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Simon Steen-Andersen — a Composer of the Postmodernist Era*

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Abstract. The composer’s position in the contemporary academic musical culture includes an entire spectrum of directives: from the modern to the postmodern. The postmodernist aesthetical directive towards irony and the element of play are the most akin to Danish composer Simon Steen-Anderson, who has received broad recognition in the professional community. In this article, the conceptions of three compositions by Steen-Anderson are analyzed — *Black Box Music* for solo percussionist and fifteen performers (2012), *In Spite Of, And Maybe Even Therefore* for winds, piano, percussion and double-bass (2007) and *Amongst* for amplified guitar and large orchestra (2005). These compositions demonstrate a prevalence of the compositional strategies of deconstruction, which make it possible for the composer to choose an unexpected and nontrivial angle in regard to such archetypical dialogic ideas as “the orchestra vs. the soloist,” “the conductor vs. the soloist,” “the old vs. the new.”

Keywords: Simon Steen-Anderson, *Black Box Music*, *In Spite Of, And Maybe Even Therefore*, *Amongst*, postmodernism, deconstruction, the concept of a musical composition

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Introduction

Chronologically, art entered the stage that was subsequently labeled as postmodernist during the period of the 1960s and the 1970s. This was also asserted by musicologists: Richard Taruskin, [1] Jonathan Kramer, [2] and Judith Lochhead. [3] This fact has also been discussed by Russian scholars. Mention must be made of Evgeniya Lianskaya's dissertation, [4] the massive, the substantive articles of Svetlana Savenko, [5] and Vladimir Chinayev, [6] and the book by Marianna Vysotskaya and Galina Grigorieva. [7] The issues and techniques of postmodernism in musical culture continue to be studied and cognized by musicologists up to the present day. [8; 9]

The methodological status of postmodernism has been formulated by Umberto Eco in his essay "Postscript to 'The Name of the Rose'": "I, myself, am convinced that postmodernism is not a fixed chronological phenomenon, but a certain spiritual state, if you will, *Kunstwollen* — an approach towards work. In this sense, the phrase is appropriate that any epoch contains its own postmodernism, just like any epoch has its own mannerism <...> The past presses down, overwhelms, intimidates us. The historical avant-garde (incidentally, in this case, I also take the avant-garde as a meta-historical category) wishes to disavow the past. <...> Postmodernism presents an answer to modernism: since it is not possible to destroy the past, or else its destruction leads to speechlessness, it must be reevaluated, ironically, without naïveté." [10, p. 435]

Irony and play are chiefly perceptible in the music of Danish composer Simon Steen-Andersen (b. 1976). At first, let us clarify, why we have turned particularly to this composer, who is very modestly represented in contemporary scholarly literature (see,

for example, [11; 12]). In the present day, in the conditions of the global world, the function of the contemporary "table of ranks" is carried out by various ratings, wherein each composer is given a certain position, according to expert assessment. Despite the fact that each rating is rather conditional, let us, nonetheless, turn our attention to the initiative of the Italian journal *Classical Voice*, which in 2017 published a large-scale query of experts in the sphere of contemporary music and received the following result: the greatest number of voices was gathered by Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas, and after him, the second place was taken by Simon Steen-Andersen, who was in advance of such acknowledged masters of contemporary composition as Helmut Lachenmann and Salvatore Sciarrino. At the moment of the publication of the rating, the composer turned 40 years old, and the list of his compositions was quite broad: it numbered around 50 compositions, frequently bestowed with large European prizes and awards.

Steen-Andersen's path into composition did not differ from the conventional type in Northern Europe: he studied in his native city of Aarhus in northern Denmark, where his composition teacher was Karl Aage Rasmussen. During the course of his studies, Steen-Andersen made use of the possibilities of the program of academic mobility, which allowed him to study a while in Freiburg with Mathias Spahlinger, in Buenos Aires with Gabriel Valverde and in Copenhagen with Bent Sørensen. Presently, Steen-Andersen lives in Berlin and teaches composition in Bern, at the University for the Arts.

He immediately drew attention towards himself from the public and the expert community by the originality of his compositional ideas, which are situated in a zone between pure and theatrical

performance. His witty and nonstandard solutions have attracted the attention of critics and have resulted in numerous commissions from various ensembles, which included such outstanding collectives as *Ensemble Modern* and *Ensemble Recherche*. He has been a frequent guest of the Donaueschingen Festival and the Darmstadt Summer Courses. His musical works reflect an authorial vision, which frequently treads along a nontraditional, non-banal, paradoxical path. Let us examine some of his compositions.

Black Box Music (2012)

Steen-Andersen's compositions are for the most part programmatic and draw attention towards themselves by their peculiar conceptions. Particularly the conceptual component presents the first level of authorial originality. Let us turn to one of his most famous works, highlighted in the aforementioned rating — *Black Box Music* (2012)¹. For start, let us try to interpret the title. Notwithstanding the fact that this is also the title of an Italian musical group, which was popular in the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as of a company active in the field of the technology of spectacular events, which organized concerts since 1992 (for example, of the German industrial rock group *Rammstein*), the initial meaning of *Black Box*, in this case, must be considered the concept of the “black box” introduced by William Ashby, a British psychiatrist and specialist in cybernetics. A black box, as the dictionaries interpret this concept, is an “apparatus and/or program system with an unknown inner structure, but with a familiar (foreseeable, registered) reaction for signal inputs, commands or data. The principle

of the ‘black box’ has been widely used in testing. If the inner workings of a black box are defined, then its reactions on input actions are fixed and may be fixated, studied and prognosticated, and if they are not determined, then these reactions are more often than not unpredictable. In engineering, a black box is an installation, system or object, described from the positions of input and output, but without any comprehension of how its inner construction works. In this sense, the human brain is, indeed, a ‘black box,’ the construction of which remains little known to us.”² Thereby, a black box is a certain contrivance endowed with certain reactions, which are hardly always predictable. In this regard, it may be regarded as a large metaphor, providing the opportunity for endless experimentation and study.

How does Steen-Andersen interpret this title?

The piece *Black Box Music* was composed for a solo percussionist, 15 instruments, an amplified box and video. The soloist stands on the stage, immersing his hands in a black box with a built-in camera and various sources of sound. In this box he plays different objects — tuning forks, stretched pieces of rubber, fans, — and at the same time directs the music with the help of gigantic “hands” projected on the screen behind his back. The composition contains a very precisely written-out musical score, in which both the instrumental sounds and the noises are fully fixated. The idea of the work could be called original, to the highest degree. The initial point of the piece is, of course, the classical soloist-conductor. The motions of the conductor, who is manipulating an invisible orchestra, are

¹ The composition has aroused immense public response. Steen-Andersen received a prize of the Nordic Council Music Prize (2014), the Mauricio Kagel Music Prize (2017) and an Siemens Music Prize (2017) for this work.

² Black box. *Multitrans. Electronic dictionary*.
URL: <https://multitrans.com/m.exe?s=black%20box%20abstraction&l1=1&l22> (accessed: 07.11.2024).

projected on a screen. However, it does not immediately become clear that the performer is standing in front of a black box covered with a black curtain, having put his hands inside the box, and not being able to see his own actions — they appear only as a projection, and are visible only to the audience. These motions are viewed and perceived as signs of directing the orchestra — and the musicians, situated in the dark premises of the concert hall along the walls (i.e., placed in a position similar to that of the audience), react to these gestures. But the main point of attraction of the audience's attention is in the conductor's gestures, which resemble the manipulations of an actor-puppeteer. It becomes apparent that the conductor and the soloist are one and the same personality, only an inwardly disconnected one: the conductor conducts, essentially, into emptiness, while the soloist submits to the playing of the orchestra. The music of the black box may be interpreted as the deconstruction simultaneously of conducting and of the puppet theater, and, at the same time, as research and exploitation of the audiovisual relations comprising conducting and theatrical production. This entire 30-minute show is divided into three parts. It begins with an Overture and the "Elimination of Ambiguity" and ends with a ceremonial, pompous "Finale."

The ironic musical drama played-in within the "black box" presents an absurdist action, where the very source of the action is incomprehensible: either the conductor is generating music to life with his manipulations, as this frequently happens, or it is that the music with its actions arouses the reactions of the conductor, who turns out to be simply a figurehead, a puppet "led" by the ensemble, which at times puts its conditional leader "to the test." The role of the conductor is fancifully interpreted in the absurd actions

of the cartoonish character. To a certain degree, this work comes to resemble Mauricio Kagel's composition, *Zwei-Mann-Orchester*, wherein the initial parodied figure is presented by the so-called "one-man-orchestra" — a street musician who plays on several instruments at once. Thereby, the "black box" turns out to be simultaneously a real object and a metaphor, a merry, but also a frightening symbol of the mysterious process of musical collaboration, at times transforming into rivalry and always bearing the uncertainty of the result, since neither the "conductor" is allowed to surmise, how his exercises would finish, nor the performers have any knowledge, what would be the next gesture of the head of the ensemble, and who is controlling whom — it remains unforeseen.

The "Mysteriousness" of the "black box" — it is the ambivalence of the relations between two sides, two actants in the process of performance. But the possibility itself of ambivalence, of the shift in emphasis has always aroused a profound interest on the part of a composer. Frequently, this is endowed with a conceptual character, reflected in the titles of the compositions.

In Spite Of, And Maybe Even Therefore (2007)

In 2007 the work, *In Spite Of, And Maybe Even Therefore* was composed, the title of which intrigues us by its unusual character. Wherein lies the meaning of such a fanciful title?

The piece predominantly consists of two "musics" (which in itself is a rather frequently encountered idea — it suffices to remember, for example, Sofia Gubaidulina's *Vivente — non vivente*), both of which are being constructed and deconstructed at the same time. The first "music" is a quasi-unison, performed fortissimo by instruments without amplification situated in the background: the piano with a

closed lid, the contrabassoon, the double-bass and percussion instruments. The very beginning of this progression is repeated over and over again, within a small loop³, gradually expanding in length, continuously discovering a greater amount of material. At the same time, this music becomes interrupted with pauses or insertions with the other music, performed by an amplified flute, clarinet and horn, all of whom are seated at the forefront. At first, it is interrupted very seldom, and only for a short, evanescent period of time. Gradually, these disruptions occur more and more frequently and for lengthier durations. Soon, they begin to prevail, and the progression acquires a more and more fragmented character and is finished by only short echoes of the initial construction.

The second process has as its basis one of Beethoven's *Bagatelles* for piano opus 126, performed at an ultra-pianissimo dynamic by the amplified flute, clarinet and horn. The musicians sit at tables, facing each other. At the beginning, they play, from time to time, one chord, but gradually the temporal interval between the chords begins to shorten. During the process of performance, it becomes possible to understand that this music is tonal and that the chords sound closer and closer to each other. At a certain moment, the sonorities drift together so closely to each other in time, that they form a tonal progression. However, each time a chord sounds, a part of one of the instruments is physically disassembled by the respective performer, which makes an uncounterfeited, "civilized" performance more and more problematic. At that exact moment when, finally, the chords are supposed to join together in a progression, the instruments have already been disassembled into separate

parts and are lying as fragments on the tables in front of the performers. The musicians try with all their strength to perform Beethoven on these fragmented parts of the instruments, but the initial music almost entirely vanishes within the sounds of the manipulations with the instrument and the noisy, sham manner of performance. After a certain amount of time, the sounds disappear, paving way to that "choreography of motions" that is indispensable for their performance. Out of these "musical ruins," the music attempts to build new relationships and new paths of construction of continuity, but the sought for coalescence is slowly destroyed by the interruptions, which continuously become lengthier in time.

What happens here clearly demonstrates the process of the so-called "deconstruction," one of the crucial phenomena for postmodernism; and while for the creator of the term, Jacques Derrida, deconstruction was simply a process of analytical "dismantlement-vs.-assemblage" of a text, for Steen-Andersen, the "assemblage" of music transforms itself into "dismantlement" and the "vanishing" of the musical instrument, as if the emergence of a musical connected duration possessed a certain destructive force — thereby a bird is born, having hatched itself out of an egg: it could not have appeared alive to see the light of day, had the shell not been destroyed. The "thinned out matter" of the instrument — what is this, other than a metaphor of the spirit towering over matter? (It must be noticed that particularly it is the *wind* instruments in Steen-Andersen's music that are subject to deconstruction: only the "spirit," the breath draped in sounds, is all that remains of them, in the literal sense). The composer himself

³ A *Loop* is a "circuitous" fragment of musical duration or magnetic tape forming a precise multifold repetition.

remarked about this quite definitely: “When I compose within a classical frame I wish to show the tradition in a radically new light. <...> I thematise the beauty of the destroyed and the unpolished. I bring the listener inside the ruined instrument to experience sounds which we normally don’t come close to.”⁴

Amongst (2005)

Among the instruments that are the most valuable for Steen-Andersen, special emphasis must be made of the electric guitar. This is understandable, since the composer in his earlier days began his musical activities as a performer on the electric guitar. *Amongst* — a concerto for an extremely amplified guitar and large orchestra (2005) — bears in itself an almost portrait-like resemblance with its composer, who has remarked about this: “An instrument very much like us humans! And an instrument that because of all these qualities not only has given me musical experiences of unique intensity and intimacy when I least expected it, but has also influenced the very foundation of my musical search.”⁵

Amongst is essentially written for two guitars, in which two different characters are surmised. The first guitar is discreet, it seems to “conceal itself” behind its performer; on the other hand, the second guitar obstinately struggles with the impediments, in order to be heard. As the composer clarifies for us:

“The orchestra has two dynamic states that correspond to the two faces of the guitar: The one is the extreme pianissimo — where the tone is not yet well defined and secure — only made audible because played or ‘whispered’ <...> The other dynamic state is the failed solistic fortissimo; the maximum energy put into an instrument, that is hampered or ‘disabled’ through special playing techniques).”⁶ The composition may be divided into three or four sections, but some of these sections do not possess an obvious beginning or conclusion, and their other tendencies are also not so apparent. The form simultaneously seems to be open and self-contained. The music is conceived, for the most part, horizontally, frequently, as consisting of several lines, each of which attempts to outbalance the attention to itself, frequently with conflicting tendencies. The title *Amongst* pertains to the coexistence or the multi-strata in music (such as, for instance, “to find oneself *between* two lights” — in other words, to end up in a position, where one has to choose a certain local focus at the cost of global vision), and, at the same time, — also to coexistence in the social aspect, wherein the soloist frequently finds himself divulged by the orchestra and becomes but a part of the process of combined music-making — *amongst equals*. The focus of the composer’s, and, after that, the listener’s attention becomes polyvalent and nontrivial in

⁴ See: URL: <https://edition-s.dk/music/simon-steen-andersen/piano-concerto> (accessed: 07.11.2024). Simon Steen-Andersen’s *Piano Concerto* received widespread recognition winning the special orchestra prize when it was premiered at the music festival Donaueschinger Musiktage in the fall of 2014. The work takes as its starting point the sound- and video recording of a grand piano falling onto a concrete floor from a height of 8 meters. From this Steen-Andersen composes an intricate dialogue between prerecorded audiovisual material and real-time musicians. The result is a spectacular genre-bending multimedia experience. A multimedia reportage of the *Piano Concerto* can be found on the SWR website. URL: <https://simonsteenandersen.com/projects/piano-concerto> (accessed: 07.11.2024).

⁵ See: URL: <https://brahms.ircam.fr/fr/works/work/36144/> (accessed: 07.11.2024).

⁶ Ibid.

a postmodernist manner, whereas the world not as much changes, as much as it acquires a different dimension.

Conclusion

So what is it that Steen-Andersen conveys to us by his music?

His most apparent wish is to see the “seamy side” of a musical composition, its back side. The musical work seems to insinuate to us regarding its genesis: the composer places us in a situation, where the music does not simply “appear” to us in its integrated form, but also slightly opens to us the inner, unmanifest, secretive situation of its birth. The word itself — *composition* — suddenly acquires additional overtones,

concealed in the utmost depth of the word: it is simultaneously a *noun* (the result), and the *process* (a composition, as a procurement or as production: the achievement of something that becomes the result afterwards). The accentuation on the procedural component emphasizes the presence of the *formation* in what results as the outcome; it reveals that concealed factor of the inner life of a musical text that causes to vibrate the meaning and the content of the musical whole, the simultaneity of its existence. The drama unfolding inside a black box, the complex world of a musical instrument reflecting our attitude towards it and its reaction towards us — what is this, but a metaphor of the postmodernist “vibrating,” ceaselessly forming and changing reality?

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