

Kevin Volans
CONVERSATION WITH WALTER ZIMMERMANN
Vogteistr. 9, Köln, 1 March 1977

KV: Your piece BEGINNER'S MIND represents quite a radical change for you from the sort of music you were writing previously. The title "Beginner's Mind" refers to the Shunru Suzuki book ZEN MIND, BEGINNER'S MIND - did this change, then, come about as a result of your interest in Zen?

WZ: The interest in Zen grew out of the search for a technique of living through.... realising... er... doing music detached from the local musical situation, which was not acceptable for me at all. I was in a state of discontent with the music scene - with me in that scene - especially in Cologne, so I tried to find out what it is really like when Suzuki says your mind can be really stable even in the midst of noise, you see, and for me that was the midst of noise: Cologne, the Cologne scene of music. It was a situation of, like, kind of writing pieces..... where I didn't see any basis, material basis for organic forms. ...It was too much a case of writing pieces for people who expect this and that....It was for me too much a school - it was too little writing a music which can exist outside a school, and I just wanted to push, or work through myself to live outside a school, because I felt this was the only situation you should write music in.

What I did after IN UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC THE SOUND DIES ¹⁾ was to try to bring together the contradiction in my interests - like my interest in pop music was always a kind of base line of my feeling for years now - going to discotheques, dancing, listening to all kinds of jazz, pop music.....so I don't have any stylistic barriers, I just have pieces I like or I don't like, which are drawn from many commercially defined styles, but I'm not interested to take on this separation - I just tried to put together, tried to realise that I have a real attachment to pop music - I tried to find out why. I wanted to go away from building up Utopias, of your own language or your own music, which of course always works as a thinking space, but not as a real space. I wanted to get out of these thinking spaces - Utopias, which are like isles - which are nothing else than yourself. I didn't want to hide any more that I actually like a certain type of music, but I write a completely different music.

This was the motivation of BEGINNER'S MIND. I found in Zen Buddhism a tool ... like you have a hammer to put a nail in a piece of wood - it was nothing else.

KV: You don't practise zazen now - did you consciously give up Zen?

WZ: No, I transported it into my reality, and into music, and my sensitivity to reality. It was too much a monastery sort of thing for me - I tried to use the techniques for everyday life, so this means you give up talking about Zen, or thinking about Zen....

I was masochistically going to concerts of New Music in Cologne for five years, and you see, I did that consciously ... you get down to yourself only if you are confronted with contradictions all the time. And I did that really consciously, not to learn more, but to see, you know, all this shit around, and I was

going to every concert for years.

KV: So it is in that sense that you regard composing as an act of homeostasis - of balancing out these conflicts within yourself.

WZ: ... just using music as a tool for your personally felt, yet somehow generally felt, ...er... situations you find in the environment.

What I also criticised in this piece was the self-perpetuation in New Music - of writing music because somebody else wrote that, so you have to do this - a kind of mutual reaction, which brings you more and more into isolation.

The Beginner's Mind song is nothing more than an organic piece of music, which just swings in the rhythm of breathing - this is probably nothing more nor less than I wanted to do. - coming back to organic form, where you can relate to the music as an organic being and not as an intellectual construction - but where you have to suspend your intellect in order to feel the music. That doesn't mean it's naive, it just means you have to do even more work - the work of sublimating your ideas into music. You see, some of this New Music didn't solve the problem of composition, it just went half way: concentrating too much on making theoretical constructions, and too little on translating ideas into sound. (I'm probably talking more about the music I did before than about New Music in general).

So the beginner is not a naive person. He is a person who finds techniques to work his way through ideas into sound.

KV: What exactly do you understand by "organic music" - are you referring to organic rhythms, for example?

WZ: Organic music, I would say, should respect every kind of rhythm in your body: breathing, heart-beat, and so on, and the music should correspond to that. One should create a certain amount of time to give your body a chance to respond.

KV: Would that then preclude rhythmic structures that are not so obvious - that may nevertheless relate to thought patterns, for example? Obviously if one can play it, it is organic to some extent.

WZ: Obviously thought patterns are organic ... as long as you think them...

KV: I would like to discuss a word that kept cropping up in our earlier discussions about BEGINNER'S MIND (when you were writing it), and that is the word "suchness". One of the qualities I took you to be aiming at in the piece was that of suchness.

WZ: What do you understand by that word?

KV: I wanted to ask you what you understood by it.... Well, I take it as being the feeling of seeing an object as itself ... entirely devoid of any associations - ultimately a contact with reality (if that doesn't sound too high-flown). I felt that in BEGINNER'S MIND that one thing you were trying to create was a music that was simply ...there. Each one of the little elements of which the piece is built up becomes an object in itself and they react with one another simply by

proximity - rather than any other more complicated fashion ... I was reminded of George Brecht's boxes, where objects - it could be a tram ticket or a wooden float - are removed from their environment by being placed in a box, thereby losing some of their associations... and the objects begin to react with one another simply by their proximity - random proximity, even. I feel this with Duchamp's found objects, although they create their own aura, too ... This is possibly quite different from the artist's interpretation... WZ: I would agree with your term in so far as using it to describe the thing you accept just through its appearance, but I would not like to accept it as something extracted from its environment.

KV: That was just an example - where, in order to see an object clearly you have taken it away from its environment. But this is just one stage ...

WZ: But just to see the function of this thing in the environment is for me the real suchness, not the thing itself.

KV: Well, the term implied for me that you were attempting to write a music, or a style of music, or musical objects, that existed in their own right, so to speak ... that they were immediately recognisable as objects within themselves - they were simply to be experienced directly. Now this leads to several contradictions or paradoxes...

WZ: Yes, that's right. You need strategies, very definite strategies, to arrive at a point of suchness. And I would say these strategies have to do with time. Our problem is to confront western, educated minds. We have to work against our historical thinking. We have to work against our relating everything to something that has gone before, and the feeling that if it doesn't fit our idea of continuity, it is bad.

So we have to find strategies to get rid of this primary reaction, which is simply a defence mechanism ... If you hear something you try to localise it - many people do that - you can't let it get to you directly.

KV: But one is faced with the irony that in attempting to write a music 'in itself', you ended up in C major ...

WZ: It is C major in Europe ...

KV: ...thereby giving the very people whom one wanted to lead away from associative thinking a golden opportunity to do just that, straight away.

WZ: I'm not very interested in looking for a 'pure sound'. I think you can use history - historically produced styles and different forms of expression. That's our advantage in this century, I would say, where you can have history available, plus space. You can go to different cultures. You can use musical styles which appeared in another century, but in a context where they acquire this ... this suchness, insofar as you provide strategies to lead them out of their historical context. And time and repetition are important to lead one to that state where one can work through one's historical associations to get to that point to hear an object as it is. Then, it is important to live on in this environment, you know. So it's not just leading you away from your environment, but giving you a chance to integrate into it again. Historical thinking, and time working against it - this is important.

So I'm quite prepared to accept a critique that says: you are using a piano, you're

using fifth's and harmonies that would give a very sophisticated mind a red face, because he feels reminded of anything, say, Haydn to Messiaen, perhaps something very private to something very general. But it's for just these over-associating minds that this piece was written.

KV: So, what one is aiming for, in fact, is almost in exact opposition to what Kagel, I think, once described as "taking the perfume" of another age or culture, in order to then work with these associations.

WZ: I think there is too much perfume around anyway, and I try to free the material from it. History is nothing other than the repetitions of sounds in certain spaces at certain times - this makes the perfume...

KV: So when you write a piece like DIE SPANISCHE REISE DES OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN you are in no way attempting to evoke the spirit of von Wolkenstein or Tunisian music.

WZ: I was just interested in going back in time - to the 15th century - and to Tunisia today, where they play the music that grew out of the same period, but which is still kept as a living tradition - not historicised. So you have on the one side in Europe this fast changing history, where what happened ten years ago is history, and you have on the other side North Africa, where this process is going much slower, and probably doesn't change at all. This was interesting for me. And I got the impression that European people who heard that piece made exactly that mistake of putting the piece back in time, when it is now. They said it was an historic imitation ...

KV: This brings me to another point - when you were working on BEGINNER'S MIND we discussed the possibility of writing "local music" - that is, music that went beyond nationalism and internationalism, and was a music of here and now - that is, music that was local in time and space. Now, two pieces later, you write a piece that is concerned with Tunisian music and German music of the 15th century. This surely appears to be a contradiction ...

WZ: For me, local music is very important - getting more and more important - but first I have to clear the scene from any chauvinism. That always comes up when you deal with local music.

KV: By chauvinism, do you mean on the part of yourself, or of other people?

WZ: ... that local music is not just the place in which you are living ... that you overemphasise the importance of the place in which you live. I mean: "Cologne - the centre of New Music". You first have to clear the space - you have to see what our German music, in a very important stage of its development, was influenced by.

KV: But you're again faced with the irony that BEGINNER'S MIND was taken as musical imperialism and you may get the same sort of criticism with this piece ... although I doubt it, because I gather it was difficult for some people to recognise whether you wrote it at all ...

WZ: I am tired of composers who think that their ideas are more important than the Bleistift (pencil) that they write with. I want to get to the point where the material you are dealing with is much more important than your own ideas. You can never be prepared for what is going to come out of a musical

confrontation. You always have to let the music surprise yourself. And if people say to me, "This is not a piece of Walter Zimmermann," then I say: "You're right!" I want to get away from the thinking that you have to dominate, whether it's a human being or it's nature, or if it's material.

KV: A lot of what we've been discussing, of course, goes back to Cage - "... to hear a sound as a sound" - but there is obviously a difference in the way you approach the problem to the way in which, say, Cage, or many American composers would approach the problem... I think you hit on it when you mentioned time and repetition. In all your pieces there is a very definite arrow of time - a formal thinking that involves a progression or development from, say, A to B, whereas a piece like John McGuire's FRIEZE is deliberately non-developmental, and cyclic ...

WZ: I would say I would much rather write cyclic music. But I can't do it. I think cycles are very nice, you know ... yeah, the topic of BEGINNER'S MIND is a process.

KV: But it's not simply 'process' - it's more like development - because 'process' could equally be applied to Steve Reich or Terry Riley, where there is not the same sense of transition.

WZ: With this piece I just thought of two islands - you want to go from one to the other in a boat, and you just do it, and you see the one island getting smaller and the other getting bigger ... and finally, real.

The original material, which represents the old for me - my old - is the one island, and the memories are worked through. The memories are dissolved in the middle of the piece, where there is no expectation of the other one. (There is some expectation before, which starts the movement away from the first island). In order to work the memories through you need to replace them with expectations - but when you are in the middle between the two islands there is just the sea ... After the previous material is dissolved to nothing the pianist begins to think about the new island. KV: But the process is not simply mechanical. I think the distinction I'm trying to draw is between an automatic process and an emotional one.

WZ: It is an emotional one - it was written from a completely emotional point of view. It was written in a four / four beat - I wanted to have as few structural barriers as possible - there was no complication in the time-structure. It was like ... four bar phrases, and I didn't even recognise that. I just had the material at the beginning and the material at the end - I knew what both islands looked like - and in a very emotional attitude, I just wrote.

KV: This is similar to IN UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC ... in that one has a very definite feeling of having arrived - it's cathartic, in a way.

WZ: The catharsis form is very important for me. You can see in the very early pieces. I was always interested in it. I don't know why.

I recognise it with landscape. Like when I drove last year from Pittsburgh to Montana, you know, I had the same feeling of ... you know, landscape from the mid-west where practically nothing changes - the changes become bigger and bigger, until you get to the continental divide - that is, Montana, in the

mountains, and you go down the mountains to the sea ... This feeling you get when driving through landscapes is important to me. I found that important - to offer space ... and time ... in a piece of music, especially here. You should be aware that you can use music to create space.

KV: Your method of building up forms from elements, or more particularly, moving from A to B - composing an emotional process - invites the criticism that you're being too didactic. This also applies to your remarks on chauvinism. By this I mean you're very consciously trying to take the listener from A to B - whether or not he is already at B, so to speak. You guide the listener along a line of development - development of their awareness - when they may already have made that transition.

WZ: Yeah, the people who are at B will probably be bored ... but people on the way ... there are some, probably.

No, I'm against didacticism. Probably it is didactic to myself. I don't want to be chauvinistic.

KV: To what extent, then, do you regard your music as being a moral force?

WZ: No ... no... no...

KV: I mean composing music is for you a moral thing in that you feel you have a responsibility ...

WZ: No....

KV: ...to yourself, at least.

WZ: What we talk about is just the motivations I have to write music. We don't say that this has to get through and be reflected in the listener. I don't want this at all.

KV: Well how do you see your work in relation to its public?

WZ: I'm still very incontent, because ... it is not the public ... I still cannot play music for, or with ... people, I'm very disappointed, because we still can only perform our pieces in a very sad environment, where you have, of course, to be happy to hear it - I want, of course, to make music for ... for... but I cannot do it as long as I am didactic to myself.

KV: What was your reaction to the Neue Einfachheit concert series?

WZ: The problem is that it was taken as a 'movement', and it's not a movement at all. I see it as a possible segment of a variety of musical activities. It doesn't mean we should all do Neue Einfachheit, which is a frightening idea. But I think the mechanism in the thinking of the people who went to those concerts, and dealt with that word, is very interesting, because the critiques I read so far have an incredible amount of essayistic descriptions of that word, and they all make that mistake that they see it as a Mode (fashion) or a trend, as a neue Richtung, but they don't recognise it as just a gathering of different material. Like Cage - he wrote CHEAP IMITATION in '68 - a year in which he wrote the most complex music. HPSCHD, for instance. And it is just an attitude. It is not a Mode at all.

Of course everyone wants to establish within himself a certain Einfachheit - clarity. The problem is that it is taking a process - what should be a process within oneself, and fixing it by naming it.

But I think it's quite healthy, and quite

interesting : all these statements about this term 'Neue Einfachheit'. It's really amazing - but it overemphasises the word... It is not a good idea to subsume all these different pieces under just one title. But this one term seems to produce a lot of thoughts. Taking all these reactions together, Neue Einfachheit is a very complicated thing

1) For details of the pieces, see below.

WALTER ZIMMERMANN

- 1949 born in Schwabach, Mittelfranken, West Germany
- 1969 studied composition with WERNER HEIDER, Erlangen
- 1970 and 1972 studied with MAURICIO KAGEL, Köln
- 1970 - 1972 studied at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht with O. E. LASKE
- 1973 studied ethnomusicology at the "Ethnomusicologisch Centrum JAAP KUNST", Amsterdam and participated simultaneously in the Gamelan orchestra of the Museum van het Troepen, Amsterdam
- 1974 studied computer music at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y.
- 1975 travelled extensively in the U.S. in order to collect material for a book based on conversations with 23 American composers: DESERT PLANTS
- 1976 made ethnomusicological recordings in the oasis SIWA in Egypt, in a ghetto in PITTSBURGH, in an Indian reservation in MONTANA and in a "Hinterland" area of MITTELFRANKEN, West Germany

Principal Works

- 1972 AKKORD ARBEIT for piano, orchestra and 4 loudspeaker channels. Duration ca. 30 min.
- 1973 EINER IST KEINER for 2 violins, viola, cello, soprano sax, clarinet and trombone
- 1973 IN UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC THE SOUND DIES for 2 pianos, ring modulated organ, percussion and 3 times: flute, clar, trombone, violin, viola and cello. duration ca. 30m.

"IN UNDERSTANDING THE MUSIC THE SOUND DIES makes use of O. E. Laske's brilliant essays on a "Cognitive Music Theory" (see below) in an attempt to generate a musical grammar in sound, i.e. to compose the build-up of a musical language from basic elements to superficial structure. The piece shows that, in view of the historical nature of the material with which one is working, it is impossible to give the music an absoluteness. Beginner's Mind is clearly to be understood as a reaction to this piece: "W.Z.

OTTO E. LASKE

- 1) Introduction to a Generative Theory of Music. Utrecht 1972
- 2) Toward a Theory of Musical Cognition. Amsterdam 1975
- 3) "Introduction to Psychomusicology" and "On Psychomusicology". Ann Arbor 1976

1974 ORGON (unrealised)

1975 BEGINNER'S MIND for one pianist
duration approximately 60 min.

"Beginner's Mind" is the result of my study of the present European New Music scene. It was inspired on the one hand by ERIC SATIE, who wrote in an easy-going manner in the midst of a highly complex musical scene, and on the other hand by JOHN CAGE, especially the music of his "naive period" before 1950. My piece is based on a process from the complex to the simple, achieved by notating previously recorded piano improvisations. The techniques used in this process are derived from SHUNRYU SUZUKI's book Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970). The piece has three main parts: 1) leave the old, 2) clean the mind, 3) change the consciousness. In the first part the exposed material is transformed, in the second the structures of the "old" are dissolved and in the last part the "new" evolves from the tone scales remaining after dissolution. The piece itself merges into the Beginner's Mind Song, articulating the new consciousness. The piece is dedicated to HERBERT HENCK, a phenomenal pianist and a close friend, who gave constant encouragement while I was writing "Beginner's Mind". In conclusion I wish to thank Herbert for his devotion and hard work on the piece. W.Z.

1975 GELASSENHEIT for Alto and two guitars
duration ca. 15 minutes

1976 DIE SPANISCHE REISE DES OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN for Nuba ensemble (singer, rabab, ud, qanun and nay). duration: ca. 35min.

1976 - 77 ORIGINAL TON STUDIEN

1. Ägypten "Die Musik der Oase Siwa" (Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln)
2. Mittelfranken "Kinderlied", "Wilde Gesänge", "Namenlose Zwiefache" (eine synoptische Darstellung) (Produktion: Bayerischer Rundfunk, Studio Nürnberg)
3. USA "Ghetto-Blues", "Die Lieder des Schwarzfuß-Indianers Pat" (Produktion: Westdeutscher Rundfunk Köln)

1977 AUS NAH UND FERN
für 3 Chöre und 4 Lautsprechergruppen,
Dauer ca 20 Min.

1970 - 77 compositions performed in Nürnberg, Erlangen, Köln, Witten, Hannover, Bremen, Kassel, Amsterdam, Paris, Brussels.

1977 - 78 planned recordings of the musical cultures of Gypsies in the historical stations of their migration from India to Europe.

