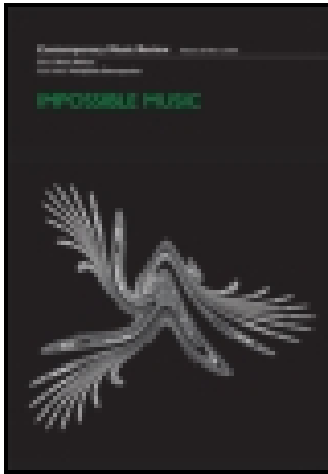


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Publisher: Routledge

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Contemporary Music Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gcmr20>

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Published online: 26 Nov 2008.

To cite this article: Petra Music (2008) The Rest is History—Mathias Spahlinger and Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht on Utopia in New Music, *Contemporary Music Review*, 27:6, 665-672, DOI: [10.1080/07494460802410393](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494460802410393)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460802410393>

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The Rest is History—Mathias Spahlinger and Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht on Utopia in New Music

Petra Music

All music worthy of the name is utopian, presaging a world not yet reachable at present. All human beings are caught in reality, striving to go beyond these limits, waiting for a moment which simultaneously is real and fulfills the longing for transcendence. True music can carry such a fulfilled moment, maintaining the power to reflect on misery and pain as well as on the notion of limitation, while still remaining playful and expressing beauty. Music goes beyond, while not neglecting it, representing a vision that can only be seen as utopian.

This statement of Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, taken from the last program of *Geschichte der Musik als Gegenwart* (Metzger and Rainer, 2000), the radio conversations on history and music between the legendary musicologist and the avant-garde representative Mathias Spahlinger, will provide a point of departure into the aesthetic theory discussed during this radio series.

The debate has its origins in Spahlinger and Eggebrecht's seminar conversations at the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg im Breisgau and was broadcast for a larger public in 1999 by DeutschlandRadio Berlin under the supervision of Carolin Naujocks. In eight programs airing between January 5 and October 5, 1999, Spahlinger and Eggebrecht endeavored to look at music history from different angles, introducing a selection of diverse musical examples with an eye to their authenticity and innovative aspects. The conversations found wide acclaim, were published in a volume of the highly regarded *MusikKonzepte* series, and are now considered programmatic for the understanding of Spahlinger's aesthetic positions, while Eggebrecht, who had passed away in August 1999, left a striking and insightful musical testament.

Each one of the eight programs is dedicated to a different historical aspect of musicology, starting with an attempt to assess the dichotomy between 'Old and New Music', moving on to explore 'Historical Consciousness in Music', 'Discovering History', and 'Progress'; discussing 'The Liberation of the Subject'; talking about 'Musical Time' and 'Timelessness'; and finally focusing on 'Utopia' in music.

History

Over the course of the first programs, Eggebrecht and Spahlinger look at the music traditions present during the past millennium, talking about music from all periods, trying to understand in what way these authentic pieces might have broken traditional conventions. Thus, history is always seen as a part of the present, a teleology always determining and vitalizing the debate.

In discussing the relation of atonal music and tonal music, Spahlinger states that tonal music had really never been abolished. However, he explains that there is a difference between following conventions in an unconscious way and reacting consciously to convention, resulting in a revolutionary, provocative abandonment of conventions. For a musician growing up with conventional tonality it would be impossible to play a dominant seventh chord on the piano without feeling a need to resolve it. In new music, such rhetorical figures could not survive because the sense of speech is reflected on its own and not depicted as something else. This reflection on convention and history is what creates the distinction between new music and previous practice.

The onset of a literate tradition in music completely changed the future of musical dissemination, but can also be seen as the beginning of a historical consciousness in music. In this context, Spahlinger mentions the interesting fact that the past millennium of music-making started with the introduction of notation and ended with its abandonment. With notation (combining pitch, rhythm, instrumentation and even the composer's name), the composition had secured its form for the future. In music, literacy also enables more complex forms of imitation such as augmentation, diminution and isorhythm.

Eggebrecht points out that every notation has had its weaknesses and has always been subject to change. Musical literacy is a medium of communication and productivity possessing positives and negatives. It enables a communication throughout historical periods, but is also a medium of production and power. With notation, composers are not obliged to communicate as much in their close surroundings, which may result in their concepts becoming more abstract. After all, a piece may be played ideally because all the markings on the page have been realized yet still without conveying its message. The sufficient answer to what can be seen as musically right or musically truthful must always, in a musical society, be a musical answer.

The beginning of the traditional musical reception was the performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 by Felix Mendelssohn in Berlin. At the time, the Age of Enlightenment meant the loss of a holistic way of life. Revolutions began to disappoint, religion became less important with the onset of industrialization and life itself turned more superficial. During the romantic era, people were looking for something missing and found Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* to be an important message from the past to counteract the present.

The way that (re)discovered historical musical material is selected is malleable, and therefore it is important to introduce the terms 'tradition' and 'innovation' to that

discussion. Music can always be seen as some kind of response to a previous reaction, in perpetuity. The actual musical information in that response lies in the way it embodies a destruction or reconstruction of tradition. Music may not have to be innovative, but it must be authentic, and if music wants to express something timeless it is obliged to be current. Eggebrecht widens the perspective by questioning what tradition and innovation—and indeed history—might mean to the composer in being creative, innovative or authentic. The surroundings in which composers operate are also an important factor in their works. Spahlinger then shows that with the change of paradigms in music, the avant-garde took over, eventually becoming traditional because at the time, the innovative way seemed to be the only sensible direction in which to move forward. He stresses the fact that composers taking extreme liberties work very strictly in a different field. Schönberg, for example, always saw his work as based on tradition. Still, in his invention of twelve-tone music, he seems to neglect everything understood as tradition at the time. His quote ‘One had to do it, nobody wanted to do it, so I volunteered’ implies that the beginning of twelve-tone music was a natural consequence at the time of its creation. The genius in Schönberg’s work is that he pursued an objective necessity and made it his own fate.

As an example of a compositional adaptation of history, Spahlinger’s piece *adieu m’amour*, based on Dufay’s chanson ‘Adieu m’amour’, presents a reduction of the song to isolated, individually articulated notes. The chosen material exclusively consists of the notes that Dufay used in his chanson. Furthermore, the whole formal structure and proportions are based on Dufay. The medieval rondeau interchanges between different parts of music and text, a technique reflected by Spahlinger with the change of single articulated pitches. The piece does not present an interpretation of the original but rather uses the Dufay piece as its basis. For the most part, the original is not recognizable. Only few passages can be heard as Dufay quotations. This technique not only stresses the historical distance between the two pieces, but also shows that immediate expression of a common theme is still possible. Spahlinger personally feels very close to the Dufay chanson, having listened to it since childhood; but the distance between the pieces is great and the music transports this experience. Spahlinger explains that music expresses not so much an abstract message as something otherworldly. Dufay’s piece is based on this idea, and it is astounding that still today the listener can intuitively understand this context. Through history, an immediate experience of perception is still possible. The piece *adieu m’amour* may thus be seen as a transformation of this experience into a present conscious and a present way of listening.

Progress

As opposed to the more neutral term ‘to proceed’, the term ‘to progress’ describes a transition into a higher state, meaning to advance towards a defined goal. Spahlinger envisions progressive musical examples as pieces that have changed the way of production or the way of thinking, or that make innovative use of musical tools.

The invention of bruitism, for example, was very progressive as it emancipated the noise as a musically viable sound. Noise differs from pitched sound because it cannot be organized in a linear way. Noise is non-dimensional, or rather infinitely dimensional, with qualities that may represent anarchy in music and the negation of artistic tradition—except that in the futurism movement it is an unreflected material element that surfaces only later in *musique concrète* and electronic music.

New music distances itself from the objective character of the work through the use of unconventional, open material. Varèse, for example, does not follow the teleology of increasing expression seen in late romantic music, but represents the distance between the modernists and romanticists, strictly employing technical analogies and ideals. Still, his music remains highly communicative. While his titles refer to scientific or technical terminology, his music reflects the expression of the subject and the liberation of his music from traditional sound quality in a progressive yet responsible and subjective way.

The liberation of the subject is nothing but a challenge to consciously take responsibility for change. In aleatoric music, the subject is replaced by chance. For Eggebrecht, this is problematic. John Cage, for example, organized his experiments on his own and thus is still responsible for their outcome. Spahlinger does not see aleatoric music as result-oriented music. Music is always illustration, meaning that the piece of art without character of work can only be the portrayal of an object without objective qualities. Art can never be seen as real and determined because it has never been objective. In essence, the liberation of sound would be an illusion because the subject can never be ignored.

Nicolaus A. Huber's work focuses on the social character of new music. In his essay 'Critical Composition', he states that listener and composer create the work together, yet with an ironic distance between them. In his piece *Ouverture*, there is no immediate expressive gesture, but rather a discipline of emotion. The piece picks up on the dotted rhythm of a French overture and the hierarchy of beats—a hierarchy creating an image of a proud monarch striding with stuttered steps, tripping into a display of post-revolutionary imagery.

Time

Eggebrecht and Spahlinger address musical time because they are interested in how time can, should or ought to appear in music. In Ligeti's *Poème Symphonique for 100 Metronomes*, there are 100 planes of time and measure. Meter, rhythm and tempo are not constructed by each other but become abstract. The piece is presented as a self-contained object of aesthetic observation by its thematic restriction, a motivic unit or a common substance, just as a traditional piece might be held together by a key signature, pulse, or meter. In the Ligeti example, every instrument follows its own pulse. In the piece, there are three sections. The sections are not separated by caesuras but connected by continuous transitions. The way the piece is perceived becomes more essential than the piece itself. How the listener perceives musical time as it has

passed during the piece is the focus here. The perception of time becomes a subjective reaction; the listener realizes there is a quantitative change as the number of metronomes decreases. However, to state when exactly the change happens is a matter of subjective perception. There is not a single tempo, but the quality of the piece changes with every different tempo. All versions may be equally justified.

Nicolaus A. Huber introduced the term 'rhythmic modulation' as a development of variation in rhythm. The developing variation—in contrast to the traditional variation—changes the original figure to a second one and the second one to a third one that has nothing to do anymore with the original. It thus presents an open form, a principle of principles without principle applied to the area of rhythm.

In this way, the meaning of time is illustrated. Time is not a medium in which things occur, but a medium in which things and people are transformed. These changes find their origins within the subject. In western music, the interval appears to reign over the rhythm. In its context it is not astounding that tonality was the first to be abolished. The phase in which metric context was disbanded happened much later and was missed for a long time. In serialism, rhythm and meter have both been negated, but in an abstract way: by making rhythm synonymous with duration.

Timelessness, on the other hand, means an existence unbounded by the constraints of the passage of time. Eggebrecht clarifies that, in connection with music, timelessness can be expressed *through* music, or one can speak of the timelessness *of* music, in that it outlasts the time when it was written. For human thought, timelessness is impossible because it can itself only be thought of in connection with time. Spahlinger underscores that music can, paradoxically, only be timeless if it is grounded in time and in its historical background. Also, he addresses the structural musical syntax that prohibits the swap of single elements, creating teleology of sound. In contrast, music that swaps single elements represents a state of direction. The performer and the audience change in contrast to this. Music changes through us, dissolving its timeless spheres.

Eggebrecht and Spahlinger go on to think about adorative and evocative music. Adorative music is characterized through ecstasy of sound, presenting a power that is greater than the passive listener. In contrast to evocative music, adorative music leaves the listener as an individual, not merged with an audience, thus creating a dialogue between music and recipient. In evocative music, there is no separation between composer, audience and performer; it is a collective process. Steve Reich's work *it's gonna rain* follows this path. The work presents a recording of the voice of an African preacher, who creates a direct dialogue with his audience answering in responsorial chant, about the omnipresence of God. Reich transforms this into minimal music by superimposition of several layers, creating a repetition that results in complicated rhythmical patterns.

In the context of this composition, Eggebrecht raises the question of whether music can at all be separated from time, since timelessness seems to be impossible in connection with music. Spahlinger answers by stressing the human quality of reality, which can never be subordinated to objectivity. In traditional music, composer and

listener have to act in time in the syntactic direction of the music. At the same time, the work is to be taken in as a whole, reflecting a timeless process. In new music, the syntactic direction disappears and timelessness can be seen as liberation of time through focusing on the sound itself. The importance of the single elements is stressed by their relationship to each other.

Utopia

In the last show the discussion moves on to talk about the utopian aspect of music, questioning the notion of aesthetic beauty and the conditions of its creation. Utopia in music is a result of the open quality of musical art. This openness makes music art because the listener is challenged to fill in the blanks left by the composer. The artist's duty is the perfect expression of imperfection; misery and pain, representing a perfect and limitless expression of ugliness. In this sense, an ultimate beauty, expressed by positives, is not beautiful but rather too beautiful to be true. Spahlinger quotes Bruno Liebrucks, who stated that truth never appears as truth itself but only as a specific negation of a specific truth of its time. Art's openness also displays communicative and social aspects, the inner and outer teleology of the artwork becoming one inseparable action. Self-reflection, for instance, plays an important part in the process of creating art since the composer cannot communicate with his audience in an immediate way. In order to allow the composition to be seen as a message sent to the audience, the composer first has to reflect upon himself.

This precarious relationship—precarious because it is not only about beauty but also about content—between the opposites negation and confirmation, as seen in the perfect expression of imperfection, can be found in the Schubert song *Der Leiermann*. Eggebrecht describes music's main function in life as a representative of a hereafter; a counterpart to reality. In *Der Leiermann*, this function is being questioned because the song silences art, taking away its utopian character. Art would have to end if the fulfilment of the song's teleology came true.

Spahlinger's definition of what Eggebrecht called a counterpart to reality declares that reality would not be complete without possibility—possibility not being something that can be determined voluntarily, but something which is shaped by history. Without the linear concept of time the present is unimaginable. Rather, the counter reality must be seen as something incorporating this sense of an incomplete present reality. The visionary aspect of music fulfils the imagination by transforming it into aesthetic beauty in its own world, by its own rules, missing in reality: the playing with the senses. The Schubert lied is representative of a new art form creating an alternative relationship between art and reality: art with the ability to also engage in scenes of horror or poverty. The artist plays the role of a messenger in an almost political aesthetical program. The artist must cease to be the conceptive ideologue of the ruling classes because his work can only be truthful if he becomes the megaphone of the oppressed.

The song *Der Graben* by Hanns Eisler and Kurt Tucholsky, about the horrors of trench warfare, shows a strong contrast to the Schubert lied. The song shows in an advanced, yet reduced, way artistic techniques paving the way for a new musical language, creating a new kind of audience. The society addressed by the Eisler song becomes an audience challenged to change the world. This reflects Adorno's idea of the anti-aesthetic aspects being important in art. Without them, art could not be understood. Spahlinger proceeds to question whether art can still be art if it becomes a vehicle for something else. His answer states that as long as it remains self-reflective, intentionality in art is possible. For Eggebrecht, the utopia in the Eisler song is a very real one. A world without war should be possible and a worthy cause to fight for. However, the horror of the text turns the potential of its utopia into an illusion. By transforming the Tucholsky text into musical beauty, Eisler brings the text to a premature fulfilment, distracting the listener from the actual goal of creating a state of peace in reality.

A different kind of utopia is represented in Gustav Mahler's first symphony. The third movement, a funeral scene full of false sorrow, leads into the stormy fourth movement, creating a deceptive social scene representing a cry of despair, a prosecution of the creator and a cry out against everything that in Mahler's eyes seemed socially repulsive, banal, and trivial. At the end of the movement, emerging from triple pianississimo towards triple forte-fortissimo, a triumphant climax is reached. For Eggebrecht, this symphonic utopia of the nineteenth century, in its fulfilment of hope through a triumphant movement, is of a dubious nature. Spahlinger shares Eggebrecht's skeptical point of view here. He does not question the excellence of the music but puts his doubts into a counter question, asking if it is really necessary to express a utopia in such a pompous way. Eggebrecht objects that Mahler is caught up in the aesthetics of the nineteenth century, striving to reach the totality of the symphonic tradition in the here and now, in expressing the negatives but expressing them in such a way that there is a resolution at the end, acting out a finale which becomes a contradiction to its own programmatic, presenting a symphonic aesthetic leading to World War I.

As stated at the beginning of the debate, all music worthy of the name has to be utopian. Spahlinger continues this train of thought and defines music that is not utopian simply as bad music: music that is easy to listen to, pretending that the utopia of a better world has already been realized. Not only does he consider it bad music, but also inhumane music. Real utopias, however—if they are of a political nature—strive to achieve justice. Only with justice is love possible, since love between parties with dissimilar rights or powers must either be impossible or revolutionary. A better world can only be achieved if the people act as though it was already established; any other action can only create a system in need of change. Even though these statements may be misunderstood as being contradictory—as suggested by the reviewers of the *MusikKonzepte* edition (Mahnkopf, 2001; Roth, 2001)—it needs to be made clear that it is in the power of music to change the world for the better. Therefore, music is challenged to express even negative matters, to encourage a

change in society. The higher a life form develops, the more incomplete, open and dependent on communication it becomes. Actions are separated into plan and execution. In our selection of observation, we strive for completeness. Art is utopian because of the determination to complete the totality. Adorno stated that within the rules of music theory, the totality must be untrue, because it is not divided into parts; it rather *consists* of parts.

For Spahlinger, there is also a ridiculous aspect in utopias when he envisions the picture of a donkey chasing his incentive to pull the carriage in the form of a carrot dangling in front of him. It is utopian that the donkey would eternally be pulling the wagon. For a better world, the only thing the institutions can do is to encourage ethical behavior. Eggebrecht picks up on this idea and transitions into the conclusion of the conversation by returning to Bach and the *St. Matthew Passion*. In relation to the religious aspect in Bach's compositions, Spahlinger states that not so much God but justice is the essential ingredient for a better world. However, since justice is always subject to change, injustice can never completely be avoided. In light of this dilemma, Spahlinger and Eggebrecht agree to place mercy before right and close the program with the aria 'Erbarme dich'.

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