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## Where the river bends: the Cologne School in retrospect

ATTACHING LABELS to art and artists is a difficult exercise. Critics, and perhaps audiences too, like labels because they provide a short-cut to understanding; artists tend to resist them because they imply a shortage of that most marketable asset, individuality. Few artists respond well to comparisons of their work with that of other artists, but there are historical instances where labels can also be a way of acknowledging that at a particular time and in a particular place something new and important occurred and that this was, in some sense, a collective aesthetic achievement. It seems to me that the music produced by a group of young composers in Cologne between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s is one such moment of historical significance within the development of new music and that by designating this group as a Cologne School it is possible to draw attention to the nature of their collective achievement without diminishing our sense of their individual status. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that part of the strength of this Cologne School aesthetic is that it has enabled its principal protagonists to forge such powerfully distinct compositional identities.

At the centre of this article then are four composers, Clarence Barlow, Gerald Barry, Kevin Volans and Walter Zimmermann, and in due course I will discuss why I am concentrating on this quartet more or less to the exclusion of a number of other composers working in Cologne during the same period who might also be considered part of the same musical tendency. I am not however offering an overview of all or any of these composers' careers, although in each case there is much to consider and, to date, far too little serious critical writing on their work. Instead, I want to re-examine some of the music by which these composers first began to attract attention, to put this early work in the context of the ideological debate which its composers were generating around their music, and to compare the aesthetic positions taken up in these early works with those articulated by some of their more recent music.

I want to argue that one of the central features of this music is an inquisitorial attention to the nature of musical material and to the nature of the relationship between that musical material, large-scale formal structures and expressive intention. By musical material I mean the very stuff we hear when we listen to music; it seems to me that one of the achievements of the Cologne School composers was to introduce a new body of material into the repertoire of new music. A key strategy in the production of this material

was appropriation, the transference of existing musical material into a new context. Most of this material was tonal and/or modal, and its choice was often at least provocative and sometimes politically incorrect (although that term had yet to be invented when the Cologne School members began their work). I want to show that although acts of appropriation, whether quotation, allusion or 'meta-collage', were familiar features of the music of older composers like Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Kagel or Stockhausen, the absence of irony in the Cologne School's use of appropriated material distinguishes it as something new and different.

What attracted Barlow, Barry, Volans and Zimmermann to Cologne in the 1970s was the city's reputation as a major centre both for new music and for new ways of thinking about music in general; this after all was the city not only of Stockhausen and Kagel but also of musicians like Reinhard Goebel, who launched his pioneering work on Baroque repertoire with the *Musica Antiqua Köln* in 1973. Cologne's reputation rested on the active presence of such highly influential individuals and on the institutions which supported them, most notably the Hochschule für Musik, where Kagel and Stockhausen led composition courses, and Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), exemplary patron of new music through its concert series, its commissioning of new music, its electronic music studios and its commitment to innovative programme-making both in TV and radio. Stockhausen and Kagel, the Hochschule and WDR are the key agents in the propagation of what would become the Cologne School.

As with any attempt to force artists into schools, it is difficult to achieve agreement on membership. In Bruce Chatwin's profile of Volans, first published in the *New York Review of Books* and subsequently anthologised in the collection *What am I doing here?*, he describes Volans as having 'two colleagues', Zimmermann and Barlow, whose shared project was to return to their various homes 'and investigate the relation of music to its geographical source'.<sup>1</sup> In a conversation with me Volans recalled 'two waves of people' coming to Cologne; he was in the first wave with Barlow and Zimmermann and then Barry and Chris Newman arrived later. Barry's recollections also place Zimmermann, Barlow and Volans at the heart of the group, although he mentions Claude Vivier, John McGuire and Newman too. In an e-mail to me he wrote that 'I honestly don't know what school means re Cologne. We all happened to be there at the same time even if we arrived earlier or later', but he went on to say, 'We did all hang out together in an off/on kind of way, interests aside. It was a passionate time. We were lucky. We were very involved. Aesthetic decisions/concerts had a life or death quality – for me anyway. Very extreme.'<sup>2</sup>

Of the four members which this article will regard as constituting the Cologne School Clarence, Barlow was the first to settle in the city. Barlow was

1. Bruce Chatwin: 'Kevin Volans', in *What am I doing here?* (London, 1989).

2. Gerald Barry: e-mail to Christopher Fox, 23 October 2005.

born two days after Christmas 1945 in Calcutta and left India in 1968 to study composition in Cologne, first with Bernd Alois Zimmermann and then, after Zimmermann's untimely death in 1970, with Stockhausen, with whom he studied until 1973. Walter Zimmermann, 'the son of a Nuremberg baker', according to Bruce Chatwin in the Volans profile I mentioned earlier, arrived in Cologne in 1970 and attended Kagel's composition classes, although he was also studying electronic music and ethnology in the Netherlands during the same period. Like Zimmermann, Kevin Volans was born in 1949 and left his native South Africa in 1973 to join the Stockhausen class at the Hochschule, progressing in 1975 to the coveted position of Stockhausen's teaching assistant. Gerald Barry (b.1952) arrived in Cologne from Dublin in 1975 and, with a characteristic disregard for local proprieties, attended both Kagel and Stockhausen's classes, oblivious or indifferent to the fierce rivalry between the two course leaders. As Volans wrote in the first extended account of Barry's work, 'Cologne was a place in which a student of composition could easily lose his way. Barry made his choices rapidly and sure-footedly'.<sup>3</sup>

Volans goes on to describe the nature of Barry's choices, in a passage which could equally well apply to the other Cologne school composers: 'he rejected the dogmatism of serialism with its heavy diet of Germanic diligence and prepared surprises, but also mistrusted what he interpreted as the minimalists' bland pursuit of predictability (while noting the usefulness of transparency and clarity of texture)'. From the perspective of 1987, when Volans wrote those words, and even more so now, another 20 years later, this prescription for a new music which was neither serialist nor minimalist seems obvious, but in 1975 these two rule-based approaches to composition dominated musical life for all but the most conservative composers. In other words, if a genuinely new music was to be possible in the mid-1970s, it had to define a new territory where none had seemed to exist and, necessarily, the search for this new territory could only be attempted by composers able to recognise that there was a crisis of musical language which needed to be addressed.

When I spoke to Kevin Volans during the preparation of this article he located the root of this musical crisis in the institutionalisation of modernist practice. 'Modernism is a philosophy in which nothing is given', he said, yet 'modernism had become a style' to the extent that 'new music was becoming a parody of itself'.<sup>4</sup> Thirty years earlier, Volans had written to Walter Zimmermann in much the same terms:

New Music [his capitalisation] demanded listening without preconception. It challenged, as all important music has done throughout the history of western music, ideas of what is beautiful, what is acceptable as musical material or form, what constitutes a 'musical' event. The emancipation of all sound as legal musical tender, the abundance of forms, techniques and musical grammars demanded above all that the listener approach each work on its own

3. Kevin Volans & Hilary Bracefield: 'A constant state of surprise: Gerald Barry and *The Intelligence Park*', in *Contact* 31 (Autumn 1987), p.9.

4. Kevin Volans: telephone conversation with Christopher Fox, 3 March 2006.

terms, and evaluate it within its own defined framework – in short, that the listener be free from dogmatism.<sup>5</sup>

By this definition, Volans argues, ‘new music’ must require ‘new ears’; yet, as Volans goes on to say, ‘The name ‘New Music’ appears to have gained a new meaning – it has become a term for administrative convenience’. For Volans and the other Cologne School composers the task was to find a way of renewing music, to find the new music which only ‘new ears’ could hear; in other words, by listening to musical material in new ways composers might be more likely to make genuinely new music than by continuing with existing ‘New Music’ strategies for the invention of new material.

IF ANY ONE PIECE can be said to mark the emergence of this Cologne School aesthetic, that piece is probably Zimmermann’s *Beginner’s mind* (1974), and indeed the letter from Volans to Zimmermann which I have just quoted was written in response both to Zimmermann’s piece and to its reception. *Beginner’s mind* was written for the pianist Herbert Henck, an emergent figure in the Cologne new music world of the mid-1970s, and takes its title from Shunryu Suzuki’s book on Zen Buddhism, *Zen mind, beginner’s mind* (New York & Tokyo, 1970). Suzuki’s book divides the spiritual journey towards the enlightened state of the Zen mind into three phases: ‘Leave the old’, ‘Clean the mind’ and ‘Change your consciousness’ and Zimmermann’s piece is similarly divided. Zimmermann frames these three phases with an introduction, ‘Five moments in the life of Franz Schubert’, in which we can hear five versions of the old mind which is to be transformed, represented musically by short extracts transcribed by Zimmermann from his own piano improvisations. As we ‘leave the old’, these are gradually simplified and as the new consciousness emerges the pianist begins to vocalise as well as playing the piano, introducing fragments of what finally becomes the ‘Beginner’s mind song’.

There are remarkably few notes, either vertically or horizontally, and their organisation has the transparent clarity of a music that is being discovered afresh from first principles. For the most part, white note modality determines the choice of notes, metric regularity their organisation in time, and the music evolves through the gradual alteration of repeated phrases. Unlike American (and, to a lesser extent, English) minimalist music, however, the use of repetition is not systematic; the formation of *Beginner’s mind* is much more wayward – thinking aloud, rather than thinking slowly. Certainly, the music has a simplicity unlike anything else of the period; if it sounds at all familiar the reference point, as Zimmermann acknowledged, is the modal music that John Cage was writing around the end of the 1940s, works such as the *String quartet in four parts*, the piano piece *In a landscape* and the *Six*

5. Kevin Volans: letter to Walter Zimmermann, 21 August 1975, p.1.



*melodies* for violin and piano. Beyond that, as Cage in turn would have acknowledged, the model is Satie.

As in Cage works like the *String quartet*, behind the apparent naïveté of *Beginner's mind* lies a considerable formal apparatus, sustaining the music's 70-minute-long progress. In Shunryu Suzuki's book, each of the three phases on the path to enlightenment falls into ten sub-sections, and Zimmermann's pre-compositional sketches carefully prescribed how his music would take these 30 steps towards 'beginner's mind'. (These sketches were subsequently transcribed on pages 94 to 99 of Zimmermann's book, *Insel Musik* (Cologne, 1981), a fascinating compendium of his own articles and programme notes, together with the collection of interviews with American experimental composers which he had previously published separately as *Desert plants* (Vancouver, 1976).) The work's compositional sleight of hand is that a balance must be maintained between this long-term goal and the musical integrity of everything that has gone before; when it eventually emerges, the 'beginner's mind song' must sound like the inevitable consequence of everything which has gone before, but if the listener is able to anticipate its identity too soon the path to enlightenment will turn into a tedious trek.

*Beginner's mind* is a remarkable piece and requires remarkable pianists, prepared temporarily to suspend their virtuosity (although there are difficult passages too) and to hum and sing as well. It also caused quite a stir in the German new music world when Herbert Henck premiered it in 1975 within a series of WDR-sponsored concerts entitled 'Neue Einfachheit' ('new simplicity'). In retrospect perhaps the most interesting perspective on the work's initial reception comes from two letters to Zimmermann, the first from the Süddeutscher Rundfunk producer, Clytus Gottwald, the second from Kevin Volans.<sup>6</sup> Gottwald was a senior figure within German new music, not only the editor for new music at the radio station in Stuttgart but also the founder of the Schola Cantorum of Stuttgart, the choir which since 1960 had been premiering the avant-garde vocal music of Kagel, Schnebel, Ligeti and many others. Zimmermann sent the score of *Beginner's mind* to Gottwald in May 1975 and a little over three months later, on 14 August, Gottwald posted the score back with a letter which ends with 'freundliche Grüsse' but otherwise pours scorn on the music and on Zimmermann's compositional project. He objects that Zimmermann is offering 'the old as the new' and that *Beginner's mind* presents C major as if it were 'a simple child from the country', ignoring the fact that 'C major is not just a collection of notes but also a compendium of their history'.

Zimmermann made a copy of the letter for Volans and a week later Volans completed a seven-page response, which begins as a reaction to Gottwald's criticisms but develops into a closely argued rationale for the new musical

6. I am indebted to Kevin Volans for making this correspondence available to me.

direction that Zimmermann had taken. It is a young composer's letter, passionate and committed, and at its heart is the belief outlined in the passage I quoted earlier that 'new music' as a vital challenge to preconceived ideas had been bureaucratised as 'New Music', a 'system of classification [...] standards and formulas',<sup>7</sup> and would have to be reinvigorated for 'new ears'. As Volans says later, 'If what we write does not fulfill [*sic*] the "official" definition of "New Music", then we must be content that we do not write "New Music".'<sup>8</sup> He concludes by advocating 'a music that is "a-historical" and "local" [...] of "here and now", a music that is personal [...] organic and vigorous'.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not Volans intended his letter as a manifesto for a new musical movement, it has a distinctly polemical tone. Certainly it identifies many of the characteristics of the Cologne School music that would emerge in the next decade; some (the 'a-historical' use of C major, for example) are already present in *Beginner's mind*, but others would only become evident as the new Cologne aesthetic developed. Of these, 'local'-ism is the most immediately obvious, particularly in the music that Zimmermann and Volans started to write after *Beginner's mind*. 'Local' music was a radical concept in the mid-1970s; it implied both a break with the internationalism which had been a consistent feature of modern music since 1945 and an engagement with the thorny politics of race and place. For Zimmermann and Volans its implementation also involved very different journeys: 'local' for Zimmermann was Nuremberg and the region of Franconia, some way south of Cologne but still in Germany, whereas for Volans it was South Africa. Both composers started to gather material from the places they called home, Zimmermann collating and transcribing the folk melodies of southern Germany, Volans making field recordings which he then brought back to the WDR studios in Cologne to fashion into radio documentaries such as *Studies in Zulu history* (1977–79) and *KwaZulu summer landscape* (1979).

**I**N 1979 Volans began to experiment with transcribing this African source material into music for Western instruments. *Mbira* (1980, now withdrawn) was an early example, in which an mbira melody from Zimbabwe became music for two harpsichords and rattle, but the piece which secured Volans's reputation was *White man sleeps*, first heard in 1982 as a set of five African transcriptions, again for two harpsichords and percussionist but now with the addition of viola da gamba. Volans revised *White man sleeps* in 1986, re-ordering the movements and re-casting the music for string quartet, and this remains his best-known piece, much recorded on CD (in 1992 the Kronos recording spent 26 weeks in both the classical and world music charts and in 2002 a sample from the second movement featured in the chorus of a minor hit for Nelly Furtado, 'Hey man'). While it is perhaps unnecessary

7. Volans: letter to Walter Zimmermann, 21 August 1975, p.1.

8. *ibid.*, p.6.

9. *ibid.*, p.7.

here to say much more about the music, it is instructive to see how thoroughly *White man sleeps* realises the compositional agenda of Volans's 1975 letter to Zimmermann. The music is undoubtedly 'organic and vigorous' – its vigour has sold many thousands of CDs – and it is 'a-historical' and 'local' in the sense that for the vast majority of its listeners its African source material has no historical context and yet has very audible connections with a specific geographic location.

That *White man sleeps* might be claimed as 'personal' is more problematic. Volans has been criticised for appropriating and profiting from the music of African musicians and he has certainly taken music that was created by particular musicians at a particular time and transcribed it into his own music without fully acknowledging the identity of those original musicians. But as Timothy D. Taylor has written in *Perspectives of New Music*, 'Volans can't win'. Volans wanted to compose his way into an African musical sensibility, 'a music of *being not becoming*',<sup>10</sup> and to do this chose to work with African musical materials; Taylor's conclusion to a most thoughtful discussion of the issue of appropriation in Volans's work is that 'his composerly individuality overrides everything "African"' and that 'to avoid making a hegemonic music with his appropriations [...] is virtually impossible, given the history of the Western cultural system'.<sup>11</sup>

Zimmermann's 'local' project also generated some political heat, fuelled not by questions of authorship but by the historical association between German folk music and German nationalism. In *Lokale Musik* (1977–81), Zimmermann created four cycles, each of which finds a different means through which to transform his source material. The second cycle, for example, is entitled 'Leichte Tänze' and consists of 70 individual melodies, grouped together in four separate collections for different chamber groupings. In the first set, '10 Fränkische Tänze' are transcribed as hockets, using only the natural harmonics of a re-tuned string quartet (ex.1); the last set similarly uses guitar harmonics to make fragile, ghostly versions of '15 Zwielfache'. Zimmermann's overall intention for *Lokale Musik* was that it should offer a 'cycle of transcendence' from the orchestral opening, 'Ländler Topographien', to the final string quartet, 'Keuper', and that by the end any trace of the original folk music should have vanished. Nevertheless the work had a controversial reception; when the latter three cycles of the work were played at the 1982 Darmstädter Ferienkurse für neue Musik there was pandemonium, with an anti-Zimmermann clique filling the air with a blizzard of paper darts, shouts that the music was 'neo-Nazi' and angry confrontations between the work's opponents and its supporters (among whom were the present author and, rather more significantly, Helmut Lachenmann).

Clarence Barlow also made 'local' music. Bruce Chatwin's Volans profile describes how 'Barlow came back from Calcutta with a twenty-four cycle of

10. Volans: CD liner notes, *Cover him with grass*, Landor CTLCD111 (1989), p.1.

11. Timothy D. Taylor: 'When we think about music and politics: the case of Kevin Volans', in *Perspectives of New Music* vol.33 nos.1–2 (Winter-Summer 1995), p.517.

Ex. 1: Zimmermann: '10 Fränkische Tänze', VII, bars 1–9 (©Walter Zimmermann, 1979)

12. The Feedback Studio was a Cologne-based grouping of composers who had graduated from Stockhausen's class at the Hochschule and was another important feature of the Cologne new music landscape out of which the Cologne School emerged; coordinated by Johannes Fritsch, it presented a concert series as well as publishing its members' music and related, often quasi-scientific papers.

street sounds', material that would eventually form his eight-track tape piece, *CCU* (1980). But along the way he had also begun work on a piece which took a radically different approach to the idea of an 'organic and vigorous' new music. Barlow's *Çogluotobüsisletmesi* (1975–78) is a 31-minute-long work for solo piano which, like *Beginners mind*, was written for Herbert Henck. The title is typical of Barlow's work in that it tells us almost nothing about the music to which it is attached; it is derived from the name of the bus company which was transporting the composer across Turkey on 11 May 1975 on a journey between Calcutta and Cologne as he started to sketch the piece. Like *Beginners mind*, *Çogluotobüsisletmesi* was also conceived by its composer as a return to musical first principles, but whereas Zimmermann located his first principles in Satie, Cage and his own improvising intuitions Barlow decided to examine afresh the very roots of musical perception.

In his book, *Bus journey to Parametron*, published in 1980 by the Feedback Studio as a triple edition of their regular Feedback Papers series,<sup>12</sup> Barlow set out the investigative and compositional process which eventually produced the piece, a process which focussed particularly on music's tonal and metric organisation. With extraordinary thoroughness, *Bus journey to Parametron*

Ex.2: Barlow: *Çögluotobüsisletmesi*, opening (© Feedback Studio Verlag, 1978)

attempts to define, as precisely and objectively as possible, how listeners perceive musical qualities such as consonance and dissonance, harmonic cohesion, rhythmic smoothness and syncopation, divorcing these terms from any cultural context. Once he had arrived at these objective definitions he then constructed compositional algorithms which would generate music in which each quality could be varied independently. As a digest of psycho-acoustic theory *Bus journey to Parametron* is a fascinating piece of work and the piece of music which emerged from these researches is a tour-de-force for both composer and pianist, progressing from a single line in the bass

register (ex.2) to four simultaneous 'streams' of music, each of varying harmonic, melodic, rhythmic and tonal density, producing textures of almost superhuman complexity (ex.3). Indeed, Barlow's compositional algorithms showed such disregard for practicality that the score is headed by the remark that 'this is a piano piece for two or more hands' and to make the piece possible for a two-handed pianist Barlow had to devise 'an optional process of thinning, so that one could hear the piece played [...] by a computer in its entirety, or sprinkled with SNATCHES of ABSENCE, [...] 'SHOVED-OUT' bits.'<sup>13</sup> When *Çogluotobüsisletmesi* was released on a Wergo LP in 1982,<sup>14</sup> side one offered Herbert Henck's performance, side two a computer realisation made at IRCAM.

The computer-generated music of *Çogluotobüsisletmesi* may seem to have little in common with Volans's African transcriptions or Zimmermann's transformations of Franconian dance tunes, but they do all articulate an aesthetic which regards compositional process as being more concerned with the disposition of musical material than with its invention. The reconception of *White man sleeps* as a string quartet may have owed something to pragmatism – when the Kronos Quartet invited Volans to write for them it was for a version of *White man sleeps* that they asked – but it is also constituted a significant re-composition of the music. For the original *White man sleeps* Volans had preserved the exotic otherness of his African sources by using instruments from the world of early music, at the margins of Western concert music (although also a reminder of the importance of the work of Reinhard Goebel and other authentic performance practitioners within the Cologne music scene). The string quartet draws *White man sleeps* into a different relationship with European art music; it is no longer African music heard through European instruments, but a mainstream European ensemble heard from an African perspective.

An Ives Ensemble CD of Barlow's music was released in 2000 under the title 'musica derivata',<sup>15</sup> a designation which embraces *White man sleeps* and *Lokale Musik* as effectively as it does *Çogluotobüsisletmesi*, since all three are formed from materials – folk melodies, algorithms – which exist beyond the confines of the individual musical work. Barlow's derivations are as audacious as his appropriations: there is a piano fantasia based on the formula-melody form Stockhausen's *Mantra* and a piano trio, 1981, in which the three instruments spin like satellites around piano trios by Muzio Clementi, Schumann and Ravel, each instrument's music changing as it falls under the gravitational pull of first one source work, then another. The most extraordinary work, however, is the *Variazioni e un pianoforte meccanico* (1986) for MIDI grand piano, although it is a work which, paradoxically, can only make its full impact in live performance. A pianist sits at the piano and begins to play the 'Arietta' from Beethoven's op.111 piano sonata. After a while the

13. Barlow: *Bus journey to Parametron*, p.75. Barlow is referencing Stockhausen's use of 'Einschuss' (shove-in) sections in *Carré*.

14. Barlow: *Çogluotobüsisletmesi*, Wergo WER 60 098 (1982).

15. Barlow: *Musica derivata*, hat|now|ART 126 (2000).

pianist's hands leave the keyboard and it becomes apparent that at some point the computer has taken over, generating ever more elaborate variations on Beethoven's opening statement. Inexorably the computer-generated variations become more and more chaotic, until finally the pianist has to rescue the piano from its crazy proliferations, returning once more to the calm of Beethoven's original theme. The piece is a showcase for Barlow's algorithms, but it is also a telling metaphor for the relationship between humanity and machines.

GERALD BARRY'S MUSIC is also 'derived', nowhere more clearly than in the enigmatic '——' (1979, revised 1987). As the opening demonstrates (see ex.4), this is music which, it might be argued, has no material at all, just composition. Such material as there is consists of tonality's flexible friend, the chromatic scale, and the timbral and registral capabilities of six instruments; the listener's attention is drawn to changes in the length of phrases, changes in the distance travelled up the scale, and changes in instrumentation (notice that it is not until bar 16 that a combination of instruments recurs).

Derivational strategies have been a mainstay of Barry's compositional method ever since these early Cologne School pieces. The Bracefield/Volans article I cited earlier describes a number of different techniques by which Barry created tonally ambiguous pitch collections out of tonal sources, most notably using Bach chorales as a sort of musical glue to hold his first full-length opera *The intelligence park* (1981–87) together.

I decided that all the harmonies of the opera should be based on the passing notes of Bach's harmonisations of these chorales. You know what I mean – the chords formed by the passing notes. I extracted each chord, say in maybe fifty chorales, and I wrote out the chords, in series. And so I simply used them all in all kinds of ways, horizontally, vertically, diagonally, etc.<sup>16</sup>

What is unusual about all these Cologne school appropriations and derivations is that they are consistently unironic, both in intention and in result. Because the Cologne School approach to material is a-historical, the critical distance between source and resultant music, on which irony depends, is eliminated. The contrast with their teachers is striking. Where BA Zimmermann throws quotations into expressive opposition with one another in a work like his piano trio *Présence* (1961), Barlow blurs the identities of Clementi, Schumann and Ravel in the compositional centrifuge of 1981; where Stockhausen dreams a utopian one-ness out of the merging of national anthems and identities in *Hymnen*, Volans makes transcriptions to celebrate the particularity of southern African musical culture; where Kagel has made repeated critiques of the iconic status of Bach, and of the belief systems represented in his music, in works such as *Die Mutation* (1971) and *St. Bach's*

16. Interview with Gerald Barry, in Volans: *Summer gardeners: conversations with composers* (Durban, 1985), p.7.



*Passion* (1985), Barry used Bach in *The intelligence park* 'to transcend it, [...] to make something really new out of it'.<sup>17</sup>

Unironic derivation continues to inform Barry's work. Recently, in an interview about his third opera, *The bitter tears of Petra von Kant* (2002–05), he talked about generating a 'store of material', 'musical material in the abstract', before beginning to set the text; this 'produces a friction when I bring it to the text', allowing 'all kinds of enigmatic connections [...] between music and text which you wouldn't think of if you worked in a more conventional way'. The Cologne School aesthetic of the 'here and now', proposed 30 years earlier in Volans's letter to Zimmermann, is also still in evidence:

I have no safety net, no method which I bring out each day and apply to material. Every time I sit down it's as if I'm starting out again as a composer. [...] Everything counts, there is nothing that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter a damn how dry or random or arbitrary the source is, all that matters is what one does with it.<sup>18</sup>

Just as in a Jasper Johns flag or number painting, where the figures on the surface are no more than a subject out of which to make a painting, so in Barry's music 'everything that exists in the world is [...] there to be devoured and made use of as material', and Johns has been a reference point for more recent Volans pieces too. His two-piano piece *Cicada* (1994) takes its title from a 1979 Johns print and in a recent interview with Bob Gilmore he has talked about 'trying to get rid of content'.<sup>19</sup> Contentlessness may be an

17. *ibid.*, p.7.

18. Ivan Hewett: 'Gerald Barry in conversation', in *The bitter tears of Petra von Kant*, English National Opera programme book, September 2005 (unpaginated).

19. Bob Gilmore: 'Wild air: the music of Kevin Volans', in *JMI: the Journal of Music in Ireland* vol.6 no.6 (November/December 2006).

impossible goal for an artwork, but it is evidently a fruitful poetic image for Volans, for whom the popularity of his African music had become something of a burden. Walter Zimmermann once told me that he felt that he had ‘almost drowned in *Lokale Musik*’<sup>20</sup> and in his interview with Gilmore Volans says that with his fifth string quartet, *Dancers on a plane* (1993, and another Jasper Johns title), ‘the moment for that kind of work had passed, along with the apartheid state’. I would argue, however, that the Cologne School composers had established a changed relationship with musical content many years earlier with works like ‘———’ and *Çogluotobüsisletmesi*, or Zimmermann’s extended étude on pulsing piano tones, *Abgeschiedenheit* (1985). Certainly works like Volans’s astonishing String Quartet no.6 (2000), in which two chords (or is it a single harmonic entity voiced in two parts?) are exchanged between a live string quartet and its pre-recorded double for 25 minutes, share the same compositional preoccupations as those earlier Cologne School works.

IT IS THIS CONSISTENCY OF ARTISTIC PURPOSE that convinces me, if no one else, that it is useful to group these composers together. It also confirms me in my decision to leave other figures out of the frame. When I discussed this article with Volans and Zimmermann they both mentioned the importance of Michael von Biel (b.1937), Volans describing him as ‘a huge influence on Walter Zimmermann in showing him a way out of serialism’, but Biel’s rather sporadic output demonstrates a sensibility closer to the New York School than to the Cologne School. Barry and Volans also mentioned Claude Vivier (1948–83), but as Volans said, Vivier was ‘totally in love with Stockhausen and his method’ so they ‘ignored’ him. The American composer John McGuire (b.1942) was another important presence in 1970s Cologne but his rigorously systems-based music is also quite at odds with the Cologne School aesthetic. On the other hand, omitting Chris Newman (b.1958) has caused me much more anxiety. From his arrival in Cologne in 1980 Newman quickly became a key member of the city’s alternative new music scene but, much as I like his gloriously gauche music, it seems to me that his Dionysian approach to composition is very different from that of my chosen quartet.

The Cologne School label is not one with which Barlow, Barry, Volans and Zimmermann are entirely comfortable. In my exchanges with them in preparation for this article I mentioned that I would be discussing their work under this heading; Barry’s doubting response, quoted earlier – ‘I honestly don’t know what school means re Cologne’ – was the only direct response to the idea, but mature, successful, individual composers are rarely at ease with the idea that they were once much more inter-dependent. Nor as a brand is it particularly familiar in German musical circles, where the term ‘Cologne

20. Quoted in Christopher Fox: ‘Cage-Eckhart-Zimmermann’, in *Tempo* no.159 (December 1986), p.10.

School' is much more likely to be used in connection with the older Cologne generation of BA Zimmermann, Ligeti, Stockhausen and Kagel. Nevertheless it seems to me that the younger Cologne group is much more of a 'School'; beyond an historical relationship with serial procedures and information theory there is little to connect the older composers apart from contemporaneity.

The objective facts also seem to confirm my view that something significant really did happen in Cologne in the years after 1975. In London, as the 1970s gave way to the 80s, Adrian Jack noticed that something was going on along the banks of the Rhine and featured all the Cologne School composers in the MusICA series which he launched at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1978, bringing their music to the attention of English audiences for the first time. (During the same period he performed a similarly crucial role in promoting the music of Scelsi and the French spectralists.) In an e-mail to me Gerald Barry paid due tribute to Jack's work:

Adrian got to know my music because I sent him some things and he liked them. Pieces like *Things That Gain By Being Painted* and '——'. Maybe that would have been around 1978. Then I did my first London concert at the ICA. Around then I think. After that he put on other concerts with pieces like *Sur les pointes*, *Au milieu*, *O* [...] And of course he commissioned the opera [*The intelligence park*]. He was marvellous.<sup>21</sup>

The collegiality of Barlow, Barry, Volans and Zimmermann operated at many levels: domestically, Volans took over Barlow's apartment when he went back to India; organisationally, Zimmermann's promotion of concerts in his Beginner Studio provided a space for the performance of his colleagues' music; musically, Barry and Volans were often keyboard duo partners. Above all, there was an important network of shared ideas. As I hope I have demonstrated, this is seen most clearly in the music these composers produced, but there is other evidence too. In 'Kärwamelodien', the second set of 'Leichte Tänze' from Zimmermann's *Lokale Musik*, two clarinets play notes whose combination should produce difference tones; these difference tones should spell out the folk melodies (unfortunately, because of variables in room acoustics and instrumental balance this rarely works in practice). The idea was a byproduct from Barlow's preparatory researches for *Çogluotobüsisletmesi* and page 38 of *Bus journey to Parametron* reveals that there was a mutual exchange, since Barlow's algorithms for metric cohesion are based on an analysis of 27 Franconian duple-time dances. Elsewhere Volans documented conversations with his Cologne colleagues (and eight others) in his book *Summer gardeners*, and in the introduction to the book he acknowledges that it is a 'long overdue' 'companion volume to Walter Zimmermann's *Desert plants*'.

With time, labels tend to fade, wash off or become inappropriate and it could be argued that the Cologne School label has passed its music-historical

21. Barry: e-mail to the author, 23 October 2005.

sell-by date. None of the composers involved still lives in Cologne; Barry and Volans are based in Dublin, Zimmermann in Berlin, and in 2006 Barlow joined the music faculty of the University of California at Santa Barbara. The cultural conditions which made Cologne such a mecca for musicians in search of the new have passed away as well; the extraordinary commitment to new music of WDR has dwindled in the harsher economic climate of the enlarged Germany and the centre of Germany's national gravity has shifted to the east. Yet Barlow, Barry, Volans and Zimmermann still make music of great vitality and individuality. While grouping them together as a Cologne School should in no way diminish that individuality, locating the early stages of their musical journeys in a shared aesthetic project may help to explain the lasting originality of the music they continue to produce.

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