

## *Resisting Representation*

Walter Zimmermann, a composer presently working in Berlin, transforms philosophical conceptions into music via an inexplicable alchemy. The transformations are unpredictable and sometimes as astounding as the magic by which Schubert draws melodies from poems. In his music we hear sounding forms as idea and ideas as sounding form, and yet, you must never "accuse" Zimmermann of composing program music. I have seen that it makes him anxious. He is not alone. No composer who acknowledges the heritage of Western European art music can be immune from the prestige of absolute music or deaf to its real achievements. Our art is infinitely capable of representation, but to its glory, it resists.

Figure V.1 is a schematic score of the opening of Zimmermann's *Randonnée No. 1, Northwest Passage*, corresponding to the first forty seconds of a ten-minute piece. The group who commissioned the work, Toronto's Arraymusic Ensemble, have recently completed a stunning recording of it, still awaiting distribution but available at their web site.<sup>1</sup> Zimmermann's score, for practical reasons, is notated in six-eight measures and with transposing instrument parts in their own keys. To display one aspect of its structure in the simplest manner, I have redrawn it ametrically with *Mensurstrichen*, without showing the rests, and I have omitted the cymbals. The visual alignment of the parts in my version is slightly compromised. The texture illustrated, except for the heightened activity of the double bass at the start, is a fair sample of a sonic format that continues throughout the work. Most of the time we hear only groups of repeating notes at one pitch. The groups overlap and differ in the speeds and numbers of repetitions. The texture is audacious in the simplicity of its premises, challenging in the complexity of its resultants.

The two-part title would seem to allude to incompatible directions of this composition. *Randonnée* (hike or excursion) fits the arbitrary, autonomous technique, where Zimmermann overlays the map of Canada with a derivative of his "magic square" of pitches, a cycle of fifths taking one edge of the square as fundamental tones and their twelve lowest partials filling the perpen-

1. The recording is planned to be released with the title *Array Live* on the Artifact label.



diculars. The slow march of tones across the square follows the route on the map of the ill-fated seamen who attempted for three years to navigate a northwest passage only to perish, trapped in ice floes, ending a voyage which Zimmermann asks us to contemplate as a tragic quest for knowledge. An arbitrary square and an arbitrary procedure thus interpret a factual map and historical narrative. How can they have any mutual relation that matters to the ear?

In truth, it is not difficult to account for representational elements of *Northwest Passage*, in part depending on somatic images and in part on *dangerously* literal figures. Recurrent washes of cymbal rolls immerse the boat in an icy storm. The timbre of high trumpet, with the violin and clarinet also in extreme registers, the double bass and metallic percussion is freezing cold. The boat, nearly blocked, slowly lurching, slowly turning, is immediately present as a mode of movement felt in the slow and abstruse cross-rhythms of the bleating, repeated tones. There is a charmed and elevated innocence in the conception of an extended music where, as if children dreaming a fairy tale, we feel throughout that we are moving in the manner that a huge ship moves (not its wobbling passengers but the ship itself, as when while parallel parking my body becomes a car). But the demise of the boat in a gradual, very prolonged diminuendo is tragic and entirely adult.

What are we to make of the literal citations—the wood rods that the percussionists snap as the ship breaks apart or the ship's bell that sounds in the second half? These intrusions from another world are at once so poignant and sound so perfectly fitted to the music that one would expect to find a strictly musical logic in them. I cannot! A paradox is evoked that we are more familiar with in the visual arts, as when a painter glues a bit of newspaper to the canvas. The scrap may or may not represent newspapers in general, but either way it is not a *likeness* of newspaper. The sample of newspaper would be capable of referring to newspaper in general, or news in general, or scraps in general—samples are the most ambiguous of all signs—but the new context of the sample, the surrounding colors and textures with which it joins in new relations, may overwhelm its referential potential. Quite likely the painter so intends. Whatever the discourse, the painter's pride will be the kaleidoscope of sensuous distractions. Representation is resisted. Although the sounds cited are literal, they, too, resist representation.

The force of the narrative image constructed in *Northwest Passage* is inseparable from the representationally irrelevant fascination of its nearly meaningless sensory and logical relations, the

subtleties of speed and grouping changes in the slow progress of the twisting chords that change one voice at a time, and the strange aberrations of displaced Pythagorean relations in the intervals of its trichords. Perhaps I should feel no special affinity for Zimmermann's style. It conveys an appreciation of purity and mysticism I would not normally share. He takes risks with monotony that irritate me, even when the reward is as enthralling and surprising as in his *Patience and Opportunity (Geduld & Gelegenheit)* for piano and cello with curved bow, where we wait a year, it seems, for one Bb with miniscule variations of timbre to turn into a garden of harmonies. Yet the discomforts disappear in the radiance of his endlessly inventive sound world that nourishes and is nourished by a novel and energetic contest between structure and reference.

Neither the style nor the tone of the composition analyzed in the next chapter claims affinity with Zimmermann, whose compositional achievements are worlds above my own. Comparison is not the point. I very much want to end this collection of essays which center on representation in music with a reflection on its contraries and to reaffirm, via my personal witness of the countercurrents as a composer, that musical semiotics must be as alert to the loss of meaning as to its construction. The particular that I want to emphasize is the role of a fascination with musical logic, with the *sensory* logic of music as a determining factor both in the meaning of music and in its loss of representation. Representation yields to play, a turn that belongs to semiotics and provides the theme of Danuta Mirka's *The Game of Music*. For the professional musician with access to a score—be he or she the composer, the performer, or the critic—this fascination can be explicitly accounted. For other auditors it may be entirely intuitive. I insist that explicit and intuitive apperceptions can be aesthetically equivalent. My position in listening to *Northwest Passage* is not very much privileged by my access to a score. Yet, even if the auditory experiences have some equivalence for all who share the music, the composer's reconstruction (ultimately untrustworthy as any personal memory must be) might still be distinctive as a mode of explanation. I indulge my own fascination with syntax here as an exhibit pertinent to the brief.