



Visible Sounds: The Music of Simon Steen-Andersen

by Bernd Künzig

Some visitors to New Music concerts will readily admit that often, they can only really understand and enjoy the newness of the music when they not only hear, but also see it come into being. Contemplation, just listening with eyes closed, seems to be a difficult task for this type of concertgoer. With a composer like Simon Steen-Andersen, however, they are more likely to get what they need, for the visibility of sounds plays a decisive part in his music. To this end, he makes extensive use of the available multimedia possibilities, albeit without following the fashions of the time. On the contrary, the incorporation of a low-tech visibility is perhaps connected more to the childhood of the composer, born in 1976: the joystick from the early generation of computer games is a central instrument in his music, and in his series *Run Time Error* he uses it to control both images and sounds. In this site-specific series, which often takes place in the back rooms of his concerts, he himself runs through a kind of obstacle course on which found instruments, devices, objects and architectural elements are knocked on, rattled and shaken into a microphone which he uses to record it. A camera performer following close on his heels documents this tour de force in images. In the actual concert, the video recording is projected in duplicate and controlled with a joystick by the composer-performer: the speeds of the two projections accelerate and decelerate in relation to each other, they are played backwards and forwards, but they nonetheless manage to come together for the finale. One could define this new form of audiovisual composition in the sense of the original word *componere*, and with a formulation by the brilliant exhibition curator Harald Szeemann: 'When attitude becomes form.'

Even though Simon Steen-Andersen's music has little to do with pop, there is still one central aspect of rock and pop music that, along with the range of noises he uses, affects his sonic language. Sounds can not only be made visible; a fundamental aspect of their genesis is their physicality, as the composer underlines: 'Actually, I always tell the musicians to arrange themselves so that one can see what they are doing. I always find it interesting to see what the people are doing or how a sound comes about.'

At a first, superficial glance, this seems rather banal. But Simon Steen-Andersen is anything but a mere illustrator of sounds. In his compositions, he often plays with perceptions in a way that makes it hard for us to distinguish whether what we are seeing is producing and determining the acoustic result, or vice versa. Thus in *Black Box Music* (2012), conductor-like gestures are made in a form of puppet theatre setting. The body of the percussionist making these gestures never becomes fully visible, either to the musicians playing in front of him or to the audience. He is entirely reduced to his hands, which not only conduct, but also have to use all manner of objects inside this closed box – the puppet theatre curtains, rubber bands, paper streamers and

other devices – and even indulge in surreal slapstick. One only sees inside this box via a miniature camera and an oversized video projection of what it records, giving the whole setting the air of a proscenium stage or a magic box. The viewers and listeners remain unsure whether the gestures and events taking place inside it are controlling the musicians, or rather act as a choreographic interpretation of the sounding events. The whole situation has an eeriness to it, for essentially this connection between image and sound is a monstrous one: Steen-Andersen refers to this approach as a simultaneous deconstruction of conducting and puppet theatre, of the animal and the mechanical, which he carries out almost as thoroughly as E. T. A. Hoffmann in his tale *The Sandman*.

In the series *Self-Reflecting Next to Beside Besides* he creates labyrinthine nestings of images and sound, following the same principle as the doll within the doll. The starting point of the series was an ensemble piece entitled *Besides*, whose final part is called *Beside Besides*. The series derived from it, *Next to Beside Besides*, takes up motions like upward and downward glissandi. The instrumentation changes, but the form, shape and sequence of sounds remain almost identical throughout the pieces. At the heart of this labyrinth, in *Self-Reflecting Next To Beside Besides*, the instrumentalists play exclusively together with the simultaneous video projections of their own actions. This results in duets, trios or quartets with phantoms. The acoustic and visual reflections of these self-reflections form a labyrinth whose possibilities for development seem truly unlimited, despite the rigor of its conception.

The Piano Concerto (2014) can be viewed as a large-scale, concertante synthesis. The video prelude, a film of a grand piano falling in slow-slow motion, is merely the starting point for the 'building' and 'breaking' of a classical instrument that finally produces broken sounds itself. In this concerto, the broken appears like a phantom as the video projection of the pianist, who not only plays the intact concert grand live, but also uses a sampler to control and rhythmicize a pre-recorded version of himself playing the broken instrument. The result is an orchestral piece with two piano soloists, intact and broken, perfect and imperfect, real and surreal, with various references to music history extending from Romantic virtuosity to ragtime. Steen-Andersen speaks of the 'beauty of the imperfect', and realizes a principle that Helmut Lachenmann named when he said: 'composing means building an instrument'.