

Darmstadt 1992 — the Understory

Paul Steenhuisen

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Article abstract

Present at Darmstadt in 1992, this Canadian composer also had several of his works performed, notably by the celebrated violinist Irvine Arditti. He relates his nearly missed encounter with Helmut Lachenmann, and the friendships he made with other Canadian composers and performers. Steenhuisen describes a Darmstadt true to its reputation as arrogant and unhealthily competitive and self-conscious, but also still capable of delivering profoundly inspired, spontaneous, and strong musical moments.



Paul Steenhuisen, Lee-Ann Edwards and Pierre-Yves Artaud rehearse Steenhuisen's *Foundry* at Darmstadt 1992.

SOUVENIRS

Darmstadt 1992 – the Understory

Paul Steenhuisen

While studying with Louis Andriessen in Amsterdam between 1990 and 1991, I was several times engaged in his dogmatic persistence against the Darmstadt School. His repudiation of the aesthetic associated with the course, in fact, was the final grain that convinced me to attend. After all, if Louis was willing to expend such energy denouncing the emptiness of post-serial music, there must be something more to it. In the majority of our good-natured debates, Louis turned out to be right, but in this one case, not entirely.

In the early 1990's, I was very taken with the music of Brian Ferneyhough, who was the fulcrum of much of the Darmstadt energy at that moment. There was significant appeal in the St. Vitus' dance of his musical gestures, emanating from multifarious rhythmic intersections and superpositions. It's true that many of the pieces lacked the "right wrong notes", but their nervous energy and excessive demands were well aligned with the *zeitgeist*. The average amount of ink splashed on the score-pages of composers in attendance at Darmstadt, the extreme thickness of beams, and the density of extended technique augmentation all confirmed his legacy. More importantly, select music by the New Complexity's primary exponents — in particular Ferneyhough's *Etudes Transcendentales*, Richard Barrett's "...ne songe plus à fuir", and Finnissy's *Alongside* — has a gut-wrenching parametric force that remains integral.

Despite the pleasant, largely ripple-free discourse of the West coast scene, several of us chose not to suppurate by the sea, and a diverse, independent contingent of Canadians made the jaunt to Germany. Interestingly, all of the Canadians I met at Darmstadt in 1992 had ties to the West. Vancouver resident Rodney Sharman was well-known and charismatic, astonishingly present in many of the photographs taken that year. It was there that I first met Manitoba-born composer Laurie Radford — then a Montreal resident, but briefly a student of Stephen Chatman at University of British Columbia. Michael Oesterle, studying at UBC at the time, was absorbing as much music as he could en route to the refined technical mechanics of his current writing. Brenda Mitchell, the mezzo-soprano in Het Nieuwe Ensemble's recording of Ferneyhough's *Etudes Transcendentales* was also there. She had family residing in White Rock, British Columbia, though few of us knew she was Canadian prior to our arrival in Germany. As for me, I was born in Vancouver, and entrenched in my regular vacillations between the West and points elsewhere. Immediately before going to Darmstadt, I was in St. John's, Newfoundland for the Sound Symposium, and the contrast between the two contexts couldn't have been more extreme.

What interests me now about the 1992 Darmstadt Summer Course for New Music is the impromptu discussion and music-making that emerged in addition to the scheduled debates and concerts. To me, that organic, unpredictable element was the life of the festival. Reflecting on it 12 years later, it also becomes an examination of time and the filtration of information. Several fleeting moments of musical intrigue imprinted on my inner ear and developed into pursued interests traceable back to those appreciably chaotic weeks in July 1992. My experience at Darmstadt confirms the benefit of placing oneself in similarly pressured artistic situations. On the one hand, you leave it excited and inspired, or clearly disappointed and aware of how to resolve it. On the other, you depart carrying information that is slowly distilled, and the genuinely meaningful is retained or returns more personally in the long term. Some of the words, statements, pieces, and conversations emerged gradually again years later, only when I was ready to *know*. For example, the presentation by Michaël Lévinas and the Ensemble Itinéraire furthered my interest in spectral music, and no doubt influenced my decision a few years later to spend an extended period of time in Paris.

One important moment for me at the Summer Course was when I met Helmut Lachenmann. As a student in The Netherlands, I had seen a Dutch television profile of his music, and was immediately fascinated. Having pored over the fragile calligraphy of his scores, and the detail of his voluminous preface notes, I knew I had to talk with him. As per usual *Ferienkürse* protocol, that

merely meant requesting an appointment before everyone else did. Having just sparred with Wolfgang Rihm in a vigorous public discussion, he told me to meet him on the bench outside the school at 2:30, following his appointment with Hans-Klaus Metzger. At the prescribed time, with notebook in hand, I dutifully went to the bench and waited. By 4 pm, Lachenmann had yet to arrive. Feeling half like this might be a test of my mettle, and half like he had better things to do, I was both dejected and determined to wait for him — no matter how long it took. At 4:30, he finally arrived, and talked with me for two hours — about sound, emancipation, Luigi Nono, Beethoven, and Bruckner. Despite what I thought was my already broad sound palette, he left me with the exhilarating feeling that an even more fresh and open soundscape was available.

I vividly recall a concert that a few of us put on in the Sporthalle. As host of the *Are You Serious Music* radio show (CITR, Vancouver), and presenter of the 99 *Generators* electroacoustic music concerts, I had given the North American premiere of *The Unthinkable* by Richard Barrett, and several broadcast premieres of his *FURT* live electronics performances with Paul Obermayer. Within a few minutes of meeting, Barrett suggested that we put on a concert together. Shortly thereafter, a hand-written concert announcement on recycled paper was taped to the wall near the entrance of the school, and within 24 hours, the gymnasium down the road hosted what we agreed was the strangest concert we had ever been part of. We played electroacoustic music by Barrett, Eric Lyon, Nicolas Vérin, and myself, as well as a long, unidentified work performed by a Russian flautist who sat on the floor emitting fragments of sound and text overtop of a slow, ambient electroacoustic accompaniment. Eric Lyon sang and played piano in a piece of his that was part *Klavierstück*, part Legion drinking song. My tape piece *Tube Shelter Perspective*, composed in Studio One at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague using only equipment that was older than me, blared through the large arena. The diffusion was partially controlled by a joystick configuration that Clarence Barlow had devised for a concert the following evening.

Performances were a hot commodity at Darmstadt. At times, it was a race against the clock, coordinating with the many performers who sought to play as much as possible. The bulk of that type of management transpired in the cafeteria, with the stench of schnitzel hanging heavy in the air. I remember talking with soprano Sara Stowe as she sifted through heaps of mostly unplayable scores — unplayable, at least, in the brief burst of available rehearsal time. She was rustling up players for a performance of my piece *millennia*, and mentioned that “some English guy” might do the violin part. That “guy” turned out to be Irvine Arditti, who not only sight-read this challenging score in a short

rehearsal, but also simultaneously managed to identify the errors being made by the other two performers. Another daunting performance-oriented moment came when Pierre-Yves Artaud coached American flautist Lee-Ann Edwards in my solo flute work *Foundry*. I had listened to his recording of the Ferneyhough rite of passage *Unity Capsule* hundreds of times, and to hear him race effortlessly through fragments of my piece was inspiring. It wasn't so much that Artaud summoned music from the flute, but that he virtually consumed it. Every musical utterance was chewed, shorn, digested or spat back through his barrel chest. Edwards gave an all-out performance of *Foundry* a week later, and received loud cheers from the discerning crowd. Arditti, Artaud, and Edwards are examples of a higher level of playing that one could find at Darmstadt, one that brought forth the essential musical ideas.

While the veneer of the summer course maintained its reputation for repellent self-awareness, cliquishness, and the arrogance in historical documentation for which many have rejected it, at the same time, the understory was that the course was also a spontaneous generator of interesting collaborations and musical events that were incongruous and risky, ranging from the absurd to the sublime. Under the guise of complexified musical hyper-expressivity, a myriad of other possibilities, determined by the volition of the participants, co-existed or clamoured for daylight. Subsequently, some germinated.