

Jürg Frey: (per)forming sound and silence

Jürg Frey the performer is inseparable from Jürg Frey, composer. To understand his music is to know that underlying each event, each phrase, each rest, each relationship, is the beating heart of a performing musician. Frey's sense of pitch is that of someone who *knows* pitch. That is, someone who knows what it is to make pitch *sound*, and to make sounds live and breathe, who knows how it feels for two sounds to collide in space and time, and who knows what it is for sounds to appear and then disappear, to be articulated in time. And to hear Frey make those sounds - to hear the clarinet both as an instrument communicating across centuries (how I would love to hear him perform Mozart's clarinet quintet) and as an entirely fresh sound, emerging from nothing, barely present yet imbued with a radiance that makes a nonsense of the reductionist label at times assigned to his music - is to recognise that his composed music is abundantly affirmative. Like the music of his older friend, American composer Christian Wolff, his music is to be played and to be understood through playing. It is discovered only through the act of performance and through experiencing the sounds made alive. Unlike Wolff, however, whose unique performance strategies result in a strange, at times fragmented music, Frey's flexible treatment of older models, such as canons and chorales, is easily perceptible yet entirely fresh.

To those readers and listeners who know of Frey (born Switzerland, 1953) as part of the 'Wandelweiser' group of composers, and who consequently characterise his music as reductionist, concerned only with silence and minimal sounding events (possibly somewhat austere), the description of Frey's music above may come as something of a surprise. But as with all groupings and labels, the story is far more muddled than the generalised perception. Frey has been associated with the Wandelweiser group - including founders Antoine Beuger and Burkhard Schlothauer, Evia Maria Houben, Carlo Inderhees, Radu Malfatti, Craig Shepard, Thomas Stiegler, Manfred Werder, Michael Pisaro, and many others, some who have come and gone, and a host of younger composers, many in their 20s and 30s - almost since its inception as a movement (founded in 1992, Frey joined the following year). His music is published by Edition Wandelweiser, which has also released a number of recordings of his music, and he plays with the Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble. His music shares with many of these composers an emphasis upon quiet, sometimes extremely quiet, sounds, is generally fairly slow moving, and embraces the totality of the sounding environment, whereby the physical space and time within which sounds are situated and between sounds is fundamental to the musical discourse. Shared influences might include John Cage, Christian Wolff, George Brecht and others within the Fluxus movement. Yet each of the composers listed above pursue their own compositional and aesthetic interests. Pisaro's recent work, for example, is characterised by textural multilayering, field recordings and noise. Werder's work navigates a route between a conceptual, poeticised text-based work, bordering on the non-event, and (live) sound installation. Jürg Frey's own work is diverse, including sound installations, works for electronics and electric instruments, and a number of scores for undetermined instrumentation. Some hcmf regulars might recall his *Un champ de tendresse parsemé d'adieux*, premiered by the *edges ensemble* in 2011, comprising the sounds of falling dried leaves and very small stones and the faint whistling of the performers dispersed around the performing space. At the same time he has written some of the most harmonic *and* melodic music of all the Wandelweiser composers.

The works which feature in hcmf 2015 tend toward pitch-based compositions. There are exceptions, most notably the second string quartet, performed by its dedicatees the Bozzini quartet. (To hear this live will be a rare treat for those of us who first encountered their recording of it, released in 2006, and were stunned by the extraordinary sonority and intimate physicality of the music.) Often familiar tonal material hovers curiously between the states of being and progressing. But lest the music becomes too familiar, too 'understood', one can sometimes sense the composer consciously rubbing out what's gone before, through repetition or silence, or change, so that what was heard becomes forgotten.

Recent works foreground sound over silence, in contrast to earlier works. At the same time one might argue that what we hear is not 'speaking' but merely being; that the music tends toward silence through its 'not-speaking'. It is in no hurry to go anywhere nor say anything. In Frey's own words: 'Silence can also be present in the sounds. In order to have silence in sounds, one must let go of everything which gets in the way of this silence. This sound is a sound without the idea of what it can mean or how it should be used.' Frey's music calls upon both listener and performer to surrender expectations, to give themselves to the present whilst allowing what was to colour what is. All that is known is what is experienced - sound and silence, both physical, both performed, both temporary, emergent and relational, alive.