Positive or negative 1

In a two-part article, the first in a series surveying developments in contemporary Germanic music, IAN PACE introduces the music of Helmut Lachenmann

IN THE 1994 Meltdown Festival at the South Bank, a performance by Ensemble Modern of Helmut Lachenmann's *"... Zwei Gefühle..." Musik mit Leonardo* (1992) provoked furious reactions from some members of the audience (like one might expect of a quaint group of Saffron Walden concert-goers exposed to *La valse*), incensed at this incursion of such a 'modernist' work into the festival. The audacity of Ensemble Modern in programming this work alongside the uncontroversial sample of 'good composition' provided by Thomas Adès's *Chamber symphony* came in for particular criticism. Clearly Lachenmann, even after well over thirty years of work, retains the potential to provoke and unsettle the fragile assumptions brought to bear on contemporary music.

This was not by any means the first airing of Lachenmann's work in Britain: the Almeida and Huddersfield festivals had previously made features of his work, which had received less attention. However, since the Meltdown concert, performances of the trio *Allegro sostenuto* (1986–88) have generated considerable interest, and a concert by the Composers' Ensemble in the Sounding the Century 1998 season will include *Mouvement (-vor der Erstarrung)* (1983–84.)

It is all too easy to dismiss the work of Lachenmann (or that of Dieter Schnebel, Mathias Spahlinger, Nicolaus A. Huber and others) as *musica negativa*, in the deprecatory manner that the term was used by Hans Werner Henze in his attack on these composers. What is at play is the fact that Lachenmann's music forces the listener to confront and question their ingrained expectations from and responses to music, in an attempt to extend and further illuminate one's powers of perception. This is far from mere nihilism, or a view of music as an (inevitably redundant) simulacrum of a fragmented and alienated society.

To date, there has only been one major article published in English on Lachenmann, by Elke Hockings,[1] and an article by David Smeyers looking at Lachenmann's clarinet writing.[2] Various shorter pieces have appeared in CD booklets, and two of Lachenmann's own essays have been translated into English.[3] Hockings's article is a critical look at the development of Lachenmann's aesthetic position, but no article has given a comprehensive survey of the music. This article (concluded next month) is intended to fill that gap.[4]

MODERN GERMAN music from generations younger than that of Stockhausen and Henze is, relatively speaking, an unfamiliar area in Britain today, despite many of the composers' having a major reputation all around Europe and elsewhere as well as in their native country. The modernistic developments of the 1950s had a special potency for young Germans, distrustful of the conventions of the past, which could be seen to have been tainted by the culture from which they originated, a culture which culminated in genocide. The critical tradition of German aesthetic thought, encompassing such figures as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and more recently Jürgen Habermas has continued to inform much of the intellectual and cultural life of that country. An almost mystical faith in Hegelian dialectics has provided a hope for progress even after the devastation of the war years. Lachenmann, who was born in 1935, is a child of this era, and his ideas and work are heavily influenced by this tradition.

Lachenmann was then at first, like many of his contemporaries, drawn towards the music of the 1950s serialists. He studied briefly with Stockhausen in Cologne, and then with Luigi Nono, who was to have a decisive impact upon his work. Nono's perception of an equation between musical and social revolution, in distinction to other socialistically-inclined composers such as Hans Eisler, and awareness of the social responsibility of the artist, were to be a profound influence on the young Lachenmann, but where Nono's work expanded from a post-Webernian serial language to encompass such polemical subject matter as the letters of condemned resistance fighters, the recorded sounds of street demonstrations or leftist texts such as those of Che Guevara, Lachenmann wished instead to engage in a more fundamental examination of the political connotations of seemingly abstract music, of notes, sounds and their combinations.

Serialism on one hand, and the chance procedures of John Cage on the other, had taken conven-

1. Elke Hockings: 'Helmut Lachenmann's concept of rejection', in *Tempo*, no.193 (July 1995).

2. David Smeyers: 'The open-minded clarinettist (Helmut Lachenmann's clarinet)', in *The Clarinet* 16 (1989).

3. These are 'The Beautiful in music today', in *Tempo*, no.135 (December 1980), and 'On structuralism', in *Contemporary Music Review*, vol.12 part 1(1995), the latter a highly intricate and difficult, but penetrating essay. Lachenmann's collected writings are published in German as *Helmut Lachenmann –Musik als existentielle Erfahrung: Schriften 1996–1995*, ed. Josef Häusler (Wiesbaden, 1996). Any translators out there considering the preparation of an English version of this substantial volume would be performing a great service. I urge them to do so!

4. This article is in part based on a lecture, 'Helmut Lachenmann and other currents in German music', which I gave on 7 February 1997 as part of the Redlands Lecture series at Reading University.

tional musical language apart, producing for Stockhausen an 'imaginary music of the stars'; for Cage sounds had been freed from the glue that had previously held them together. Lachenmann came to see serialism as a fundamentally historical phenomenon, rather than a new universal *lingua franca*.

> In fact, a study of works from the 'classical' period of serialism, such as the *Canto Sospeso* or *Incontri* by Luigi Nono, *Structures* or *Marteau* by Boulez, *Gruppen* or *Kontrapunkte* by Stockhausen, reveals that the compelling quality of this music is not just derived from the virtuous consistency with which the self-imposed rules are adhered to – and work – but also at least as much from the wisdom with which the music, even with the aid of such a system of rules – and in dialectical contact with it – constitutes a *reaction* to existing social structures and the existing communicative rules of the bourgeois aesthetic apparatus they have created, and offers them resistance – not just rhetorical but actual – putting their normal functioning out of action, indeed sometimes even destroying it. It was this resistance to the established which constituted the strength of these revolutionary aesthetic outbursts and accounted for the beauty of these works at a time when the traditional concept of 'beauty' was regarded as highly suspect by most of these composers.[5]

Lachenmann also realised the importance of what Cage had achieved, but believed the 'liberation of sound' to be an insufficient task for a composer; indeed he was later to criticise Cage for wallowing in 'an aesthetic wasteland: a paradise for believers and nonbelievers'.[6] It is my contention that Lachenmann's music is almost unthinkable had the Cage of the *Music of changes* not occurred previously, as he says: 'I also partake of Cage's fortune, however my creative curiosity does not land there but takes off from there.'[7] For a composer in the New World, at a certain distance from the war experience, it was possible to strike a thoroughly ambivalent view towards (musical) history; for Lachenmann a new musical language had to he built out of the ashes of the old, with an ever-aware and critical eye towards the historical traces implicit in sounds, gestures and other musical characteristics.

Thus Lachenmann formulated the concept of 'verwiegerungen', which is often translated as 'rejection', 'refusal' or 'repudiation'. It was necessary to reject the conventions of the past, because of the associations I mentioned earlier. Music had become rarefied, phantasmagorical, to use Adorno's term: a work could become a fetishised commodity, praised for its transparency, for making invisible the circumstances of its production on either composer's or performer's part, music 'from the heavens' (my quotation marks). In contradistinction to this view, Lachenmann set about the development of an 'instrumental *musique concrète*'. He began to make extensive use of unusual instrumental techniques, particularly with stringed instruments. In live performance, the unusuality and theatricality of these techniques would draw attention to the concrete nature of sound production (almost the polar opposite of the pure sound(s) of Cage and Feldman), just as Pierre Schaffer's original *musique concrète* used actual recorded sounds, that could be readily associated with the material world.

MANY OF LACHENMANN'S works from the 1950s to the earlier 1960s, such as *Souvenir* (1959) for chamber orchestra of woodwind, xylophone. piano and lower strings, use an essentially serial language and a relatively large degree of continuity, to create a type of Nonoesque icy lyricism. The piano works *Echo andante* (1962) and *Wiegenmusik* (1963) are as much concerned with after-effects and resonances of sounds, those elements marginalised in conventional writing, as with sounding notes themselves, a consideration that Lachenmann would return to in various subsequent works. The latter piece also shows an early use of tonal fragments 'made strange' by their being placed in unfamiliar contexts. The culmination of Lachenmann's early period perhaps comes in *Les consolations* (1967–68, rev. 1977–78) for 16 voices and orchestra, a wild and colourful work using phonemes and other fundamental vocal units, that displays a love for and wonderment in the widest possible variety of sounds, and relates to comparable works from the period by Kagel, Schnebel, Ligeti, Berio, Bussotti and others. One of the texts for this work was, Hans Christian Andersen's 'Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern', which is also the basis for his recent stage-work of that name.[8]

But the first work to demonstrate Lachenmann's mature aesthetic ideas and techniques was *temA* (1968) for voice, flute and cello (ex.1). The flute makes much use of breath sounds and different modes of blowing, speaking and singing into the instrument, and key clicks, the vocal part involves a plethora of vocal techniques (some anticipated in *Les consolations*) with intricate motions of tongue and throat, and the cello has a marked *scordatura*, as well as being required to bow various pasts of the body of the instrument; the sounds produced range from the wispy and ethereal to the grating and primitive. This player also uses harmonic stops so as to prevent a string vibrating when it is struck *legno battuto*, the fingers of the left hand striking the string, and often plays the same pitch on different strings, sometimes simultaneously; the *scordatura* provides different overtone combinations to the usual ones. The piece mediates between these types of sounds and more historically identifiable expressive gestures, with the latter gradually usurped by the for-

5. 'On structuralism', p.97. Further interesting discussion of Lachenmann and serialism are included in Hockings, and also in Thomas Kabisch: 'Dialectial composing – dialectical listening', which is printed in the booklet for Roland Keller's CD of the piano music (col legno, AU 31813).

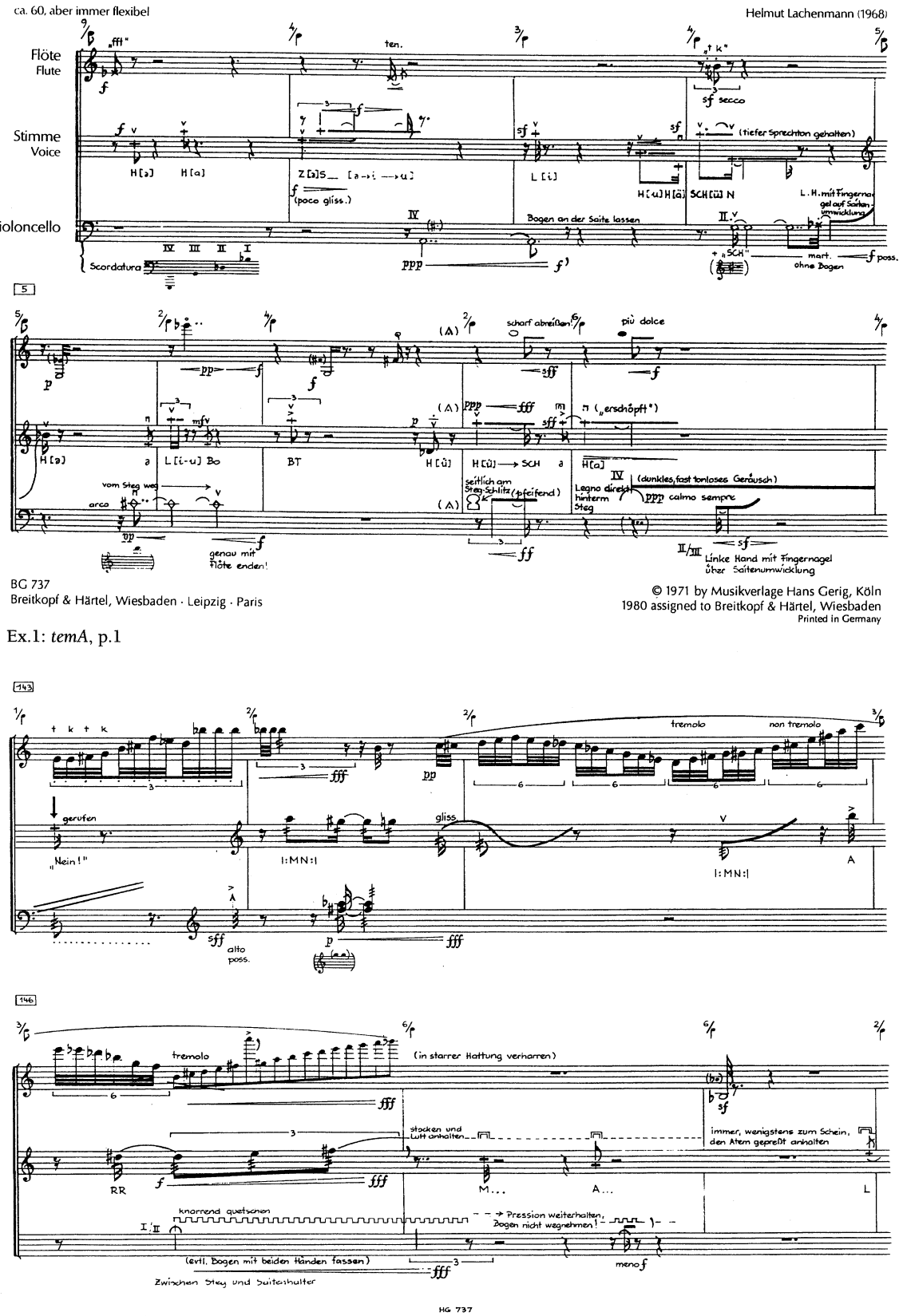
6. From an interview between Lachenmann and Heinz-Klaus Metzger: 'Fragen und Antworten (1988)', in *Musik-Konzepte 61/62. Helmut Lachenmann*, edd.: Metzger, Rainer Riehn, p.123.

7. ibid,p.123.

8. Not having been able to attend the premiere of this work in Hamburg (January 1997), I have not discussed it at length in these articles. For an overview, see John Warnaby: 'Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*', in *Tempo*, no.201 (July 1997).

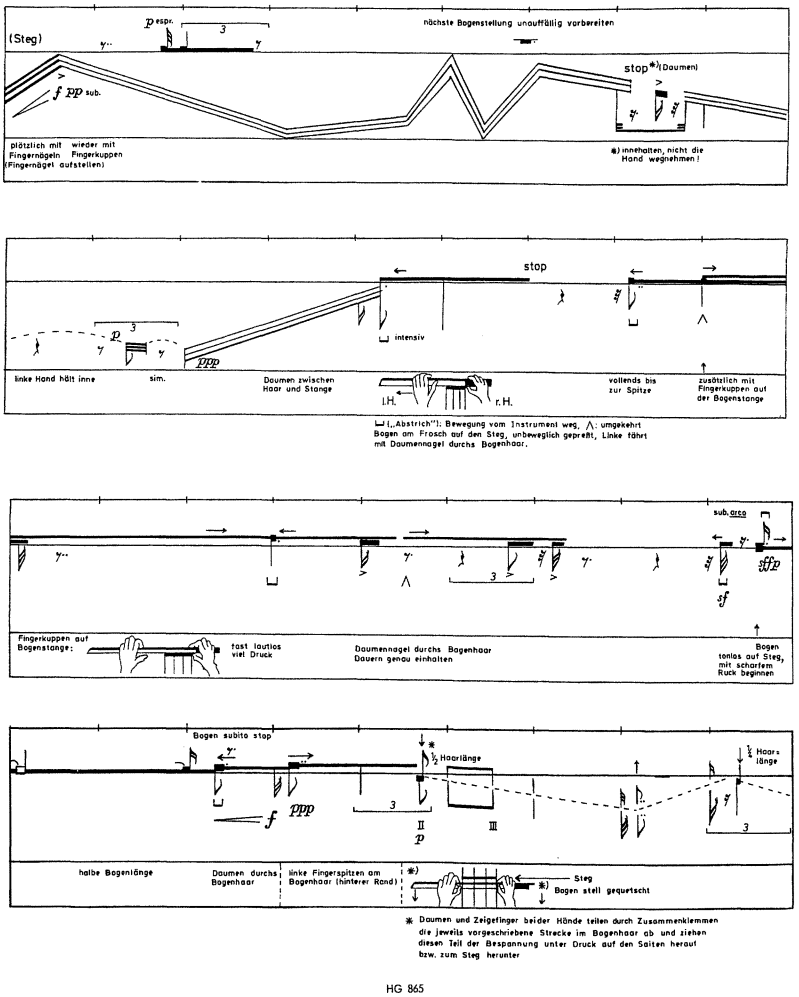
temA

für Flöte, Stimme (Mezzosopran) und Violoncello/for Flute, Voice (Mezzo-Soprano) and Violoncello



Ex.1: *temA*, p.1

Ex.2: *temA*, p.21



Ex.3: *Pression*, p.3

every conceivable manner except the standard one; the bow is applied both below and on the bridge, on the frog, and to parts of the shell, the fingers of the left hand are rubbed against the strings, the strings are overbowed, and so on. Yet the piece is much more than an exemplification of a concept; Lachenmann is able to create intricate and fascinating structural procedures through interplays, juxtapositions and transformations between sounds. Very occasionally clearly pitched notes interrupt or accompany the long, ever-changing, lines of sound, in a manner not completely dissimilar to that achieved by Stockhausen when ring-modulated pitch vectors cross in *Mantra*. *Dal niente* uses as a parameter a spectrum from pitched to unpitched notes, running in tandem (though engaging in a dialectical relationship) with the pitch spectrum itself. The clarinettist graduates between different degrees of 'breathiness', from clear pitches to unpitched breaths. A melodic line performed without discernable pitches still however possesses contoural characteristics, so it becomes a ghostly shadow of a musical line, or an oblique perspective thereof. Sometimes a continuous line of notes is presented, of which only fragments are pitched so as to produce a filtering effect.

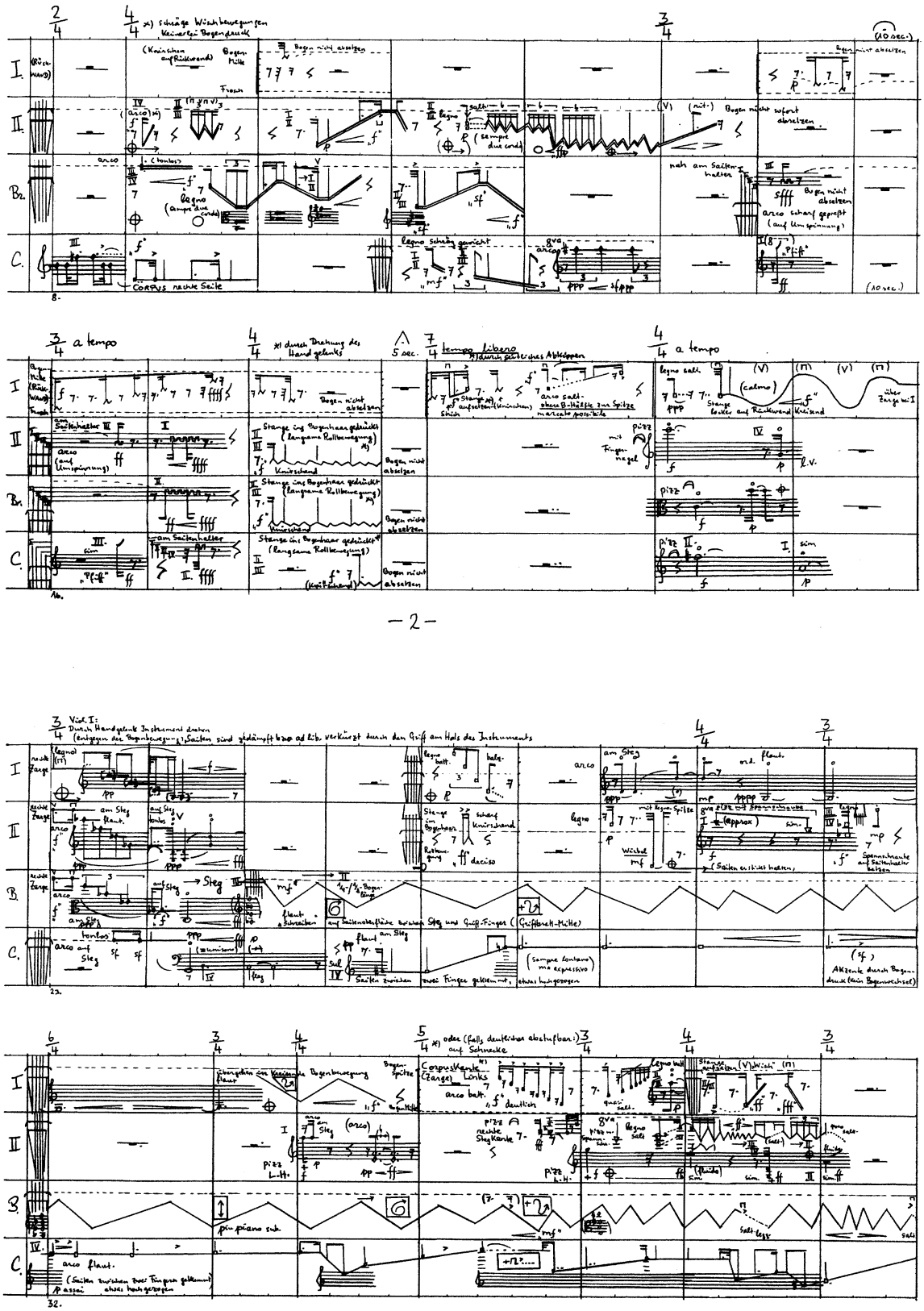
Guero, which was written in response to a commission from Alfons Kontarsky for a short piece using new techniques, completely re-invents the piano as a six-manual guero. The piece does not contain a single note played on the keys: instead, Lachenmann has the pianist scrape along the keys with the fingernails, and pluck in the gaps. Whereas the interactions and progressions in *Pression* and *Dal niente* were between sound-types. *Guero* is thoroughly physical and theatrical: the overall progression in the piece is literally upwards, as the focus of the scraping graduates from the front of the white keys, onto their surface, then to the front of the black keys, to their surface, and finally onto the tuning pegs. The closest the piece approaches to pitched notes is at the end, where a couple of strings are plucked, but in front of the dampers in such a manner as to produce a part-muted, part-*ponticello* effect.

AFTER THE 'cleansing' experience of these works, Lachenmann was able to embark on a major ensemble piece even more dissected than *temA*, his first string quartet *Gran torso* (1971, rev. 1976, 1988). An elaborate counterpoint is set between the four players, each of which has *scordatura*. All the types of techniques employed in *Pression* are made use of here, and numerous others besides: for example the tension peg on the bow is used to pluck the strings, resulting in a sound a little reminiscent of the sitar. With this work, Lachenmann managed to consolidate his new type of notation (ex.4), which served most subse-

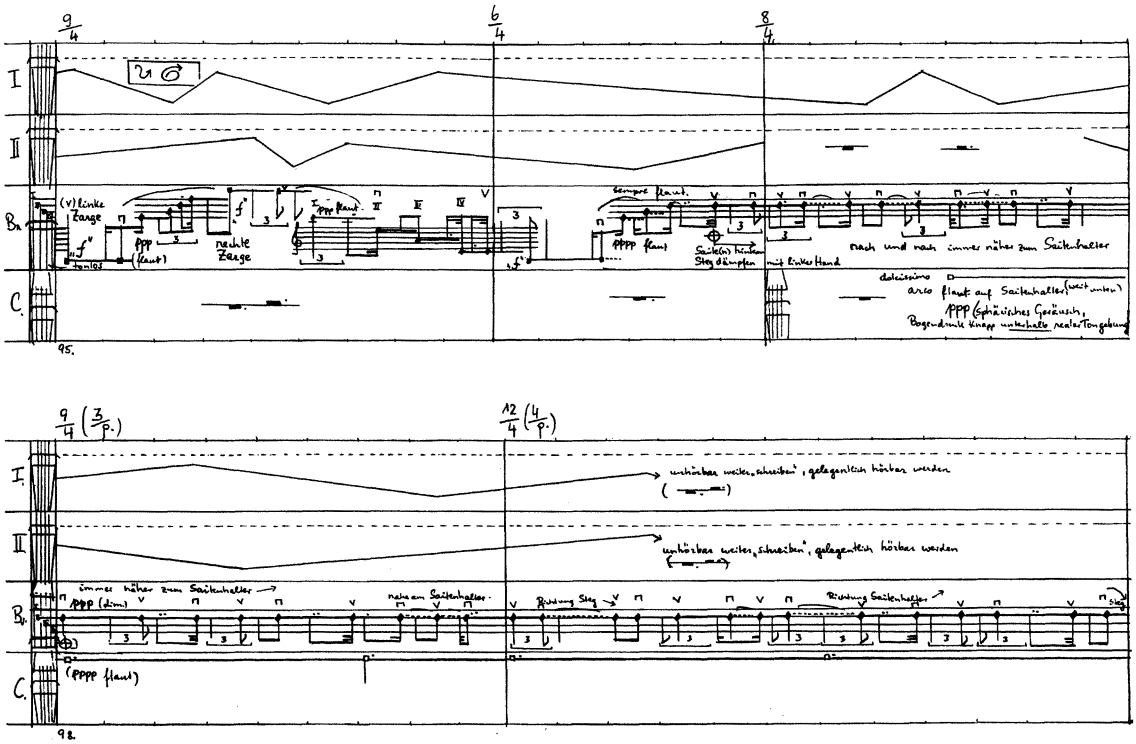
mer. Much is made of the correspondences between the voice and the 'vocal' qualities of the flute, in contrast to the more earthbound instrument of the cello. Lachenmann was not in this piece adverse to elements of virtuosic display, but these are kept in cheek by their contextualisation,[9] as for example when one particularly virtuosic passage is violently wrenched apart (ex.2). At other points, the music moves in and out of silence, or some unheard background continuum.

Three crucially important solo works that followed, *Pression* (1969) for cello, *Dal niente (Intérieur III)* (1970) for clarinet and *Guero* (1970, rev. 1988) for piano exemplify in an archetypal manner Lachenmann's concerns of the time. In each, non-standard instrumental techniques form in part the *raison d'être* of the piece. In *Pression* (ex.3), the cellist is called upon to play the instrument in almost

9. Lachenmann has considered the dialectical relationship between structure and musical material at length; this is discussed extensively in 'On structuralism'.



Ex.4: *Gran torso*, pp.2 & 3



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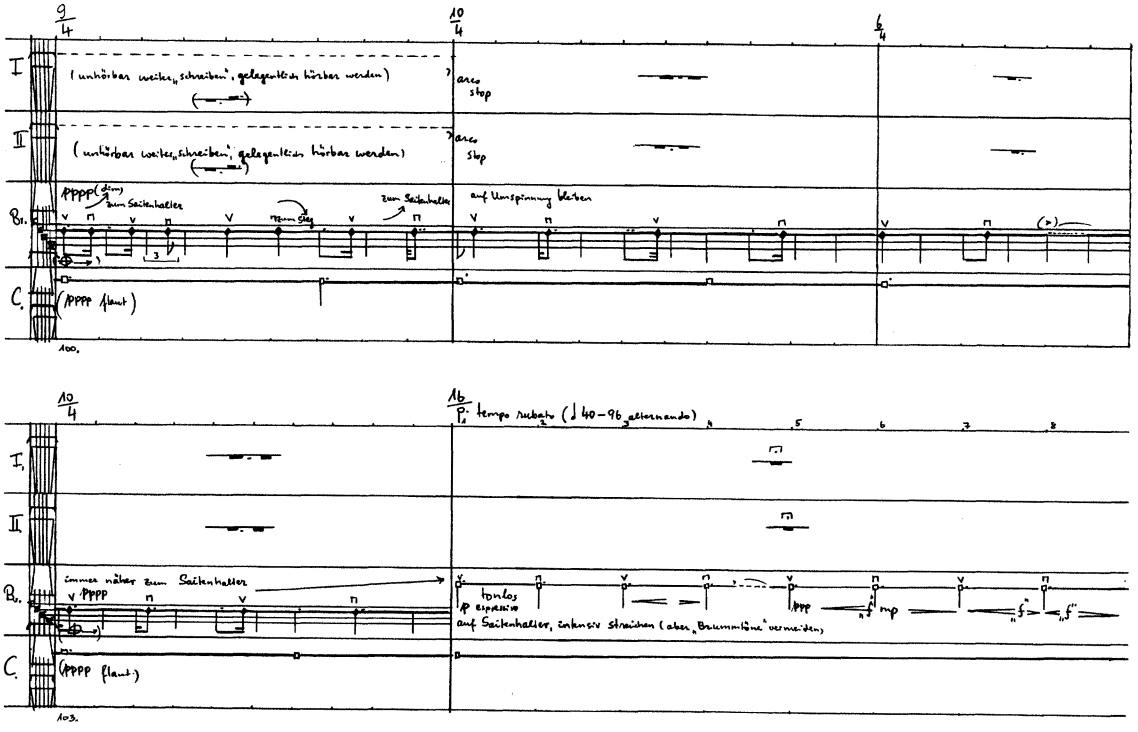

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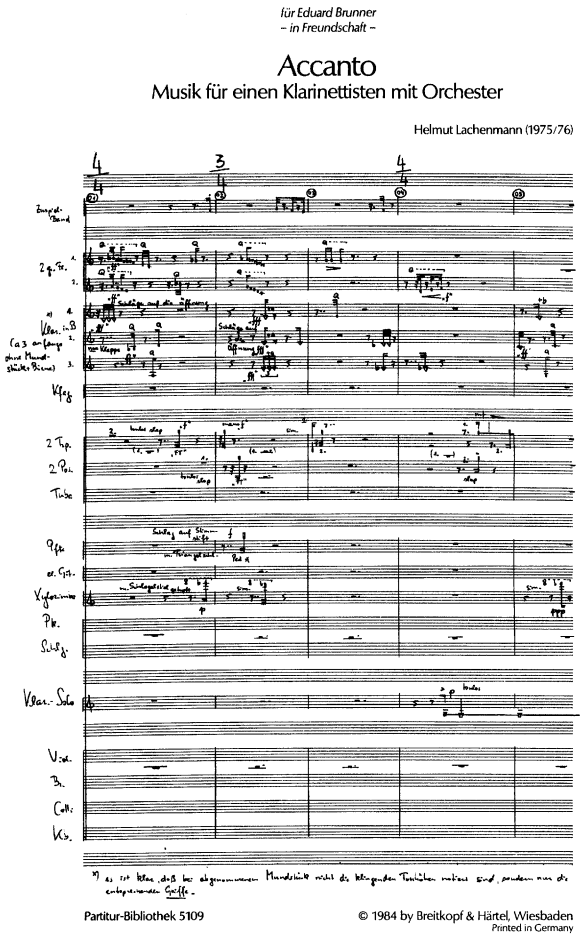
Ex.5: *Gran torso*, pp.9 & 10

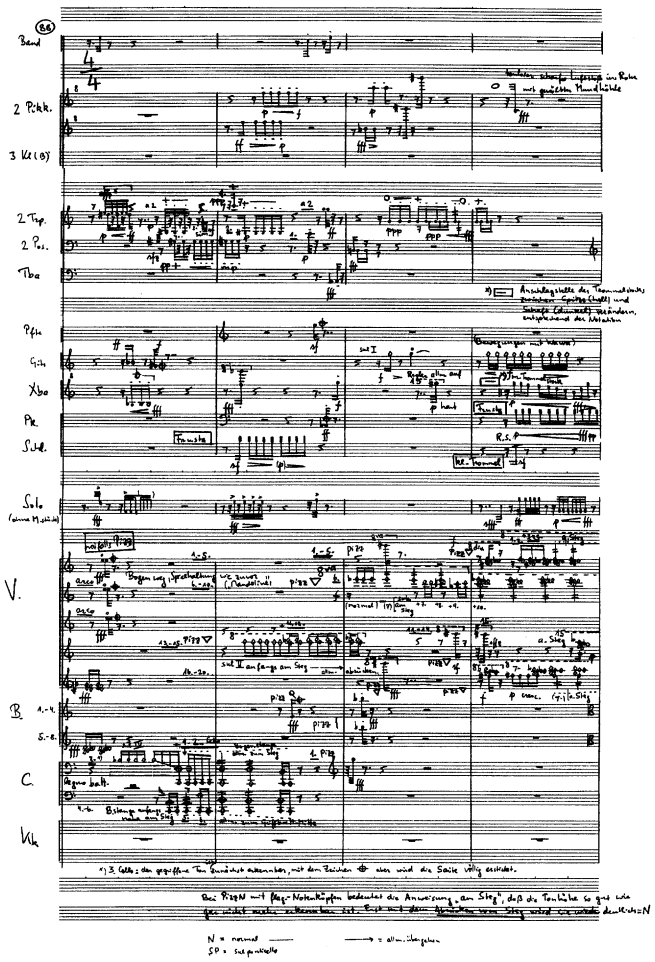
quent string writing. Amongst the many new symbols devised is the 'bridge' clef, which signifies the position of the bow between the bridge and the tailpiece, and the use of 'virtual' dynamics. These are used to signify the dynamic a player would achieve were they to play the instrument in a normal manner; however, the fact that, for example, they are bowing the wood of the instrument makes the sounding dynamic only a fraction of this, thus creating a disjunction between historically derived physical action and resultant sound, another way of drawing attention to the nature of sound creation.

The work is quite sectional, with different techniques predominant in different sections, though in the earlier part of the work the progress is from many sonic and gestural types towards a fixation upon certain elements, such as grinding sounds produced by excessive bow pressure or regular rhythmic patterns. The viola, traditionally the least prominent member of the quartet (and the butt of so many jokes) has an especially prominent part. Around half way through the work seems to grind to a halt, and the viola has a long solo, mostly on the tailpiece, on the threshold of audibility (ex.5). Another level of 'virtuality' is provided by the *tempo rubato* indication during the sustained sound; this is hardly likely to be perceptible to a listener, but has an important effect on the psychology of the performer. The piece attains only a partial recovery from this state of stasis for the conclusion. Lachenmann continues to work upon and subvert one's expectations; the sheer length, combined with the intensity, of the viola solo exceeds the dimensions that would make it palatable as mere 'exotica' (as in Lachenmann's attack on 'the cheap pretensions of avant-garde hedonists, sonority-chefs, exotic-meditationists and nostalgia-merchants'[10]) and elsewhere the judicious timing of sudden fortissimos come just at the right point to prevent the mind from being lulled into submission.

All of these works can be considered 'beautiful' if one is prepared to accept Lachenmann's rethinking of the nature of 'the Beautiful'. Beauty is indeed a historically defined phenomenon which has meant different things to people from different eras. For Lachenmann, beauty was not the business of false images, idealisations: in one of his most daring utterances, he declares that 'The experience of the Beautiful is indissolubly connected with making perceptible the social contradictions in our reality: because to make them perceptible is to make them surmountable.'[11] I often hear people denounce Lachenmann's music as joyless, academic and depressing. For my own part, I find the lifeless recycling and watering-down of musical clichés or the tedious spinning-out of surfaces that one finds in many of the younger British composers' work (though the second criticism can also be applied to much contemporary French music) a much more downlifting experience.



Ex.6: *Accanto*, p.1



Ex.7: *Accanto*, p.23

10. 'The Beautiful in music today', p.22.

11. ibid., p.23

12. It is interesting that Lachenmann has hardly ever used electronic devices or instruments. This might he because their technological nature serves to distance the sound from its means of production to a greater degree than is the ease with conventional instrumental usage.

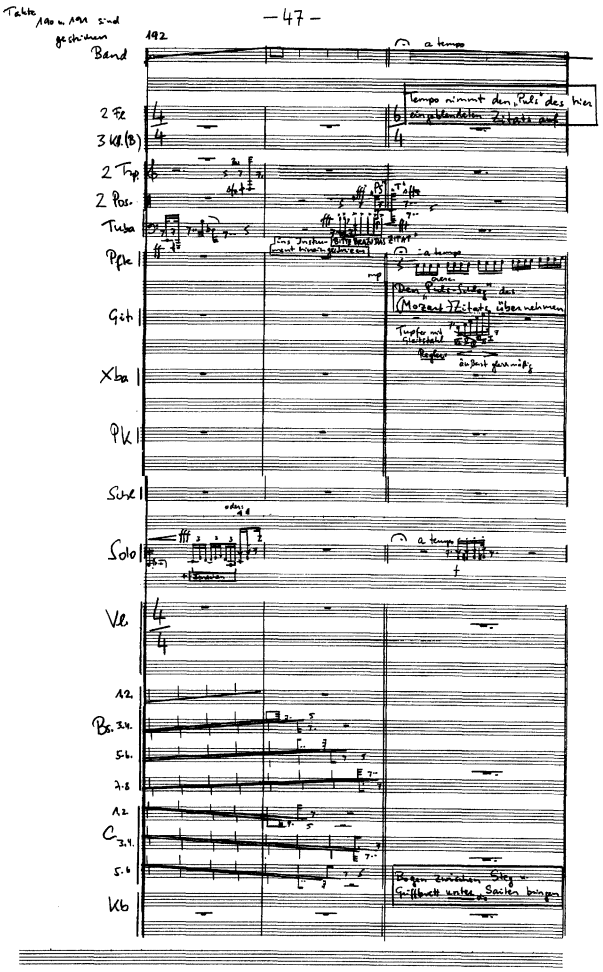
Lachenmann's music, by contrast, is I think a very positive experience, enabling one to find stimulation or tenderness in unforeseen ways.

Soon afterwards, Lachenmann wrote *Schwangkungen am Rand* (1974–75) (a title one could imagine being used for a work of Hans-Joachim Hespos, for which there are many translations, from 'Teetering on the brink' to 'Peripheral vacillations'), for an orchestra consisting mainly of brass and strings, though with the important addition of two pianos and two electric guitars. The players are placed literally 'on the edge' of the audience. This piece would seem to be a turning point, consisting as it seems to of an articulation of the impossibility of coherent musical discourse. It is a sparse work in which disembodied sounds, within a sea of silence, struggle to come together, resulting often in empty repetition. The use of the electric guitars is an important additional sonic category previously excluded from the vocabulary of 'serious' music.[12] Of course Lachenmann was not the first person to do this; however, his immense skill in 'framing' the sound of the guitars by the contextualisation of their first entry serves to heighten their impact. *Schwangkungen am Rand* is indeed a bleak work which itself teeters on the brink of becoming a very arid music indeed; perhaps it was this factor that led Lachenmann to conclude this first phase of his musical development and introduce new considerations.

IN THE 1970S, many German composers were beginning to re-examine their musical history. After decisively rejecting the tradition that had preceded them, it became time to enter into a critical re-engagement with the past. Lachenmann realised the impossibility of ignoring the historical connotations of any music, even that so removed from convention as his own, and that to shut out the past was analogous to an attempt to forget history, and thus be condemned to repeat its mistakes. The breakthrough work in this respect was the clarinet concerto *Accanto* (1975–76) which enters into a dialogue with Mozart's Clarinet Concerto. The Mozart work is recorded on a tape, which is then played back at the same time as the soloist and orchestra play. However, the tape part is notated in the score

using the position on the staves to indicate volume (ex.6). It thus contains notes of specified volume and duration, which are usually short, so that only very brief fragments or snatches of harmony of the Mozart can be discerned. The soloist and orchestra's music builds upon Lachenmann's previous work, with a long section in regular semiquavers, extending one of the ideas in *Schwangkungen am Rand*; these are variously fragmented, distorted and overlaid with other material (ex.7). The orchestration, as in all of Lachenmann's works for large forces, is truly spectacular; uninterested in any type of wash of sound or other forms of hazy phantasmagoria, Lachenmann's writing demonstrates fantastic clarity, with hardly a detail that cannot be heard in a good performance, even the most minute and seemingly peripheral sounds.

Around two-thirds of the way through, a tuba player literally yells out 'BITTE BRAZU DAS ZITAT' (Please play the extract), and the tape is turned up, unaccompanied by the players. for several seconds, longer than at any point previously (ex.8). A percussionist then picks up on the beat from the tape just before it fades out again, to provide a link into the following section. From this point onwards the music seems to become harsher and more grotesque, with the soloist speaking or groaning into their instrument as well as ,playing it. The net result can also be bleak, but is surely essential from Lachenmann's point of view to temper any sentiments of nostalgia with their opposite extreme, thus avoiding the pitfalls besetting many other works making use of quotation, which appeal to an audience primarily because they enable on to bask in the familiar The effect of the work is to 'objectify' both Lachenmann's 'composed' music and the Mozart. The particularity of each is made apparent by virtue of its contrast from the other. Lachenmann has explained that his critique was less of the Mozart work itself than of the cultural role it had come to assume, thus necessitating a degree of irreverence. Mozart also inhabits the composed music on a number of different levels. Occasional melodic fragments are obliquely (by the type of distancing and filtering techniques I spoke of in the context of *Dal niente*) related to both the Clarinet Concerto and to other works of Mozart, whilst the large-scale structure of the work bears a certain resemblance to a classical concerto, but turned inside out.



Ex.8: *Accanto*, p.47

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