

THE CULTURE OF COPYING: MONETARY VALUE AND EXPLOITATION

An interview with Johannes Kreidler

Johannes Kreidler is a German composer whose conceptually oriented work has attracted wide attention. Unusually for contemporary classical music, much of his work highlights the otherwise hidden workings of the industry with several pieces directly addressing capital and cycles of exchange. A key work is *Fremdarbeit* (2009) in which Kreidler was commissioned to write a composition but outsourced the labour to China and India for a fraction of the cost (and at a tidy profit). Kreidler visits Australia this month for the Liquid Architecture festival of sound arts whose program also features locals Robin Fox, Bianca Hester, Brian Fuata and Kusum Normoyle.

You've said, 'in my work I use many samples - i.e. quotations of other music, mostly pop music - thereby questioning identity, media reality, and - politically - the issue of property rights in the digital age.' What are your views on current property rights, especially how they relate to artists? Should artists expect a financial return on their efforts and what largely stands in their way?

Of course artist should get money for their work, at least as long as we have a capitalist system. One of the means therefore was copyright – mainly in the 20th century. But due to technological developments, the copyright system more and more loses its function. Which is not only bad for artists; generally for culture it is a big benefit when immaterial goods can be copied infinitely. And also the concept of copyright has quite a lack of basement: it was more and more questionable, to which degree you can apply a work to one single creator.

Fremdarbeit famously 'draws attention to the hidden economics, and politics, within Western music making'. What sparked the idea and what was your intent? What have been the responses – amusement, intrigue, outrage? Do they differ between different geographies?

You could say that this idea was already done in the visual arts: Peter Paul Rubens already had almost a factory, Martin Kippenberger hired commercial painters to paint pictures for him, Santiago Sierra pays poor people to do meaningless actions like standing in the museum for hours, in the corner. I don't remember exactly what ignited my imagination, but it came from my approach of sampling and of using existing data to implement into music – you could say that in "Charts Music" I already let other people – the bank managers – compose for me.

In Fremdarbeit two aspects are combined: The question of authorship (who composed that piece?), when having assistant composers from a very different background asked to compose something in a style they wouldn't compose themselves, and the aspect of monetary value and exploitation in a globalized world.

I wanted to realize these aspects in music. Because it is possible and no one has done it before, as far as I know. Music is often regarded as quite abstract, which is not true. So that made me more ambitious to do it.

Meanwhile the piece was played quite often on three continents. And reactions are very interesting: sometimes people laugh a lot, but it seems out of a feeling of discomfort. In Ljubljana at the International Computer Music Conference, after 5 minutes of the piece the Chinese delegation left the hall, leading to discussions all night long with the festival

chef... in Chicago it also led to a long discussion after the concert, which was a very good one, exchanging questions of shame in the U.S. and in Germany related to the specific histories of the countries. Interestingly, at the World New Music Days, which I thought was the best place to play the piece, the audience didn't respond at all.

You live within a world-leading economy of Germany. How do the ideas in Fremdbardeit relate to Germany's traditionally strong funding situation? What about the developing Asian economies you outsourced from? Is the work necessarily the product of your cultural position within your part of the world?

A lot of the technical devices, a lot of the clothes that are bought and worn in Germany are 'made in china'. I don't have exact figures, but I know, since Germany is a leading export economy, emerging markets like China are an important partner of German industry. I also know people who say that in 20 years Germany will be a cheap-wages-country serving China... Well, China is kind of fascinating, this huge amount of people, this governmental capitalism-dictatorship; maybe Angela Merkel is not so different from some Chinese ways of politics. Compared to the neighbouring countries, Germany is a cheap wages country, that's why it has become such a powerful economy in the last decade. Another aspect of China which interests me a lot is the culture of copying.

The economics and politics of music are always present but often hidden and rarely spoken about. If you agree, why might this be the case? What are you trying to say about the economics of sound practice? Are there other artists or pieces you acknowledge who also reveal these hidden cycles of exchange?

As already mentioned above, music is traditionally relatively abstract. I also like to listen to sound itself, I like the power of music and so on. But that's only one side of it. Music is in the world, it is in the context of politics etc. I feel the need to express also this situation, or even more, I feel forced to deal with this, since I have to earn money, since I have to deal with copyright issues... And it is also a creative challenge to think of ways to implement this into this habitually 'abstract' sphere of sound.

How do you feel about the ethics of Fremdarbeit? It has helped broker your name internationally yet it relies on collaboration and I wonder if the outsourced 'composers' have benefitted as much.

Well, it is almost inevitable that a work of political art, which is done to get attention, if it has success, the success is also to the artist himself. In Fremdarbeit, this is part of the provocational strategy of the piece.

Many of your pieces (like Fremdarbeit and Charts Music) clearly have a conceptual thrust. How important are the more abstract musical results - the notes and the rhythms? Are they inseparable from the extra-musical elements? How much do these pieces rely on concert hall traditions for their power and effect (i.e. considering they step outside normal concert hall conventions, how committed do you remain to this system? Could the pieces exist equally in the art gallery?)

This is different from piece to piece. I am composing pieces where I am thinking hard about every tone, in other pieces the above concept is much more relevant than the notes. In Fremdarbeit for example, some people say, the music isn't interesting for them. I don't think so at all: to me it is extremely interesting to listen to the outcome, since in this

outcome all the contradictions of the cultural clash are present. I come from classical music, I have studied composition at a music university. But more and more it seems that I am leaving this domain, having never felt very comfortable there. The conceptual aesthetic has a lot of references to the visual arts and more and more of my works would rather fit in the gallery domain. In fact I am entering the gallery / visual arts world more and more.

Can you speak about your personal politics and your ideals around how contemporary music and art should operate economically? There are many strange paradoxes between those who fund art (governments, philanthropy, commercial interests) and the beliefs of those who make it. Many feel complicit and at times the philosophical stances seem at complete odds.

Big question. In a perfect world, there is a monthly income for everyone without any obligation.

More realistically, at the moment I am earning half of my income from teaching, the other comes from artist fees from festivals, commissions etc. For me, this works well. But it is no surprise that funding and institutionalized art production often has an impact on the artist's work, and I often argue against this: funding only if there is full artistic freedom. In these cases I am happy that I also have a day job so I can reject commissions which don't let me absolutely do what I think is good.

Finally, how do you pluck up the courage to be so bold in these pieces?

Speaking personally, I could say almost a bit pathetically: it is ideas that come into my mind that force me to realize them, no matter what effort and maybe boldness they need.

But I can also say, they are in a tradition of political art. For example in Germany there were Bertolt Brecht, Joseph Beuys and Christoph Schlingensief, artist who I admire and who I studied very well.