

KULTURMESSIAH: Patrick Frank and the Roads to Freedom

I. Overview

I first encountered Patrick Frank giving a lecture at the 2014 Darmstadt summer courses with the provocative title “Rede zur Lage der Nation” (roughly: ‘State of the Union Address’).¹ It was in many ways an unrepresentative introduction to Frank – relatively light on theory and more focused on personal experience – but it was infused with his characteristic sense of urgency and imperative. Frank is nothing if not committed, and while he has nothing of the proselytizer in him – his presentations are overflowing with more citations than invective – his unusually direct style of address combined with the sheer breadth of his knowledge made a fundamental impression on me in a way that music, let alone theory, very rarely does. I have followed his work ever since.

Patrick Frank is a composer, project designer and cultural theorist based in Zurich who is the creator and CEO of VoiceRepublic, an online platform and archive of international performances and lectures.² He is among a generation of composers in the Teutonosphere who are grappling with the death throes of the material-teleological narrative of New Music. In the briefest, most telescoped terms: the avant-garde after Cage and Lachenmann incorporated increasingly alien sound materials into composition – first extended techniques, then sound production from non-instrumental sources – until a point where any source of sound could be interpolated into a composition and be recognized as “music” (or rather, could be recognized as such by a consensus of New Music audiences). Thus, according to this teleology, the conquest of sonic material (a process described in such precisely conquistadorial terms at least since Webern’s writings) had exhausted itself; there are no sounds left to bend to the will of musical logos. Indeed, at one of Lachenmann’s lectures at the 2014 Darmstadt courses, he spoke of this material conquest in the guise of an orange: what do you do after you have consumed the inside of the fruit? Do you eat the peel? What next?

“What next?” has, of course, always been a wrought question among any artistic avant-garde. But Frank and his peers find themselves at a particularly intimidating moment in aesthetic history where the conditions of “newness” are themselves in question. From the birth of polyphony, the material-teleological narrative of Western art music has been relatively straightforward – church modes to *musica ficta* to tonality to chromaticism to serialism to noise... – and so now that any aural material is axiomatically also musical material, the foundation myth of musical progress no longer works.

This failure results in what Frank calls Indifferenz, which is at the center of his artistic output from 2006. As a cultural-theoretical concept, Frank’s Indifferenz derives from a heady cocktail of Baudrillard, Lyotard, Luhmann, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Sade. As a phenomenon, however, it is self-evident: you know it when you feel it. Indifferenz is the dominant mode in which we engage with art, politics, and, more each other in our time, and, broadly speaking, Frank’s work has first sought to circumscribe it and then subsequently overcome it. These two reactions to Indifferenz inform my two chronological divisions of Frank’s output: a trajectory from negation to affirmation.

¹ The entirety of the talk may be found here: <https://voicerepublic.com/talks/1259-rede-zur-lage-der-nation>

² <https://voicerepublic.com/>

II. The early works: rejection

Patrick Frank's earliest acknowledged works are a series of three pieces dating from 2000 to 2002, *RZ-gamma I-III*. This series applies certain properties of special relativity (namely the gamma factor) to both metric/rhythmic (*RZ-gamma I* and *II*) and pitch (*RZ-gamma III*) organization. In the case of the latter, this results in a highly specialised tuning system. This combination of scientific structuring of complex formal material brings to mind the more ambitious works of fellow continental composers Robert HP Platz and Enno Poppe (especially *Rad* [2003]), and this is indeed what Frank's earliest works sound like, including *Onto-Off* for solo violin (2003). The sort of philosophical/sociological critique which becomes crucial to Frank's mature work can be found in a zygotic form in subsequent pieces like (...) for solo piano (2004) and *Just do it* for percussionist (2005). Still, both Frank's sound world and his philosophy are firmly grounded in a content-material aesthetic (read: the aural) at this stage.

Der schalltote Raum ('The Anechoic Chamber', 2006), Frank's only composition to date for orchestra, is the first unmistakable turn towards a radically new aesthetic. The title itself is taken from a Jean-Francois Lyotard lecture on André Malraux which positions the work of the French writer-cum-bureaucrat "als politischen Akt der Verzweiflung".³ This despair – in its slightly more dynamic form of indifferenz – is precisely the aesthetic preoccupation that defines all of Frank's mature works.

Der schalltote Raum begins with a series of solo string instruments slowly and laboriously repeating the same pitch (an E), then gradually doubling, a process which, with occasional silences, continues throughout the first three and a half minutes of the piece. The effect is somewhat akin to a particularly aggressive manifestation of tinnitus. Then, after a sudden descending melisma, the main orchestra falls silent. Faintly – very faintly – a second orchestra in a different room, comprising 7 wind instruments, can be heard playing another piece of music, which is just barely recognizable as the overture to Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*. It is immediately obvious that this is not a quotation or a snippet of a collage, the kind that can be found in the works of Sciarrino, Schnittke, Hans-Jürgen von Bose, and many others. It is the work itself, whole and played in its entirety: not a reference, but an artefact. Here the composer is not a bricoleur or assembler of pastiche, but an arbiter of historical material. Nor is such material arbitrarily chosen: the premiere of *Der schalltote Raum* was programmed in a concert where it was to follow a performance of the prelude to Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*, the same piece that reappears as a distant yet familiar totem in Frank's piece.

The musical material here is roughly familiar from both Frank's contemporaries and an older generation of composers also writing a certain music of rejection (or "musica negativa"), especially Nicolaus A. Huber (cf. especially *Informationen über die Töne E-F* [1966]) and Mathias Spahlinger. Nevertheless, there are several aspects of the piece that point beyond technical imitation and towards an understanding of musical material which is as historically specific as it is unique to Frank's compositional development. Specifically, the site- and program-specific compositional curation of the piece is a remarkable innovation, and already demonstrates Frank's discursive understanding of the compositional act: *Der schalltote Raum* bears the conditions of its creation (a new commission to follow a Mozart favorite) within the music itself. The result of these conditions, unsurprisingly, is indifferenz.

³ See Lyotard, *Der Schalltote Raum: Die Anti-Ästhetik von Malraux* (Vienna: Passagen, 2001).

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental mystery about the piece. Listening to it, while the “anechoic chamber” of the title is perceptually obvious, what the experience of such a chamber *signifies* is far more ambiguous. Is it the space wherein all new works written in the 21st century must fall, a warped void where the masterworks of the past are still vaguely perceptible? Or is it a sort of musical singularity, where all the potentiality for “new music” has been compressed into a single, endlessly repeated and doubled pitch? Though such waxing poetic may be invited here, it is certainly qualified: Patrick Frank’s music only allows for navelgazing after a punch to the gut.

Immediately after *Der schalltote Raum*, Frank devoted himself fully to indifferenz (n.B. zur überstezer(in): nutzt diese paradox-spaß auf deutsch?). This led to the series of *Limina* projects (2006–2007), which can be seen as being in certain ways compatible with Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf’s conception of the “polywork”.⁴ The *Limina* masthead comprises *Konzert-Installation Limina* (2006) with 8 instrumentalists (Frank is credited with “Raum/Licht/Musik-Kompositionen und Konzept”), a 4 ½ hour long “Konzert-Installation/Tanzperformance/Symposium/Buchveröffentlichung” simply titled *Project Limina* (2007), and the book *Limina: zur Indifferenz in zeitgenössischer Kunst und Musik*.⁵ Bastian Zimmermann has written an engaging and thorough examination of the project,⁶ so I will confine myself to remarking that the *Limina* polywork both enriches the utilization of aesthetic/material indifferenz begun in *Der schalltote Raum* and looks forward to the even more ambitious multimedia projects Frank has recently undertaken.

If *Der schalltote Raum* represents the beginnings of Frank’s negativist critique of musical material, *Das Meisterwerk* (2010) represents the endpoint, the last threshold of compositional paralysis. It is, as its subtitle “Studie III zum Jetzt-Möglichen” (“study III for the Now-Possible”) indicates, an absolute and all-encompassing reckoning of musical syntax, both in conception and execution. It is also, consequently, a genuinely unsettling and exhilarating monument of musical nihilism: the ambiguity found in *Der schalltote Raum* is nowhere present. The piece is in four movements and three “interventions”: the former are scored conventionally for piano and later trombone (from the second movement on); the latter are spoken either by one of the musicians or an independent announcer. The first movement, “danse languide”, comprising the initial two minutes of the piece, is immediately recognizable as “institutional New Music” of a Germanic flavor: a freely atonal language developed from smaller harmonic and rhythmic cells, the sort of construction easily amenable to both pitch-class and motivic analysis. But analysis is not signification. This point is made immediately after the conclusion of the first movement, where, as “Intervention I”, the announcement “welcome to today’s masterpiece” is made. Now the first movement is actually (and accurately!) analysed as containing “a very expressive and neoromantic language” where “[d]ifferent influences can be heard, for example by Scriabin.” But the inability of such description to offer any sense of meaning, let alone understanding, to the musical material is persistently and lugubriously driven home by the speaker, who goes to great lengths to explain the development of the motive E-F into the “diatonically filled minor third” D-E-F. The performance indication of the first movement, visible to the performer but not printed

⁴ See Mahnkopf, ‘Theory of Polyphony’, in *Polyphony and Complexity*, ed. by Mahnkopf, Cox and Schurig (Hofheim: Wolke, 2002)

⁵ Friedberg: Pfau Verlag, 2007

⁶ ‘Die Konzert-Installation Limina und ihre Konzeption der Black-Box’. Available online at <http://patrickfrank.ch/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Zimmermann1-1.pdf>

on the program, gives a further indication towards this empty signification of material: ‘Auf der Grenze zwischen Original und Simulation. In Neoromantischem Schein (danse languide)’ (On the border between original and simulation. In neo-romantic appearance [danse languide]).

The next two movements, “ardent, enthousiaste” (performance indication: ‘zeimlich gut’ [pretty good]) and “in mutigem Glauben” offer little surprises besides the entry of the trombone, which, as the speaker subsequently notes, increases the “complexity of the texture” with “[s]ound repetitions [that] are characteristic for its voice.” But upon the conclusion of the third movement (as “Intervention III”), the speaker announces something new:

In the fourth movement, you have two options to choose from: either simulation or original. In the year 2010, everything is possible in Contemporary Music, every style, every technique, every intention; even lack of style, or no intention at all are imaginable. Negative and positive, original and simulation have dissolved into each other. Please raise your hand to show us which fourth movement you want to hear. The one with the majority of votes will be played by us later.

What this speech does not reveal is that there is only one final movement of *Das Meisterwerk* written in the score. This means that no matter how the audience votes, they are going to hear the same thing. Of course, even if the audience remains unaware of this particular shell game, the end result is the same: the movement that follows is as undifferentiated as those that preceded it. This is absolute material indifference: any sound can be replaced by any other sound without a change aesthetic signification. Not even an active intervention from the audience can alter the ineluctable proceedings of a New Music concert.⁷

It should go without saying that *Das Meisterwerk* is not a crowdpleaser. Yet at the same time it is far too didactic and mundane to cause a scandal. The only possible esthetic outcome of a performance of it is irritation, boredom, and desperation: it is a *Lehrstück* where nothing is learned. But this irritation is the only authentic (in the Heideggerian sense) outcome of the creative aphasia gripping the conscientious composer of New Music, an aphasia that goes beyond the simple failure of signification of the material. Historically speaking, the concept of a “masterwork” has been under heavy scrutiny since at least the 1920s (cf. Artaud), yet the cultural-institutional-industrial complex still demands that the artist dutifully create masterpieces – which is why, of course, producers from record labels to academic publishers speak of a contingent series of “20th Century Classics” and now “21st Century Classics”. The critically conscious artist thus is only able to fulfil his role, as it is currently formulated, in bad faith. This is why the elemental creative unit found in the work of young critically-informed composers is not a sound or a form but a *commission*: which, like all other musical ideas, tends towards fulfilment.⁸ *Das Meisterwerk* lays bare the entire process of artistic production in its current historically-formulated condition of absolute impotence: it is an artwork that annihilates its own cultural-material foundations, a creation against the potentiality of creation.

After such a statement, Frank could no longer continue along the same course of rejection, having now in effect rejected the entirety of the musical apparatus. So again the question presents itself: what next?

III. Overview, continued

⁷ It may be confined to a footnote that the initiation of a vote between two identically unpalatable outcomes has very obvious political parallels.

⁸ For another example of this, see Johannes Kreidler’s *Fremdarbeit* (2009).

Like Kreidler, Frank realised that the aesthetic-material impasse of music was deeply interconnected with a broader cultural-political impasse, and thus both his writings and his compositions increasingly turn to political and sociological developments for their theoretical justification. Looking back now over his lecture I attended in 2014 (both in an ad hoc translation by Wieland Hoban and its published form in the 2016 *Darmstadt Beiträge für Neue Musik*), its prophetic content is obvious. Extremely unusually for the time, Frank identifies subversion not as a precondition of revolutionary political art, but as a demagogic tool of right-wing populists (a claim first found in the conclusion of the large: “Populists often complain that the freedom of speech is applied selectively, that there is intolerance towards opinions not belonging to the mainstream. They present themselves both as victims of defamation and heroes of democracy and freedom of expression. [...] The Left must confront the paradox of accepting intolerance and inequality as a way of stabilizing the values of tolerance and equality.”⁹ Years before Milo Yiannopoulos would get (and, recently, lose¹⁰) a six-figure publishing deal for saying nasty things loudly and persistently, Frank identified the impasse between the avant-garde fetish of subversion and the Left’s fixation on an unqualified tolerance. Before the alt-right was even a twinkle in an anime messageboard’s eye, Frank had described the catastrophic trajectory of cultural and political history in the West.

This catastrophe can be roughly encapsulated in Frank’s postulation that “negativist critique no longer works”.¹¹ The negativist mode of engagement with political discourse is simple, straightforward, even propagandistic: a problem is identified, isolated (I am “here”, the problem is “there”), and abstracted. Not only is this far too simple to be effective in the fundamentally de-centered world of digital mass media, but it reinforces an absolutist hegemony where “subversion” becomes an end in itself. It is from such a foundation – a foundation that is now self-evident and unquestionable, but was far from obvious in 2014 – that Frank sought to develop a consistent compositional praxis, one that incorporated a pluralistic, digressive engagement with culture while still retaining a comprehensible grounding in critical theory.

IV. Later works: performative affirmation

In addition to being a totalizing statement of rejection, *Das Meisterwerk* also points towards Frank’s further creative development, in that the bankruptcy of aural meaning is foregrounded by a cultural-political overdraft of signification. To unpack this monetary metaphor somewhat: the guided tour through annihilation that is *Das Meisterwerk* not only neutralises all musical material by expressly presenting its fundamental interchangeability, it also, if only by implication, accuses the cultural-political institutions, the “arbiters of taste”, of positioning this same fungibility as a necessary precondition, not just commercially, but ontologically, of an artwork. A quote from some prominent cultural theorists may make things clearer: “Bourgeois

⁹ I am quoting from the English translation given to me by Wieland Hoban. This lecture is actually based on material found in Part 3 of Frank’s multimedia project ‘*wir sind aussergewöhnlich*’ dating from 2012 (see below).

¹⁰ It is a perfect illustration of Frank’s point that Yiannopoulos’s downfall was ultimately precipitated not by the left but a center-right group – the “Reagan Battalion”.

¹¹ In his talk “Performative Affirmation”, given at the 2016 Darmstädter Ferienkurse. See <https://voicerepublic.com/talks/performative-affirmation>

society is ruled by equivalence. It makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities.”¹²

Frank continues this criticism – which, in a sense that G. Douglas Barrett would see as epochal, is ‘post-aural’ – in his piece *The Law of Quality* (2010–ongoing). Both a traditional score, an art object, a continuous piece of performance art, and a pyramid scheme, *The Law of Quality* is a score, which is placed in a luxuriant picture frame, and sold to a series of investors. When each successive investor buys the piece (for an increasing price), the payment is divided between the previous investors, the performers of the piece, and Frank himself. Thus the series of commodity exchanges is the part of the work of art itself.

While this is certainly a significant development both within Frank’s work and among his contemporaries, it does invite the sort of “this-has-been-done-before” criticism that New Conceptualism often must field. To wit: the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye created a large machine that produces chemically accurate shit he called Cloaca, then sold both the shit and shares of the Cloaca corporation (as physical documents, objects d’art, etc etc) to museums and art collectors. So, while it may be argued (as other practitioners of New Conceptualism have done about their own work) that Frank’s piece brings New Music up to date with trends in the visual and performing arts, the ways in which such a piece is dramatically new and indeed musical at all are initially obscure.

To elucidate: even if *The Law of Quality* was not, as a physical document at least, a traditional musical score, it would still be primarily comprehensible as music rather than plastic or visual art: as a structure which exists primarily as time and motion. Whereas similar conceptual pieces like Cloaca have a fundamentally atemporal production, *The Law of Quality* is inextricably rooted in its perpetual development in experienced time, a time which includes not only conventional “performances” of the piece, but the monetary, institutional, and interpersonal machinations which allow for such performances to occur. Even the least charitable evaluation of the piece must acknowledge that Frank has created a remarkably transparent diorama of the New Music production line, and this transparency points towards Frank’s further aesthetic development.

The throughline of all of Frank’s most recent works – from 2013 onwards – is the search for an alternative to the negativist critique endemic of political artwork – a critique Frank rightly describes as “toothless”.¹³ Most recently, this has come in the form of what Frank terms “performative affirmation” or even “hyperaffirmation”. Theoretically, Frank positions performative affirmation within the lineage of the two dialectic tendencies of the post-war avant-garde: one towards “radical abstraction” and the other towards “radical concretion”.¹⁴ Crucially, he goes on to point out that “the avant-garde utopia of »art of the everyday«, the utopia that consistently sought to expand the boundaries of possible art material, is realised in the ultimate dissolution of art itself (it is thus that Trump’s proposed budget which eliminates *in toto* all art funding can be described as “utopian”). Such a dissolution immediately foregrounds the subject as the *locus ultimum* of the creative act, which performative affirmation seeks to exorcise. Or, as

¹² Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 7

¹³ ‘Negation, Affirmation, Hyperaffirmation: Zum Stand aktueller Kritik’ in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 05/2016, 16–20. All translations mine.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Kreidler has said, “people take so many selfies because everything else has already been photographed.”¹⁵

In practice, Frank’s theory-laden and somewhat jargon-y concept of performative affirmation manifests itself surprisingly, directly, and often viscerally. In the short audio-video piece “The 1000 most extraordinary people of all time”, part of the much larger multimedia project *wir sind aussergewöhnlich* (‘we are extraordinary’, 2012–2013), Frank has aggregated from popular sources (*Time* magazine, Wikipedia, etc.) a list of the “most extraordinary” people who have ever lived.¹⁶ They are the usual suspects: athletes, physicists, great artists, politicians, explorers, dictators. Their images flash by at a near-stroboscopic pace to a soundtrack of Frank’s earlier compositions, compressed and overdubbed on top of each other. The spectator-listener need not understand Frank’s comprehensive taxonomy of “performative affirmation”, nor even be aware of it, for the piece to do its work. Indeed, despite its aggressively confrontational presentation, there is a sort of familiarity to the piece: this is history by lightning, but it’s empty history; an aggregate rather than a grand narrative, a playlist instead of an epic. You don’t need to be acquainted with post-Adornian metaphysics to realize that you’ve seen this before.

By far the most ambitious of Frank’s projects to date is the massive “theory opera” *Freiheit – die eutopische Gesellschaft* (‘Freedom – the eutopian society’, 2015), which, as its Overture indicates, is “a museum of posters, a discourse space, an installation, a quantitatively and qualitatively captured art project [...] a freedom-genealogy, a cultural-theoretical descriptive model of perspectives of ‘freedom’ with the conceptual pairing of ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’; ironic, moral, and childishly sincere.”¹⁷ In essence, the composer has evolved from a cynic to a curator, relinquishing all but the most rudimentary authorship over their creation: Frank’s theory opera is a collaboration with not only other musicians and composers, but video artists, architects, sociologists, celebrities, philosophers, and celebrity-philosophers, such as walking meme Slavoj Žižek.¹⁸

It is here, in his latest and most freewheeling works, that the singularity of Frank’s aesthetic approach is clearly and fully manifest. There is an Adornian adage, by now a bit shopworn, that artworks are innately utopian since they “bear witness” to the fact that the world can and should be other than it is (cf. *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 242). But such a paradigm is dependent on the material-immanent quality of artworks, a quality that has disappeared with the fungibility of material: any part of an artwork could be replaced with anything else without a change in type, it is still identified as an artwork regardless. So Frank’s latest works, in all their plurality, reveal a world that *could not possibly be otherwise*.

One brief example of how he does it: the performance spaces and program material for *Freiheit – die eutopische Gesellschaft* are filled with different posters – from communist propaganda to car ads to campaigns against zoning ordinances – that each promise a simple, immediate subjective action which will result in freedom. These are doubly contradictory, primarily in that freedom is presented not as an a priori but as a commanded objective, but also

¹⁵ On Facebook.

¹⁶ The full video of this piece can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piT_UZVbFyA

¹⁷ From page 14 of the program book. Translation mine.

¹⁸ A video excerpt of Žižek’s part from the piece’s 2016 performance in Zürich can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5JfTVzDkfw>. It should be noted in passing that Frank’s inclusion of Žižek should in no way be read as an endorsement.

in the deployment of “freedom” for mutually conflicting ideological ends, whether transcendental-global (“Proletarians of the world, unite!” proclaims one poster) or mundane-local (the anti-zoning-ordinance poster shows a forest with a sign in front of it which says, perhaps over-dramatically, “Freiheit verboten”). Taken as a whole (and this is indeed how the piece presents them), the totality of these posters are a dissolution of ideology. This dissolution is more than a theoretical construct, it is a physical-emotional response, the same sort of sinking anxiety a self-aware person gets when encountering a Che Guevara t-shirt or a dorm room poster of Marx and Lenin drinking Mai Tais. An alternative world *can not possibly be imagined*, and even if it could, its imagining would immediately be assimilated into the existing sociocultural order: *vide* Pepsi deploying Black Lives Matter to promote a soft drink. This is the visceral and quotidian counterpart to the somewhat cryptic statement at the end of *Das Meisterwerk*: negative and positive, original and simulation have dissolved into each other. In his seismic reversal of Adorno’s formulation of art-as-social-criticism, Frank’s presents this subsumption not as critique but as affirmation – not only do we have freedom, but we are free to choose which freedom we want to have. These recursive potentialities, condensed into a single work and perpetually reaffirmed, are the propulsive force behind Frank’s music. To put it in Beethoven’s terms: *es muss sein!*

At this point, Frank’s works are far too complex and discursive to be concisely summarised within the auspices of an introductory profile. An analysis of *Freiheit – die eutopische Gesellschaft* would far exceed the scope of the present investigation. It is far easier to demonstrate how Frank arrived here, rather than analyse or explicate what exactly “here” is, and this is what I have attempted to do in the foregoing section. But it is nevertheless clear that Frank’s theory opera is not a genre but a blueprint: a seismic opening up of the artistic apparatus towards the “outside” world. Future projects would include not just the professions listed above but also video game programmers, politicians, religious authorities, factory workers, or anyone from any conceivable background or vocation. It is thus that Frank has cunningly wrested the utopian project of the avant-garde from its materialist exhaustion.

V. Overview, concluded

Placing an individual composer within the wider context of New Music today is a confusing and perilous task. The New Music scene has fractured into so many discrete stylistic splinters that the creation of some sort of hierarchy of recognition appears to be not only practically but ethically unfeasible. I’m facebook friends with most of these people, and even I can’t really follow what’s going on. Nevertheless, Frank’s music is, at its essence, grappling with the same issues that one finds in pieces by Johannes Kreidler, Niklas Seidl, Neele Hülcker, Alexander Schubert, Cassandra Miller, Leopold Hurt, Maya Verlaak, David Pocknee, Hannes Seidl and Celeste Oram, to name only the best examples which I am familiar with. And indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the problem of material exhaustion and the absence of signification can be reliably traced back to at least the late 1960s.

But the situation at present is crucially, richly different. When Frank says that his compositional material is “the axioms that allow New Music to exist as an institution”,¹⁹ he is in effect describing two distinct but coincident processes. The first process, logically and chronologically, is the rejection of music *qua* music, the neutralization of cultural-political

¹⁹ As he did in a roundtable discussion at the 2016 Darmstädter Ferienkurse.

hierarchies that maintain prestige and value judgements, and the denial of an absolutist conception of artistic autonomy. This is to be understood as both a continuation and qualification of the “refusal of habit” outlined by Helmut Lachenmann: it is a rejection of the conditions which allow habit to emerge in the first place. The second process is performative affirmation, which turns from content to context while simultaneously reaffirming the radical subjectivity of artistic production and consumption. In simpler, if somewhat hackneyed, terms: Frank’s music simultaneously looks inwards (towards the structural/ontological constructions of sound as music) and outwards (towards the conditions – professional, socioeconomic, political, philosophical, scientific, and otherwise – in which such a music arises).

It would be naïve to suggest that Frank is a revolutionary composer simply because he gave Slavoj Žižek yet another opportunity to lecture or because he has collaborated with video artists. The truly radical facet of these works is that Frank has abdicated creative (and thus normative) authority. Such an abdication is unheard of, even amongst Frank’s peers. While *Fremdarbeit* engages with neoliberal realities that art and culture prefer to ignore, it is ultimately Kreidler (as the “moderator” indicated in the score) who engages with them. If a Jennifer Walshe piece is being performed, one can be reasonably confident that, unless it’s the skateboard one, Walshe herself will be there to perform in it. Even a John Cage score has John Cage’s name on the cover. Frank has understood that, as a practitioner of New Music in the 21st century, anything he does will be considered music. So his compositional act is to bring together people who can not make such a claim (economists, government workers, businessmen), and have *them* give performances of their specialisms or passions alongside “actual” music. Frank’s music is the creation of a space where a newer music can happen – a music that not only engages with the exigencies of its creation but opens them to infinitely discursive alternative possibilities.

I have consistently sought to emphasize my acute awareness (starting with the title) that this profile often uncomfortably – indeed, cringingly – veers towards the hagiographic. And now, having just in effect described my subject as a Janus-faced colossus astride two worlds without a hint of irony, I would like to very briefly explain by way of a conclusion why I have decided to frame what to all appearances is a dry, theory-laden composer, steeped in a tradition of cultural theory and little known to the English-speaking world, in such messianic terms. As it stands, not only has New Music failed in its utopian projects, but culture in general – high, low, and medium – has utterly detached itself from political phenomenology. If a Beyoncé album has demonstrably the same concrete political impact as a Lachenmann quartet (read: nil), then the terms of artistic political engagement must be sharply redrawn. Art in general, and so-called political art in particular, can no longer afford to enjoy its autonomy from the “problems” it seeks to identify. Rather than write a protest piece, an act which is at best useless in 2017, the artist must now grapple with the cultural-hegemonic machinery which allows the blissfully impotent existence of such an artwork. Frank was one of the first to identify this situation, and the first to propose active artistic solutions. His evolution from negativist material critique – wherein the materials that make up the art object are shown to have lost all signification and power – to a wildly discursive, critical, collaborative, even inspirational curatorial composition – so-called “performative affirmation” – represents, at the bare minimum, a staggeringly ambitious and self-aware attempt to transform what music is able to do. It should come as no surprise when a still younger generation of composers build on Frank’s achievements in their own practice.