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Interview with Michael von Hintzenstern, 28 March 2009, Weimar, Hintzenstern's home

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Michael von Hintzenstern, born in 1956, took his first class in composition at the age of 14 at the Hochschule für Musik 'Franz Liszt' in Weimar. From 1975 to 1984, he studied choral conducting and the organ at the Thüringer Kirchenmusikschule in Eisenach and took additional classes in musicology at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle/Saale. Von Hintzenstern received an award at the International Composition Competition in Boswil (Switzerland) in 1976 and thus worked at the Künstlerhaus Boswil from December 1976 to March 1977. In 1980/81, von Hintzenstern established the 'Ensembles für Intuitive Musik Weimar', which focused on works by Karlheinz Stockhausen (contact starting in 1970, collaborative practice sessions in 1991 and 2005, CD production Für Kommende Zeiten, sound direction: Karlheinz Stockhausen, 2005). Von Hintzenstern initiated the first 'Tage Neuer Musik' in Weimar, which has since been held annually, and established the 'Unabhängige Vereinigung für Musik der Gegenwart "Klang Projekte Weimar e.V."', which organized the Tage Neuer Musik and the concert series 'Neue Wege Zur Musik—Wege zur Neuen Musik'.

TB: You belong to the generation that completed school entirely within the GDR school system but were still always greatly influenced by the church—and, with that, by dissident ways of thinking, as well. Electroacoustics was not exactly one of the favourite children of the GDR's art system. Especially during your childhood and adolescence, socialist realism dominated all centrally controlled aspects of music education—including massive criticism of everything electronic, which fails to attribute adequate attention to the human being, who is, of course, supposed to be the central focus of art. How did you, in spite of that, still come into contact with this type of music?

MvH: I was never worried about the opinion of popular music education, or, rather, I didn't even really know what it was at the time. Because I began composing at an early age, I got into twelve-tone music relatively early—in fact, at the age of 12. I was

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fascinated by the music of the Second Viennese School. And when you get to that point, the path you take after that is already certain. I followed the classic path: Schönberg, Webern and then the Darmstadt School. I devoured all related information—in as far as it could be checked out of the Duchess Anna-Amalia library, as it is called today. I even had a long-time correspondence with the VEB book import and export company in Leipzig. Back then, I was even able to get the textbook *Die Komposition mit 12 Tönen* by Josef Rufer imported from West Germany into the GDR after I wrote complaints and got on everyone's nerves there until they gave in. My music supplies merchant called me at some point and said that a miracle had occurred: the book by Rufer that I wanted so badly was there, even two copies of it. I sold the second copy to my violin teacher, Baldur Böhme, who was also a composer.

TB: So you began with the violin?

MvH: With the violin and the piano. I started making music when I was nine, so not that early. But I started composing my own short pieces shortly thereafter. Some of it was quite bizarre, such as the 'Sinfonie mit der Autohupe'. I always wrote out the notes and then played them right away with my older brother, Matthias, who played the violoncello and the piano. And then we soon started improvising together and noticed: we don't have to write all that down! That was practically the 'hour of birth' of the 'Ensembles für intuitive Musik'.

TB: But it still took a few decades for it to become official. What did you do in the meantime?

MvH: I relatively quickly discovered Stockhausen, Boulez, Nono, Pousseur—those were suddenly all very important names to me. I listened attentively to the Norddeutscher Rundfunk and the Hessischer Rundfunk—those were western radio stations that had good reception in Weimar. Back then they had good programmes with new music at decent times of day—sometimes even at 8 p.m. At the age of 14, I heard Stockhausen's 'Telemusik' in this manner and was fascinated. With my naïve enthusiasm, I tried to contact Stockhausen. Of course I didn't have his address, so I wrote to the electronic studio at the WDR in Cologne. The letters naturally never got there.

TB: But still, you were soon able to contact Stockhausen ...

MvH: My father, who was disabled and therefore allowed to travel to West Germany, sent a letter to Stockhausen for me at a West German post office in the fall of 1970. And he answered immediately. That was just after the world premiere of 'Mantra' in Donaueschingen. On October 22, 1970. Franz Liszt's birthday, another imporant musician in my life. After that, the correspondence with Stockhausen continued until

his death. That first letter from Stockhausen, that, of course, started everything. In all those years, he was also so unbelievably generous. He gave us tremendous support, supplied us with materials, with records, musical scores, books. Incredible what all came together over the years. After that, in 1971, I held my first introductory evening talk on electroacoustics and new music—at the meeting of the church youth group in Weimar. And that was when the governmental authorities first took notice of me.

TB: Really for the first time? With all that is now known about the work of the Stasi, it is very hard to believe that someone can write letters—on the one hand, the complaints you talked about and, on the other, the letters to the WDR—without being monitored; did you really never come across the letters again in some Stasi file?

MvH: No, I didn't. But that might be due to the fact that the district secret police department in Weimar destroyed an extensive amount of files, and my file no longer exists. There is only a card with the note that my file did exist. There are only cross-references to other files. A few years ago I initiated a second query. They were then only able to find an inquiry that had to do with my travels to West Germany. I was flabbergasted that, in 1984, the Stasi already stated that they had no objection to me travelling to West Germany in the future. Yet I still had to fight for every trip until 1989.

TB: But your first trip to the West wasn't in 1984 ...

MvH: No, I was first allowed to travel from December 1976 to March 1977, after I won a trip for studying and working purposes at the International Composition Competition at the Künstlerhaus in Boswil. Paul-Heinz Dittrich told me about the competition. And I, as a sacred music student at the time, submitted a piece: 'Alea-Phonie' for variable instrumentation. The chance that I would be able to attend the trip was very small. My father, editor-in-chief for the church newspaper *Glaube und Heimat* and head of the press office at the established regional church of Thuringia, exchanged many letters with the secretary of state for church matters. It was an intense time, during which Reverend Brüsewitz in Zeitz set himself on fire and Wolf Biermann[1] was expatriated.

TB: You mentioned that the government started to take interest in you after your first talk. How did that become noticeable?

MvH: I started to have problems at school. My acceptance to EOS[2] was suddenly withdrawn for questionable and implausible reasons. And at the Junge Gemeinde there was a young man who was obviously assigned to me. At the time he started to get on my nerves because he repeatedly suggested that I focus on Wolf Biermann next. In my opinion, that was a purposeful provocation with the intention of giving the Stasi a better political excuse—possibly. Well, I certainly never held an

introductory evening talk on the music of Wolf Biermann. Nothing against Biermann, but I just wasn't interested.

TB: Besides that, what was the reaction to your first talk on Stockhausen?

MvH: It was a good group back then. About 100 guests. I ended the talk by playing 'Telemusik'. There is a very nice letter from Stockhausen that makes reference to that evening and in which he talks about the great responsibility that one has as a promoter of this kind of music. And in which he also talks about his role in contemporary global culture.

TB: Whether it liked it or not, the government tolerated the fact that Stockhausen was then played under the roof of the church with a certain regularity?

MvH: Well, the public authority didn't directly interfere with things that took place in churches. We weren't really a political threat. But it turned out that official associations such as the Komponistenverband and the Musikhochschule, which were riddled with ideology, were hopping mad because we were constantly doing things that weren't right or weren't allowed.

TB: ... so things that also weren't coordinated with the official associations ...

MvH: ... yes—they just took place, and even worse was the response. But back then that wasn't hard at all, because when something like that became known—through word-of-mouth propaganda—the church was always full. The St Jacob's Church in Weimar was enormously important for our work, the Reverend there, as well. From 1978 on Erich Kranz worked there. He played an important role in the political opposition and was in prison in Bautzen in the 1950s for six years. He gladly opened his church to us, not just for artistic reasons, but also as a free-thinking person. Another fortunate circumstance was the fact that I had discovered an organ at the church in Denstedt in 1980 that Liszt had played on. The organ was at my disposal. There was no official cantor there.

TB: At some point you started an adventurous trip to visit your idol in Kürten ...

MvH: My first visit was in 1976, in December. I was on my way to Switzerland, where I had won the composition award mentioned earlier. Before I talk more about that, I'd like to make a few background comments. After beginning correspondence with Stockhausen in 1970, I gained another important mentor, Henry Pousseur, the following year. From him I also received fantastic letters. And there was the fortunate coincidence that my father travelled to a talk in Brussels in 1971 and had the opportunity to meet him. Pousseur gave him a lot of records and books to bring back. And my parents—my mother was allowed to go with him—were able to get it

all across the border in Schönefeld. Their flight was delayed, so there were no customs agents present when they got there—and they quickly got on their way. When I read that someone from Hungary was working for Stockhausen, I naturally tried to meet Peter Eötvös. So I contacted him and travelled to Budapest in 1972 to meet him. At the time, he had a performance of his composition JETZT, MISS! based on a text by Beckett at the cultural building of KISZ, the communist youth association. I got many 'first-hand' accounts from Eötvös. I remember an evening boat ride at Lake Balaton, where we discussed things for hours. And through him I came into contact with someone in the GDR—Paul-Heinz Dittrich—whom he met with in East Berlin. Directly after that, I drove to see Dittrich in Zeuthen, where he lived in a house across the street from Paul Dessau. Unfortunately, I didn't go to see him, even though Dittrich suggested it. Back then he was just too red for me. I didn't know at the time that he was actually a protector of the avant-garde. That was just sheer ignorance on my part. In 1976 I was able to refer Eötvös and Dittrich as instructors to the summer courses for contemporary music in Gera, which would not have been possible without the tolerant mindset of the musicologist Dr Eberhard Kneipel. And it was Dittrich who told me about Boswil and the composition competition. I then contacted the president of the foundation, Willy Hans Rösch, personally and participated in the next competition. At our first meeting, Dittrich told me that Wilfried Jentzsch escaped through Boswil. The people in Boswil, who tried hard to maintain East-West contacts, were certainly a little afraid that I, as a 20-year-old, might say: 'What am I supposed to do in the GDR? It's so nice and so much freer here.' But I had the influence of my protestant home, so that I would have never done that. I wanted to represent this music wherever God chose to put me.

TB: During that trip you got to know almost the entire western European electroacoustics scene. How was that possible?

MvH: Boswil was also important in that I received money from a lot of friends and contacts so that I could buy the first synthesizer from EMS London with one of those plug-in panels. Analogue, of course. That was later the instrument through which Hans Tutschku came into contact with electronic music. It was a wonderful series of apparent coincidences in which everything came together. Through that we suddenly had the 'means of production' for electroacoustic experiments. First I had to get it across the border to the GDR. Before the trip to Boswil, Stockhausen had already given me a huge plastic bag full of music scores, books and records. I had all that smuggled into the country with the help of a Danish friend, who had a concert agency for pop music with a satellite station in "Berlin—capital of the GDR". He was an adventurous commuter across the system of borders who passed away in East Berlin in 1984—and who, as I found out in 2010, was an 'unofficial member' of the Stasi.

TB: You mentioned your first visit to see Stockhausen ...

MvH: My first visit with Stockhausen was on December 19, 1976. Right after saying hello, he said to me with his sincere generosity: 'Sit down and write down everything that you need from me!' That made me feel pretty uncomfortable and completely helpless. He then said: 'Good, then let's go to the shelves, and I'll show you all the titles, and you can take everything that you don't already have.' In one fell swoop I received all of the texts and music scores and records. Never again did I receive that many gifts! After my cousin from Frankfurt/Main and I got into Cologne with the train on December 18, we went directly to the Studio für Elektronische Musik at the WDR—Eötvös set that up—and received a three-hour guide that Mesias Maiguashca led for the Rheinische Musikschule. We then drove with him to Oeldorf, where he lived with Eötvös and Chen Pi-hsien. And from there I called Stockhausen and talked on the phone with him for an hour and a half. He pestered me with questions and wanted to know exactly what the situation was like in the GDR. He said that I shouldn't go back and that you had to stay where you have the best possibilities to develop your talents, and that it would be completely foolish to not take this chance. I should definitely stay in the West. Years later he 'remembered' that I had not wanted to go back and that he had convinced me to do so ... And the next morning Chen Pi-hsien drove me to Kürten. I then first stood in front of his house. There was a singing bowl there. After I hit it, Stockhausen opened the door with Christmas tree ornaments in his hands. That didn't fit the picture of an avant-garde composer at all. But he was, of course, an affectionate family man, too. Then he naturally put all that aside and took two or two and a half hours to show me where he composed and gave me a tour of his beautiful home. Then he handed me an envelope with 'Merry Christmas, dear Michael, your Stockhausen' written on it. There was 400 DM inside. The money was for a trip to his upcoming concerts in Brussels and Liège. At first I was shocked—I hadn't even reached my official destination in Switzerland yet. And already the prospect of another trip. I had naturally already heard from spry senior citizens that it was possible in West Germany to trade your GDR passport for a West German passport; and set out right away to find out more about that.

TB: That wasn't the only influential meeting on your trip to Switzerland ...

MvH: In Switzerland I tried to make a lot of contacts. One of those was Klaus Huber. I drove to see him several times in Freiburg in Breisgau. I had already traded my passport. I participated in composition workshops run by Klaus Huber. I also met Ernst Helmuth Flammer there, who let me stay at his apartment. In Munich I visited Peter Michael Hamel. His book *Durch Musik zum Selbst* was a bestseller back then. That fit the contemporary mood perfectly. And it is a very commendable work that builds bridges to other cultures. I was naturally also interested in his group 'Between', which improvised music with live electronics. And then in Switzerland there was the Studio für Neue Musik in Bern with the composer Urs Peter Schneider, who was always on the go and whom I also visited. I used the time to gather as many musical impressions as possible and build a contact network. I then wrote to Pousseur that I

would probably be in Belgium at the Stockhausen-concerts on this or that day. He answered immediately and said that I could stay with him at the Conservatoire in Liège, which he was the director of at the time.

TB: How was that experience?

MvH: In Brussels—at the festival 'Reconnaissance des Musiques Modernes'—I saw a lot of other composers like, for example, Luis de Pablo. Stockhausen had conducted 'Mixtur'. There was also 'Mantra'. And then in Liège they played 'Hymnen' with soloists (Suzee Stephens, clarinet, Aloys Kontarsky, piano, and Christoph Caskel, percussion). Well that was great, this intensive rehearsal work! I was living with Pousseur at the time and was with Stockhausen during the day. That wasn't easy, since there were tensions between the two. But I was always drawn a little bit more to Stockhausen, I have to admit. But in the evenings I often sat for a long time with Pousseur, who was a wonderful person. At the time he tended slightly to the left politically. He had also played variations by David Tudor for me—there was suddenly a bridge to Eisler there in terms of content. And that was very interesting. Then my goal was to look at the newly opened Ircam on the way back to Boswil. But that was unfortunately closed on the weekends. In Paris I was a guest of Emmanuel Nunes, to whom Eötvös had introduced me. In the early 1970s, I already had contact—via Pousseur—with Dr Hans Grüß, who, at the time, very competently dealt with questions surrounding new music—aleatory, etc. Perhaps also inspired by him, I wanted to study musicology. But I was then denied the opportunity to do so.

TB: With what reason?

MvH: I was at the entrance exam in Leipzig. That wasn't a problem at all, but the ideologization of the discipline was from time to time paradoxical. I was asked to show that the Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany was prepared according to the rhythmic of St John's Passion. And then I answered: 'If you will pardon my saying so, I think this opinion is impossible.' In the explanatory statement in my rejection letter, which my theory teacher here in Weimar, Herbert Kirmße, secretly copied from internal documents, it said 'technically eligible, but not acceptable due to family background and father's occupation ...' There was surely also a retort regarding 'Stockhausen and Co.'

TB: Coming back, once more, to the topic of your trip to Boswil, you returned to the GDR with all these contacts. Were you able to take further advantage of them?

MvH: There was active correspondence. I always sent the letters express, because that was inexpensive and sped up delivery. From time to time some surely did not reach their intended receiver. But by and large the correspondence took place regularly. It's not like they were always intercepted. Recently, during my second inquiry at the

office for Stasi documents, I found several things that had been intercepted: suddenly some random issues of *Glaube und Heimat*[3] surfaced. Proud as I was of the fact that I had successfully announced world premieres of Stockhausen in the church newspaper, I had sent the relevant issues to Stockhausen. They had been sorted through and taken out. Why they intercepted something that had been printed in the GDR is still a mystery to me today.

TB: One could assume that, at some point, the government converted to a laissez-faire political strategy, knowing that one would not be able to reach the masses with this kind of music and, thus, not cause a revolution ...

MvH: You always felt kind of important when you went against the current, but, in my opinion, that's a mistake. Our actual objective was even often followed with a certain disinterest. It is also surely the case that here, locally, there were several people in the composers' association and at the university who tried to stir things up. There was real tension because I was also very brash and insubordinate. For example, in 1970 at the Kulturbundclub 'Erich Wendt', new works from Poland were presented, among others the 'Sonata per Violoncello e Orchestera' by Penderecki. The head of the composers' association, Professor Dr Erich Schmidt, stood up and said: 'Is there anyone here who still considers that music?' Suggestive question. And then I stood up and said: 'I definitely consider that to be good music.' And from that day on, everyone knew who I was. Then a 'discussion' was held. That was so typical for the GDR. All the instructors—the 'experts'—started to talk about avant-garde music and everything bad that belongs to it. And they soon arrived at the epitome of the badness, Stockhausen, 'he does that kind of stuff, too'. And then I said: 'Now we need to talk about concrete examples—which compositions do you mean or are you familiar with? What is your opinion based on?' I really made a fool of them and said, 'You aren't familiar with anything by Stockhausen—you can't name a single work. Except for "Gesang der Jünglinge", which you probably also never even heard. That's no grounds for a discussion.' So I was really maliciously brash. They resented that for a long time afterwards.

TB: You then also established your Ensemble für intuitive Musik relatively early. How did that come about?

MvH: We actually already got together in 1977. It was inspired by and based on my experiences during my trip to Boswil. Back then, we called ourselves the group or ensemble for 'Neue Musik Thüringen'. One of the first composers who wrote a piece for us was Helmut Zapf, whom I got interested in new music at the sacred music school and whom I took with me to the Gera summer courses, which had been taking place since 1974, where he received support from Paul-Heinz Dittrich. As EFIM then slowly started to progress, we started to play the many Stockhausen programmes in 1980/81. In 1982 we had our first concert in an official concert hall within the framework of the 'Studio Neue Musik' at the Musikhochschule in the Studiotheater

at the Kulturpalast in Dresden. Unbelievable how many people attended! The people in Dresden were crazy for Stockhausen.

TB: In Wutike you then met Lejaren Hiller, too?

MvH: Through Roswitha Trexler, who sang at 'June in Buffallo'[4] in 1979, and became friends with him and then invited him to her Wutiker Steinbergstadl. He naturally came and performed a completely idiotic gag piece that we performed together with Roswitha—a kind of a 'funny' paraphrase, in which he recited something in German. That was his contribution to a concert at which the EFIM played a new piece by Zapf and Stockhausen. I also performed 'Tierkreis' with Roswitha Trexler. Portions of that can be seen in a film portrait that Gitta Nickel produced for the WDR.

Notes

[1] Wolf Biermann (born 1936 in Hamburg) is a celebrated German singer-songwriter and former East German dissident.
[2] *Erweiterte Oberschule* (secondary school).
[3] *Glaube und Heimat* is a church newspaper for the mid-German states of Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt.
[4] A festival of contemporary music held at the University of Buffalo, in New York State, USA, since the 1970s.