

Helmut Schmidinger: 'Put the Connecting Above the Dividing Elements!'

by Renate Publig

For Helmut Schmidinger it is more than a job description to be a composer. However, it is not enough 'only' to compose for the Upper Austrian; and so he is also a pedagogue (being a guest professor for composition pedagogy at the Graz Music University) and a concert organizer—and a very successful one, too. He is especially delighted by the diversity of the activities in this 'conglomerate' as well as by their resulting synergy effects: 'I wouldn't be able to teach without being myself artistically active; but conversely I couldn't be artistically active without passing this on.'

The connection between composer and organizer, too, is self-evident to him: 'Composers criticize the organizers when the concert programmes are made to the disadvantage of contemporary works. Then the city of Wels offered me to take over the "Welser Abonnementkonzerte"—I had to agree in order to become the organizer wished for by the composers. My aim as a concert organizer is to be seen as "one of us" by the composers.'

potential to connect, but this doesn't happen by itself. One has to discover these connections!' Speaking of 'connecting': Schmidinger thinks little of 'ghetto' concerts; as an organizer, he pleads for an exciting combination of the classical and contemporary repertoires. 'There are so many analogies, and searching for the common ground widens the horizon more than searching for differences!'

This combination of traditional and new features can also be found in the compositions by Helmut Schmidinger in the form of quotations, by which he creates references to composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn and Schubert. Apart from musical quotations the main connecting factor is textual quotations e. g. in work titles. A bridge between the generations?

'As an active musician I grew up with this music, it is part of my cultural socialisation, and I count myself part of this tradition. Hence, I try, if possible, to refer to the works of dead or living colleagues.'



Music as Communication

Schmidinger sees it as a privilege to know beforehand who will be the performers of the premières of his work. For him, music is above all communication with the audience and with the performers, with whom he tries to get into dialogue from the first conception of the genesis of a work: 'For me, the point of departure is always a personal, human encounter, to look one's counterpart into the eyes.' He laughingly adds: 'The genesis of almost all pieces begins in a coffee house!' Of course, it is also necessary to find an adequate language to reach the audience: 'If communication is to be successful a language is necessary in order to be understood, an intersection of vocabulary. This doesn't have to be too large, but it needs to be there! An exclusive language fails to achieve the communication aspect of music, which is, for me, essential.'

'Componere', not 'Dividere'

He sees composing as an expression of values; following the translation of the word componere (= to put together), he places the connecting above the dividing elements. 'Sometimes music is used as a factor of identification. Music has the



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Trailer Composition Workshop

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Website

www.helmutschmidinger.com

Worklist Doblinger

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'Classical' composers, too, sometimes encountered incomprehension during their lifetime. 'At the times of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven the programmes were made up of almost exclusively "contemporary" music; that is, the audience was very familiar with the musical language of its time. In our time, the greatest part of the played music is between 100 and 200 years old! One shouldn't wonder when today's language is no longer well understood and almost every encounter with contemporary music is a first encounter.'

Helmut Schmidinger



The Graz Music University

The Graz Music University ('Kunstuniversität Graz', KUG) gave a strong impulse—unique in the universities of the German-speaking part of Europe—by creating the course of studies 'composition pedagogy'. And so, a composition class for children and young people is already in its 3rd semester: 'Children and young people wishing to compose are accepted. Last year, for example, a young composer applied who had already written 15 piano sonatas. That is, there are interested people! One just has to succeed in reaching them!'

Schmidinger was invited to the 'Weikersheimer Gespräche zur Kompositionspädagogik' in Germany to introduce this course of studies. And finally, he wrote his dissertation about the subject of 'composition pedagogy': 'My dissertation provides the theoretical background for the course of studies and explores the question whether composition pedagogy is an artistic, a scientific, or an artistic/scientific discipline; which relationship it has towards instrumental and music pedagogy and how the job profile of a composition pedagogue looks like. All these scholarly basics are treated in this dissertation, including a history of composition pedagogy.'



Composition Pedagogy

That is, anyone can learn how to compose?

'I'm convinced that every human being has a musical/creative capability. Composition is not rocket science! As with any instrument one can grow under professional instruction, especially at a young age.'

It is one task of composition pedagogy to find models of opening up a path for young people that does not require a four-year course of counterpoint. 'In my 25 years teaching at a music school I gained the experience that most students liked to bring their own pieces to the piano lessons. Many colleagues, however, could not understand this and required their students instead, to adhere the "prescribed" pieces—in many cases nipping the children's creativity in the bud. Therefore it is a goal of the Graz Music University to incorporate instrumental and voice teachers, who are after all our contact persons in the music schools, into the composition pedagogy course.'

Another function of composition pedagogy is to preserve the children's openness towards unusual sounds and to encourage their musical creativity already at an early age. 'If you place a child in front of a piano it starts pressing the keys and is delighted in the result. It does not correct anything automatically!'

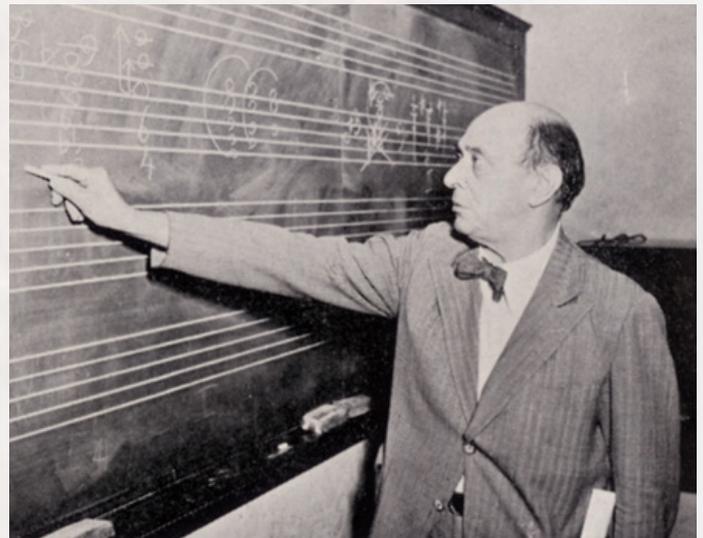
To recognize, value and adequately promote this carefree approach requires skilled teachers. 'It is the function of composition pedagogy to train adequate teachers. The aim of this course of studies is to create a cycle that already exists in instrumental education: children learn an instrument in the music school, continue their studies at university and then return to the music

schools as pedagogues after their graduation. Of course, this is a long-term project; until the first graduates are ready and the music schools are able to install the position of a composition teacher...'



Composition Workshop for Young Composers

Arnold Schoenberg is not only one of the most important composers of the first half of the 20th century, he was also one of the most significant composition teachers of his time. Thus, it is obvious that the Vienna Arnold Schoenberg Center hosts the Composition Workshop for Young Composers, this year already for the second time—an impressive example of a living composition pedagogy project. The workshop is supported both by Angelika Möser, the Schoenberg Center's director, and the Schoenberg family, who proudly speak of 'our young composers'.



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The exclusive number of six scholarship holders per workshop ensures their individual mentoring. The first module includes common work on the submitted work draft, the second module provides fine-tuning and the ensemble rehearsals for the final concert, which will take place on 21 January 2018, 11.00 am, in the Arnold Schoenberg Center, Schwarzenbergplatz 6, 1030 Vienna.

