», VII, 2 (2001), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html> (last consultation date 2013/09/23).

²¹ JÖRG WIDMANN, *Skelett*, in the programme of the concert which contains the world premiere of the piece, 6. *Musica viva – Spielzeit 2003 / 2004*, München, Gasteig, Carl-Orff-Saal, April the 16th, 2004, p. 12.

²² The only section, which was notated until now, is the vibraphone’s part in the middle of the composition.

²³ I want to thank Stefan Blum as well as Jörg Widmann very much for their manifold courtesy in several conversations and for spending their time in responding to my diverse questions.

²⁴ Cf. *Im Sog der Klänge*, cit., p. 47; and furthermore the interviews on the mentioned DVD (J. WIDMANN, *Experimentelle Kammermusik*, cit.).

be attracted insomuch as he would try to crawl inside this “magic body”. In this manner Widmann endeavours to reconnoitre the instruments *de novo ab ovo*. His way of proceeding is based on the restrictions to use very simple material. Looking distrustfully at a common practice of sound generation could open up a new perception, which in turn encourages new possibilities of playing techniques. According to that, Widmann takes the expression “experimental chamber music” literally, before he assembles the findings of the “Laboratorium” to a dramatic composition. By doing so, the creation of different sounds is emphasised, whereas the notated motion sequences solely conduce this. It is also important that Widmann rejects any reference to improvisation after this study phase, because he wants to protect his pieces against arbitrariness.

In the end, this indicates that not a single one of the reviewed pieces could be labelled as a “performance” in a conventional sense.²⁵ Moreover, the only composition by him which may fit in this classification is his early work *Duell* (*Duel*, 1998) for trombone and electric guitar. In this musical contest, the visual impressions are *de facto* dominating the structure, for instance when both players spend maximal energy, while silently playing instruments.²⁶ In all other works by Widmann, excluding the six pieces for music theatre indeed, the acting is a side product. Although we do not have the opportunity to prove these proposition for *Skelett* with the help of a score, which would reveal the taken liberties by the interpreter, it will be demonstrated that there is a stringent architecture, which prevents the percussionist from extemporising.

***Skelett* for one percussionist (2004): composition or improvisation?**

Analysing *Skelett* on the basis of the quoted video recording, one might run the risk of interpreting the interpretation without differentiating between the acting and the notion by the composer. Thus, different recitals have some influence on this study, albeit the obtainable recording is emphasised due to the traceability. At Berlin’s *Ultraschall* festival for New Music, both *Hallstudie* and *Skelett* were presented on January the 20th, 2007. Prior to this concert, Jörg Widmann and Stefan Blum slightly revised the percussion solo piece, into a

²⁵ Admittedly, the term “performance” seems, equally to “sounding body”, requiring a remaining definition. Confer hereto Philip Auslander’s thoughts: «Many other things can be understood as performative constructs: personal identity may be seen as something one performs, for instance. One can speak of performing a self in daily life just as readily as one speaks of performing a text in a theatre or concert hall. In short, the direct object of the verb to perform need not be something – it can also be someone, an identity rather than a text», PHILIP AUSLANDER, *Musical Personae*, «The Drama Review», L, 1 (2006), pp. 100-119: 101.

²⁶ Cf. the pages 6 f. in the manuscript of Jörg Widmann’s *Duell für Posaune und E-Gitarre*, created together with Christofer Varner and Thorsten Töpp (Freiburg i. B., 1998).

version which is soon going to be elaborated to a score. It is at this juncture that the sequence of the premiere and the mentioned presentation are collated with each other, which reveals the answer to the question of the envisaged architecture of *Skelett*. Attention should also be paid to the second contentious point, namely, the fact that all recitals so far were performed by Stefan Blum. Considering that the working process was a two-and-a-half-year collaboration between the percussionist and Widmann, we should concede authority regarding the realisation to Stefan Blum, too.²⁷ Purely and simply, since there is no chance for other drummers to present the piece so far, we have to recourse to the performances by him.

In an annotation to the piece, Widmann describes both his associated ideas of a drummer piece and his own approach:

Often, the best reason to start working is the impossibility of the endeavour. Initially, it seemed impossible for me to compose a piece for percussion solo. The category and the tradition of the genre of a virtuoso piece for marimba solo, equally to the blindness of affirmative intimidated drumming: unimaginable for me! Entrance of the percussionist, performing miracles, manipulations of the audience, which should be concussed by the archaic aura of the ritualized instruments: really suspect. What then? Especially, considering that I always esteemed working together with drummers, their way of not letting up their figments by trial and error; their inventiveness. Even given the most mundane articles of daily usage of a new interpretation, by inducing vibrations or creating always something unsuspected, but poetic in familiar surroundings. - - - I have decided on the eavesdropping and the childish astonishment; thus for the reactions, a treadled pedal of a vibraphone will be evoked in my case. It is a quiet journey inward the percussion instruments, while being bowed, twanged or winded, but almost never: hit.²⁸

²⁷ Besides a discussion of the initiator – or even originator – of the piece (composer or musician?), also the question about the “character” of the performer should be posed. Inasmuch as Stefan Blum was involved to great parts in the creation of *Skelett*, apparently he is more than an “interpreter” of this piece. Certainly, he is not representing “Stefan Blum while dismantling his percussions after a concert”, otherwise he has not a detached role in “his” show. In this case one should revert to the term “persona”, which is used in the performance studies. Thus Stefan Blum, as the interpreter of *Skelett*, would be «neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer’s “real” identity» (P. AUSLANDER, *Musical Personae*, cit., p. 102).

²⁸ «Oft ist die Unmöglichkeit eines Unterfangens der beste Grund, sofort mit der Arbeit zu beginnen; ein Schlagzeug-Solostück zu komponieren schien mir zunächst unmöglich. Die Kategorie und Gattungstradition des virtuosen Marimbastücks oder des blind affirmativen Einschüchterungs-Trommelstücks: [mir] undenkbar. Auftritt Schlagzeuger, Anstellen der Wunderkiste, Manipulation der [einzuschüchternden] Hörer durch die archaische Aura, die Schlaginstrumenten immer eingeschrieben ist: alles sehr suspekt. Was dann? Zumal, wenn man die Arbeit mit Schlagzeugern immer geschätzt hat, das Ausprobieren, das Nicht-Ungedacht-Lassen; das Erfinderische. Umdeutung auch der profansten Gebrauchsgegenstände durch verschiedene Schwingungserreger, ungeahntes Entstehen von Poesie in scheinbar vertrautem Umfeld. - - - Ich habe mich für das Lauschen und kindliche Staunen entschieden; eben für das, was ein getretenes Vibraphon-Pedal in mir hervorruft. Es ist eine stille Entdeckungsreise ins Innere der Schlaginstrumente, streichend, zupfend, blasend, fast nie: schlagend», J. WIDMANN, *Skelett*, introduction to the world premiere cit., p. 12.

Probably, the chosen title fuels the expectations of the wooden sound of the xylophone. Influenced by the connotations of skeleton and death, respectively in our days furthermore association of a blithe, clattering, dancing skeleton, which is playing the xylophone, most people would bear in mind pictures ensuing from the seminal “danse macabre” by Hans Holbein the Younger (*Imagines mortis*, 1523-1526), especially his xylography of the crone.²⁹ In fact, the ξύλον φωνί (Greek for “wooden sound”) does not play a vital role when death comes to claim someone, and even the images of skeletons playing other instruments were significantly more frequent in former times. According to this, Widmann consequently deceives our imagination of a musical skeleton. His *Skelett* does not insinuate the Grim Reaper, it rather shows the dismantling of our common expectancies we claim from a “drummer piece”.

Hence, the beginning of the solo will astound the audience, because the percussionist appears with a corrugated plastic bottle in the hand, which he plays like a ratchet, while stroking it back and forth with his fingers. It seems that he ponders over a preceding concert and is going to disassemble the percussions in his usual solitude. The bottle, filled partly with water, is an indication of this special setting, which together with a tobacco tin is the only unusual “instrument” of the composition. Apart from these two exceptions, only common percussions are used, albeit in a most exceptional handling. In the initial version no mallets are used during the piece, just two thread sticks are rubbed at the bars of the vibraphone. For the rest of the piece the instruments are primarily touched in a gently way. Soon, a tobacco tin with a string attached to it is added and treated like the «primeval instruments for pizzicato».³⁰ The entry of a plucked instrument in a solo piece for percussions demonstrates, once again, the basic intention of rediscovering sounding bodies. It seems that Widmann tries to rebuild the prehistoric invention of music by the recourse to modest instruments. Once more he confines himself to the restrictions of simpleness, before exploiting the full potential of our common instruments. In this way he reinvents the sonority of the bass drum by dragging the tobacco pin slowly over its head, while generating pizzicato sounds amplified by the enormous soundbox. Other oddly ways of playing the instruments are summarised in the attached table (see Ex. 8), which also shows the order of the events.

²⁹ For example visit <http://digital.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/ihd/content/pageview/2740003> (last consultation date 2013/09/23). The first edition was published under the title *Les Simulachres & historiées faces de la mort, autant élégamment pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginées*, Lyon, Melchior and Caspar Trechsel, 1538 (see also <http://gallica.bnf.fr>, last consultation date 2013/09/23).

³⁰ J. WIDMANN, *Skelett*, introduction to the world premiere cit., p. 12.

The widening, destruction and fusion of sounding bodies

approx. length in seconds	Action based on the version of the world premiere	in sec.	Alterations in the version of 2007 (Berlin)
60	The percussionist appears while tapping and scratching a plastic bottle		
		20	Stroking the wind chimes (without muting); interaction also with the plastic bottle; finally striking a single octave on the vibraphone
50	Touching the bars and blowing through the pipes of the marimba		
30	Taking a tobacco tin with a string attached and creating pizzicato sounds		
60	Turning towards the bass drum by dragging the tobacco pin slowly over this head while generating pizzicato sounds	30	Duration is halved
15	Creating pizzicato sounds on the tobacco tin, without the resonance body of the drum		- dropped out -
25	Playing the vibraphone while rubbing the string on the bars		
300	Taking thread sticks to “rasp” on the vibraphone and making noise by letting them fall on the bars	165	Duration is nearly halved
60	Picking the kalimba; after plucking it for a while, “bowing” and tapping it with a thread stick	40	Duration is reduced by a third
40	Returning to the marimba, pulling abruptly the bars off one row (while screaming!) and putting them down on the vibraphone; treadling the pedal of the vibraphone, while the bars of the marimba are laying on top	20	Duration is halved
10	Pulling the other row of bars off the marimba slowly and throwing it on the floor		
40	Blowing the pipes of the marimba like a pan flute, while treadling multiple times on the pedal of the vibraphone	25	Duration is nearly halved
10	Unlatching the tripods for the cymbals, in a way that they clash loudly	85	Large expansion of this “noisy” part: after unlatching the tripods for the cymbals, additional playing on a hi-hat and a tam-tam, also with the help of the chain; dismantling of the tam-tam, followed by playfully actions with different pellets on it and a “peal of bells”; further clashing of a cymbal and ending with a kick into another tam-tam
30	Dismantling the pipes of the marimba and carrying them under the arm while quitting the scene		

Ex. 8: Simplified outline of the sequence of created sounds of Widmann’s *Skelett*, including the variances of the “Berliner” recital in the right columns.³¹

The formal pillars of *Skelett* shown on this list appear as the only fixed elements. Nevertheless, it is possible to locate the common thread running through the piece in different performances, despite the fact that there seems to be an intention to disguise compositional devices. However, a rigorous dramaturgy is necessary for the aim of a “natural” removal to the percussion. This shines through the piece, especially in two texturing eruptions. Most of the elements of the beginning are observed as, more or less,

³¹ These shown modifications clarify the transitions of switching the instruments, while imitating the created sound on another instrument, and reinforcing the eruption at the end of the piece, too. At this point, I would like to give many thanks to Alexandra Gronwald, who assisted me very much in comparing and analysing the diverse recordings of *Skelett*.

compulsive acts, which heat up into a scream.³² Similar to the A minor chord in the *Hallstudie*, this outburst causes a new dealing with the musical material and coincidentally another view towards the instrumentalist. Hence, it turns out that the performer is not completely unified with the piece, as in a performance, but rather a musician caught unaware by the force of the created sounds. This is shown again, when the percussionist does not exit from the stage after his furious burst of passion, in which he makes much of noise by unlatching the tripods for the cymbals, but to the contrary he has to finish the composition.

In the closing scene of the piece the percussionist unlocks the pipes of the marimba and carries them under his arm while quitting the scene. In ending the *Skelett* this way, the interpreter's body seems to merge in an analogous manner to his instruments as set out above in the final image of *Hallstudie*. The process of disassembling exhibits the interiority of the instrument, but it also demonstrates clearly to the audience that a modern xylophone consists not only of wooden bars – as shown in the prior sonorous raising up – but rather of the resonating metal pipes, which were demonstrated earlier, by playing them like huge panpipes. That way Widmann explicitly visualised the described quiet journey inward the percussion instruments,³³ as well as coupling the bodies of the instrument and the performer conspicuously. By “skeletonising” the marimbaphone, the composer closes the circle and concludes his piece.

Conclusion

To sum up, the deliberations showed Jörg Widmann's multifarious handling of sounding bodies in selected chamber music works. His mentioned basic notion of “astonishment” is nevertheless misconceiving: the aim of his compositions is not to impress the audience with effects, but rather to get the listeners to think about what the widely used sounding bodies really are. He refers solely to traditional instruments, to show that the sounds of their bodies are definitely not exhausted. Widmann's hope is that this could

³² This explains also the differences between a composition and a performance, because the scream is not a cogent consequence of the preceding, but rather an architectonic intervention of the composer to structure the exigent development of the piece. Cf. an interview with Widmann, where he explains: «That scream seems totally unmotivated; but after the silence there is the need at that point to place a structural cornerstone, namely the scream» (the German version is also on the DVD J. WIDMANN, *Experimentelle Kammermusik*, cit.).

³³ Analogical to the contradiction of the wooden instrument with a metallic inside, this last “journey inward the percussion instrument” is coincidentally the only moment where the percussionist intimidates the audience by aiming the metal pipes towards it.

provide a different definition of what drums or a piano truly are.³⁴ However, the experimental phase takes place only during his period of research after the crystallised sounds are combined to a firm composition. An exception is the solo piece *Skelett* for percussionist, due to the fact that there does not exist a written elaboration yet. By analysing different performances, a specific structure could be found. Contrary to a «post-modern arbitrariness»,³⁵ Widmann tries to present a way to the audience to achieve an expansion of consciousness by rediscovering the miracle of music, while expanding the sonorities of common “sounding bodies”. Indeed, also the bodies of the interpreters are considered again, which was demonstrated by some compositions of Jörg Widmann. Besides *Skelett*, for example his *Hallstudie* illustrates a broader use of both, the performer’s and instrumental’s body, by «altering and manipulating the gestures of playing» the instruments.³⁶

NOTE

About the musical examples the author, according to the guidelines and under his own responsibility, obtained from the copyright holders consent to the publication.

³⁴ Cf. the interview to *Skelett* on the DVD J. WIDMANN, *Experimentelle Kammermusik*, cit.

³⁵ This is an expression that Widmann often uses, as seen, for example, in the interviews on the DVD mentioned.

³⁶ M. CIZMIC, *Embodied Experimentalism*, cit., p. 455.