

Return and Progress: To Wolfgang Rihm on his Fiftieth Birthday

I listen to a composition by Wolfgang Rihm:

Expressiv, eruptiv, exzessiv, tonisch, chthonisch, nicht katatonisch, gewaltig, brachial, schwelend, schwelgend, anschwellend, vulkanisch, überschwenglich, überschwappend, übertrieben, übertreffend, übermütig, überschiessend, überzeichnend, übermalend, übertönend, überwältigend...und überhaupt (to be continued)

[expressive, eruptive, excessive; tonic, chthonic, not catatonic; powerful, brachial; simmering, indulgent, swelling, volcanic, effusive, overflowing, exaggerating, exceeding, cocky, crossing over, overdrawn, overblown, overpowering... and in any case ("to be continued")]

When Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich asked me whether I wanted to participate in a symposium about Wolfgang Rihm, I immediately agreed — because I respect Wolfgang Rihm very much and also feel connected to him through bonds of friendship. Even more than that: for some reasons I consider him, although he is younger, a kind of older brother.

Jungheinrich — forever “young” already by name — proposed “Return” (Wiederkehr) as a topic, and this was another reason for me to respond immediately in the affirmative, especially since it is the title of a composition of mine. Did he perhaps think of this composition written more than thirty years ago, and what could it have to do with Wolfgang Rihm and his music? While still pondering the riddle, I received the program announcing the event and realized that the topic I was assigned had been slightly changed, making however a big difference: “Progress and Return” — I could not talk about that, I thought; that is a difficult philosophical issue. My father was a philosopher, and that may explain why I had, from very early on, a rather ambiguous relation to philosophy. In addition — to formulate it roughly and in an entirely unphilosophical manner — I do not believe in progress.

I will not deny that in the history of mankind — a history so brief and already so long — there have been steps toward progress on many fronts, positive ones as, for instance, in

the fight against diseases, as well as negative ones as, for instance, in the fight against humans. Napoleon is supposed to have exclaimed in the presence of Talleyrand: “Why should I be concerned about a million deaths!” But he had to make strenuous efforts to achieve that goal. At the same time, Beethoven exclaimed [to the violinist Schuppanzigh]: “Why should I be concerned about your fiddle!” Here we can see the vast difference between politics and music, especially since Beethoven was concerned about the violin; I am less sure about Napoleon and his soldiers. To kill one million people today has become faster, easier, and — I am almost inclined to say — less painful. In these days we commemorate the anniversary of the attack on the twin towers in New York City, which, at the beginning of the new century, reminded us that human beings have not become different at all; on the contrary, they have become diligent students and have learned to use the most progressive technological means for pursuing their all-too-human, i.e., animal-like, urges, which have not changed during the last 3000 to 10,000 years and which are pervaded by creative and destructive atavisms. Unfortunately, there are innumerable examples — only one should be mentioned here: The concentration camp Buchenwald was intentionally constructed near the site where Goethe took his walks and where German literary Classicism was at home; it shows how fragile and endangered the miracle of culture is — endangered always by forces from outside and, especially, from within — and how easy it is for humans to be pushed below their level. (What is their level anyway?) “Furchtbar und wunderbar ist der Mensch” (terrible and wonderful is man), thousands of years ago and still today.¹

This year I visited the nuclear bomb museum in Hiroshima. There are museums devoted to the creativity of humans as well as those devoted to their destructive nature, and if history progresses the way it seems to progress (which hardly would be progress), we run the risk of having more museums of destruction than museums of creativity. I was not only shocked, or perhaps not so shocked, by the horrifying pictures; by now we know what humans can do to other humans, not only in Nazi concentration camps, but also today, as we are speaking, in some part of this earth — a planet, so small and yet so turbulent. I was rather moved by a statement in the guest book: after seeing those documents of horror, a visitor felt the urgent need to change his life from ground up. I can sympathize entirely with this position: Life does not belong to us, not only because we did not give birth to ourselves, but also because we are not monads (perhaps

¹ “Furchtbar und wunderbar ist der Mensch. Furchtbar und wunderbar das Leben. Wie furchtbar, wenn wir dies Wunderbare nicht schätzen und dmehren—so lange wir leben!” My own text in *Vanitas?* (1999) for 4 solo voices (SATB) and orchestra, Milano: Ricordi, 1999.

nomads, and soon just maggots.² This often unauthentic form of existence — when, if not in view of the violence and fragility of all life, should we make an attempt to change it?! And confirm our resolution to hear and write a kind of music that does not need to be ashamed of itself even in the presence of death! To come back to the issue of progress: It is a fact that, after the first nuclear bomb has fallen, nobody can escape the dilemma of progress. In comparison to what nuclear devices can accomplish today, the Hiroshima bomb is almost touchingly inefficient. Progress, unfortunately, continues — what Goethe called the Velociferian nature, an apt word combination mixing *velocitas* (speed) and *Lucifer* (devil), moves on. A bulletin board in the Hiroshima museum informs us about when the most recent nuclear test took place: just a few weeks ago. Real progress will only come about when humankind will agree that war is a crime, when they declare war illegal and punish violators (hopefully, without war). As long as this does not happen — such utopian vision can perhaps be realized only in the most distant future and with living organisms other than human beings — only blind hope remains.

“An uncanny coincidence of fatalism and will toward progress characterizes now any thinking about the continuation of history.”³ Does this apply also to the relatively harmless/innocuous field of music? What does the concept of progress have to do with music? True, there are regressions — whenever the standards established by the great music of all times are undercut. Does Beethoven represent progress in comparison with Bach? And Wagner in comparison with Beethoven? And Schoenberg in relation to Wagner? And the most refined electronic sound in comparison with the sound of a Stradivarius violin? And so forth up to Wolfgang Rihm and the composer born in 2002, who will perhaps be honored fifty years from now with a symposium. Unfortunately, I will not be able to participate: Granted, there may be no progress, but there exists the relentless progression of time, whose success and result and masterwork is death. And it is of no use to count on *Wiederkehr* (Return/Recurrence), be it eternal or not.

Now, however, I have to say a few words about *Wiederkehr*, the piano piece I wrote in 1971, because it makes clear how I am connected, despite all the difference in our work, to Wolfgang Rihm already early on. The motto for the piano piece *Wiederkehr* is a statement by Adorno: “Unresolved/Unanswered/Open, however, is the question of the dimension of the simultaneous/simultaneities as a whole, which had been degraded to

² The original play with words „Monade, Nomade, Made“ does not come across in the translation.

³ Karl Löwith, “Das Verhängnis des Fortschritts,” in *Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte*, Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1990, p.336.

being merely a result, something irrelevant, and virtually accidental.”⁴ What Adorno formulates here, as always with precise acumen, is exactly the situation with which I felt uncomfortable, as did many composers of the time, and which also Wolfgang Rihm soon tackled in his work — every composer in his own way. My ambition was to address the issue not by taken recourse in functional harmony, but in a different, perhaps novel way. I took fifteen very different chords and connected them with a group of other chords, which however were quite homogeneous (since they consisted only of seconds, thirds, fourths, etc.) By connecting these different groups of chords, I generated clear, audible and comprehensible harmonic fields. And as far as form is concerned, I wanted to get away from linear developments and constructed a form, in which the four main sections of the piece alternate in an interplay of anticipation and reverberation. Already then I was interested in clarity and comprehensibility — certainly in a *neue Fasslichkeit* (new comprehensibility), which has nothing to with the ominous *neue Einfachheit* (new simplicity) that could be called into being and flogged to death only by the old simple-mindedness of, well, administrators of new music. This old piece is still important to me today, perhaps because it is an erratic statement: I hardly picked up on this point of departure for a new approach to harmony and certainly did not continue it systematically. I say this not as an indirect critique of the system to which I would not have submitted (even though this critique exists [as a subtext]), but simply as a statement. Sometimes I wish to have been more systematic, in my life as well as in my music (whereby having no system can very well be a system, as Wolfgang Rihm knows well). I think a new general system of harmony is necessary, but it cannot originate like Minerva from the head of Zeus, even less so from the head of one of those composers. It must grow historically — like the miraculously simple, complex, flexible and ever-renewable system of tonality. Today there are a whole series of private systems, including those concerned with harmony, but their problem is that they remain private. It seems to me that by dint of rigorous freedom — I mean a musical freedom that has its roots in the compositional logic of sovereign musical fantasy — we have to select, seek, and find what is needed for the individual work from the diverse resources given to us by history, including our personal history. In this respect, I consider a statement by Adorno and Eisler, which pointed to the future when it was made in the 1940s, still relevant today: “If we are not mistaken, music today has reached a phase in which material and compositional technique have separated, in such a way that the material has become relatively indifferent vis-à-vis/in relation to the technique... The compositional technique has become so resolute/uncompromising that it does not have

⁴ [LL: Here a footnote is needed. I omitted the reference earlier to the Moeck, because it will be taken care of in the work list.]

to result any longer from the material; on the contrary, it can, so to speak, subjugate any kind of material.”⁵

...antinomisch, fraktalisch, fragmentarisch, bedrohlich brodelnd, mitreissend, abreissend — schwarz —, wuchtig, lakonisch, dringlich, eindringlich, aufdringlich, dringend, drängend, eindringend, anregend, aufregend, redend, stammelnd, haptisch, peremptorisch, archetypisch, typisch Rihm, irrlichternd, irisierend, irritierend, umher irrend...

[antinomic, fractal-like, fragmentary, dangerously seething, sweeping along, breaking off — black —, massive, laconic, pressing, urgent, pushy, imminent, penetrating, stimulating, exciting, speaking, stammering, haptic, peremptory, archetypical, typically Rihm, like a will-o'-the-wisp, iridescent, irritating, wandering about...]

Speaking of *Irren* (erring, wandering), I know — and this is another point that connects me to Wolfgang Rihm — that he is an *Irrender* in the three meanings of the word, including those that do not, yet, exist. [LL: Which three?] By the way, *Irren* was a favorite term of Luigi Nono, which however has been abused extensively. What I find *irrsinning* (maddening) is that artists take *Irren* as a motto, in the sense of “wandering” (probably a meaning exhumed from the reservoir of Romanticism), but then make sure, in a nit-picking manner, not to digress from the approved *Irrweg* (path). To insert here in parentheses: I believe this was a dilemma of Nono, who, on the one hand, wanted to set out for the open sea, and, on the other hand, really looked for one path, even the only path — a *contradictio in adiecto* (a contradiction in the combination). But it is the contradiction which, according to Mao-Tse Tung (who, of course, was a Hegelian), moves the world forward, including music.

Do we drift ahead, or do we progress? To return to the issue of progress: Even if there is no progress, the “illusion of progress”⁶ can produce a renewal of art — perhaps only an illusory renewal, as was the case with the serial music of the 1950s, which erroneously considered itself as beginning at the zero hour. (The idea of the *tabula rasa* (or clean slate), the *instauratio ab imis* (or beginning from the ground up), is basically an ahistorical illusion.) As much as I am pleased to have a piece like Boulez’s *Structures* (and, it goes without saying, Stockhausen’s *Gruppen*), the idea of serial music reflects a

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Komposition für den Film*, Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1969, p.117.

⁶ Title of a book by George Sorel, published shortly before World War I.

technocratic mode of thinking, which was characteristic of the time, but which I am unable to see as sensible or as progress. Not everything that marches on with the *Zeitgeist* is, for that reason, already progressive. Beethoven does not represent progress in comparison to Bach, but there is no doubt that he shed light on entirely new aspects of the human soul (to put it somewhat loftily). Not progress, but a decisive change of perspective, a new mode of looking at things, a probing of unknown realms. And it is a miracle that this process is possible again and again, when composers emerge who are able to execute this change of perspective in their musical thinking — a kind of thinking which in music, as is known, involves the entire body, including the stomach. This is what is so great about music and art in general: That even in works that appear to be perfect or — if you wish — organic, natural (in the sense of an inner natural necessity), there are always real or potential alternative solutions/possibilities — quite different from nature, where the thread a spider has spun for millions of years need not be changed. If the same would apply to art and literature, we could stop with Phydias, Homer, Lucretius, and Ovid, and, as far as music is concerned, with Bach (which, admittedly, would not be a catastrophe). Art and music, however, are like a kaleidoscope, which harbors an endless array of possibilities, leading to despair over such immeasurable infinity: “Ove per poco/il cor non si spaura,” as Giacomo Leopardi put it.⁷ [Luca: Can we have a translation of this aphorism?]

...bruitistisch, wild, organisch, verhalten, manchmal schutzlos, radikal und traditionell, voraussehbar, durchhörbar, insistierend, obsessiv, manisch, ätzend, nervensägend, mutig, fickend, nicht fickfackend, sondern Farbe (und Klang!) bekennend, dreinschlagend, hau-den-lukas-artig (nicht mich!), nicht niederschlagend, mit langem Atem, aber nicht langatmig, gestisch, aber nicht brechtisch, eigentlich auch nicht heiner-müllerisch, prometheisch, aber nicht nonisch, bekennend, bewegend, fortschreitend und wiederkehrend, komplex und einfach, unbändig, ungebärdig, vehement, stürmisch, körperlich (wobei, so wie der Bauch ein Denkorgan, auch das Gehirn ein Teil des Körpers ist), ausrufend, in die Neue-Musik-Wüste rufend...

[...worshipping noise, wild, organic, subdued, sometimes defenseless, radical and traditional, foreseeable, transparent, insistent, obsessive, manic, acidic, nerve-racking, courageous, fucking, not fidgety, but confessing color (and sound!), joining the fight, let-him-have it (but not me!), not crushing, with a long breath but not long-winded, gestic but not Brechtian, and not really like Heiner Müller, [footnote??] either Promethean but

⁷ Giacomo Leopardi, *L'infinito* [more bibliographic details: book or article?]

not like Nono, professing, moving, moving forward and returning, complex and simple, unrestrained, unruly, vehement, tempestuous, physical (whereby the stomach is a thinking organ and the brain part of the body), exclaiming, being a voice crying out in the desert of new music...]

Wolfgang Rihm's music is full of energy, and it gives energy. I am grateful for that, because the energy needed for composing — and the energy a composer would like to communicate with his music — is the same energy one needs to live. Without the energy of life there is no energy for composing. Silence, inversion, death. Wolfgang Rihm's overwhelming productivity is a sign of great optimism for the future, and not only for the future of music. We are in need of such an optimism today — an optimism that has gone through the disappointments of reason and yet stayed alive. We need this optimism not only to continue to make music but also to continue to live in a meaningful way. For we do not need to turn around to see all the injustice happening under the sun — it happens right in front of our eyes. Now I have invoked two titles of compositions by Bernd Alois Zimmermann.⁸ I do not think that Wolfgang Rihm knew Zimmermann personally, he was too young (Zimmermann, by the way, was also too young when he died at age 52), and yet it seems that one of the many threads that connect Wolfgang Rihm with many different composers leads also to the world of musical pluralism espoused by Zimmermann. What a different time when I studied in Cologne with Stockhausen and Zimmermann and noticed, with puzzlement, the open rivalry of these two important composers! That was, also in terms of music, the time of the Cold War. The avant-garde fought against the arrièrè-garde, and within each group there was infighting, distrust, sectarianism, a prevailing attitude of know-it-all, hubris, and arrogance. It was a time of *Enge und Einfalt* (narrow-mindedness and simple-mindedness); it was a time when the language code was more important than the content articulated by it — as if, among all the languages spoken, only one could prevail. The history of twentieth-century music shows, on the contrary, that there have been many different practices and that, as far as they have led to authentic works, they all have been valid possibilities. Moreover, Wolfgang Rihm has proven — and I am on his side in that respect — that several codes can co-exist even in the oeuvre of a single composer. Sometimes I speak Italian, sometimes German. What prevents me to be bilingual, tri- or tetralingual — musically? However many languages I speak, it is still the same individual who speaks, even though he divides himself in terms of languages. And divided we are anyway, not only since Goethe, but most certainly since Freud. True,

⁸ *Stille und Umkehr* (1970), Mainz: B.Schott's Söhne, 1971, and *Ich wandte mich um und sah alles Unrecht, das geschah unter der Sonne* (1970), Mainz: B.Schott's Söhne, 1972.

times have changed since those Cologne days of thirty years ago (yes, there has been progress — albeit not enough of it), but it is the personal merit of Wolfgang Rihm that, from the start, he did not want to recognize barriers, linguistic or otherwise. I do not know any other composer — and certainly not one of such a high rank — who appreciates so many different compositional voices and somehow absorbed/incorporated them [in his own language]. Wolfgang Rihm, interestingly, did not commit patricide, which is usually considered necessary [to find one's own path]. On the contrary, he has chosen for himself a whole series of musical father figures. For instance, Luigi Nono. Nono composed a piece dedicated to Dallapiccola (*Con Luigi Dallapiccola*) in which he used, as constituent element of the composition, the interval Dallapiccola assigned in *Il Prigionero* to the word “fratello” (brother). (That's why I am tempted, in accordance with my earlier statement that I somehow see in Wolfgang Rihm a brother, to write a piece, using the same interval as a point of departure and calling it *Con Dallapiccola, Nono e Rihm*.) I heard the premiere of Nono's piece for six percussionists and was impressed how Nono used an extra-large drum to generate a pianissimo (I do not remember with how many p's). When one is big and strong, one can afford to move along lightly—“auf leichten Kähnen” [footnote on Webern??] (on light boats), so to speak. The pianissimo generated on a monumental drum has also a completely different quality than the one produced on a normal big drum. Or is it perhaps to be understood as somewhat mannerist? As if shooting sparrows with cannons? The danger of mannerism is always there, and we should always be on guard to avoid it. The cult of the fractural (*Bruechigkeit*) — the flirting with the fragmentary and the incomplete — can easily deteriorate into a hollow mannerist gesture. What yesterday was authentic need not have the same quality today. “Master, you negate what you said yesterday. Yes, said Zarathustra, for today is not yesterday.”⁹ What is the status of those works that, even though they originated in rugged times, nevertheless appear in a kind of Olympian Classicality? I think of Bartók in whose works the Golden Section does not seem to be grafted on (and also does not sound that way); his works, as is the case with all successful works, will triumph over any kind of smart-alecky theory. He succeeded in many a piece (I think of the string quartets, but not only of them) of squaring the circle: His music constitutes a new classical music, because it is absolutely essential, that is: necessary. What counts in composition is not theorizing or Theodorizing [footnote on Adorno??], but composition itself. And Wolfgang Rihm knows it and demonstrates it to us.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, in Nietzsche, *Werke* IV, Leipzig: Kröner, 1926 (quoted from memory).

...zupackend, direkt, narrativ, effektiv, fragend, affirmierend, hinterfragend, hart, zart, hitzig, kotzig, harsch, barsch, nie lahmarschig, zusammenbrechend, monumental, zerklüftet, ursprünglich, atavistisch, autistisch, würgend, rührend und aufrührend, nicht rührselig, was ich nicht gesagt habe: schön, aber auch hässlich, angenehm, jetzt muss folgen: unangenehm, dialektisch und undialektisch... (to be continued)

[... hands-on the issue, direct, narrative, effective, questioning, affirmative, questioning again, hard, gentle, heated, nasty, harsh, brusque, never timid, collapsing, monumental, rugged, unspoiled, atavistic, autistic, strangling, moving and rebellious, not sentimental, what I have not said: beautiful, but also ugly, pleasant, now must follow: unpleasant, dialectical and undialectical... ("to be continued")]

Talking about the piece I was tempted to write: During the last few days I pondered what to say here and when I got stuck, I went to the piano and composed a piano piece called *Saluto a Wolfgang Rihm*. I would have liked to perform it here as a continuation of my talk with different means, but, even though it is brief, it has turned out somewhat too difficult. Without practicing it a lot, I am not able to play it. Thus, I would like to hand it over to Wolfgang Rihm with cordial wishes and — brotherly — greetings.

What I like about Wolfgang Rihm's music is that kind of freedom which has nothing to do with compositional arbitrariness, but with the lack of dogmatism that was characteristic, to cite a great example from the last century, also of Schoenberg. After he had crossed the desert for twelve years, discovering along the way not only the twelve-tone technique but also his Jewish roots (two processes that are closely linked), he composed several years later in 1938 a tonal piece for the Feast of Reconciliation (Yom Kippur), a magnificent *Kol Nidrei* in G minor. But what does it mean: tonal or non-tonal? What does it mean to be European or African? What does it mean — I almost am tempted to say — to be Israeli or Palestinian? Let's take a look at the individual human beings or compositions and what they represent, without prejudging them because of race or religion or language!

I continue to listen to music by Wolfgang Rihm:

Sagte ich eigentlich schon schön? Ja? Ich sage es noch einmal: schön, sehr schön, wirklich wunderbar. (To be continued)

*[Did I already say beautiful? Yes? I say it again: beautiful, very beautiful, really wonderful.
("To be continued")]*

Source: "Wiederkehr und Fortschritt: Wolfgang Rihm zum 50. Geburtstag," Typescript of address given at a symposium honoring Wolfgang Rihm at his fiftieth birthday in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, 13 September 2002.