

Eulogy for Eberhard Blum

by Volker Straebel

The flautist, vocal performer and artist Eberhard Blum, born on 14th February 1940 in Stettin, died on 5th March 2013 in Berlin. The following speech was given, in its original German version, at the funeral service on 5th April 2013 at the Heerstrasse cemetery in Berlin.

"Da ist zu viel da da. – Da ist nicht genug nichts drin." [1] This was one of Eberhard Blum's favourite passages in John Cage's *45' for a speaker* in the German translation by Ernst Jandl. "There is too much there there. – There is not enough of nothing in it." [2] In 1990, Eberhard performed this time-structured lecture in Darmstadt simultaneously with other *Time-Length Pieces* for piano (Marianne Schröder and Nils Vigeland), percussion (Robyn Schulkowsky) and strings (Frances-Marie Uitti). It was the year of Cage's second invitation to the Summer Courses for New Music, following his legendary first appearance in 1958.

That first appearance had remained unnoticed by Eberhard, who had then just finished High School in Stralsund, and, despite having passed the entrance examination for the Conservatory in Rostock, first worked for one year as a tram conductor. The move to West Berlin followed in 1960. In the same year he took up his studies with Aurèle Nicolet. Two years later, on Nicolet's recommendation, he attended a workshop by Severino Gazzelloni at the Darmstadt Summer Courses.

There he learned works by Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez and Luigi Nono. Serial music was at its zenith and Eberhard Blum developed in his playing the required dynamic and rhythmic differentiation. In West Berlin, he was soon at the heart of the *Gruppe Neue Musik* with Erhard Grosskopf, Gerald Hummel, and Wilhelm Dieter Siebert. Hummel had already in 1960 dedicated his *Praeludium und Scherzo* to Eberhard – thus beginning the long, scarcely surveyable, series of works that Eberhard Blum stimulated and, in close collaboration with the composers, brought to first performance. [3]

In the artist biography which Eberhard sent me when we first met in the late 1990s – handwritten and sent by fax, for computers and email would never be his thing – it says succinctly: "Since the Sixties, concerts of new and experimental music. Since 1973, regular work with Morton Feldman. Performances of speech pieces by Kurt Schwitters, John Cage and Emmett Williams." [4]

In fact, since 1962, Eberhard seems to have been everywhere in the conservative Federal Republic where there was anything new to discover in the field of new music. In 1968, he participated in Karlheinz Stockhausen's collective-composition *Musik für ein Haus* in Darmstadt, and then in 1972 came his suggestion for a ten-day programme of performances and readings at the *Galerie Kleber* in Berlin – on, of all things, the 60th birthday of John Cage, whom Stockhausen so little esteemed. [5] In 1971, he was "discovered" by Morton Feldman, who was living in Berlin as a guest of the German Academic Exchange Programme (DAAD). Feldman took Eberhard to the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York at Buffalo for 1973-1976 and 1978/79.

The rest is history. The ensemble, *Morton Feldman and Soloists*, consisting of Feldman, Blum, the composer and pianist, Nils Vigeland, and percussionist, Jan Williams, was the focus of Feldman's late work and played concerts worldwide, even after the Feldman's death

in 1987. Feldman works created with Eberhard in mind as premiere instrumentalist include: *Instruments III* (1977, premiered at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London), *Why Patterns?* (1978, premiered at the Meta-Musik Festival in Berlin), *Crippled Symmetry* (1983, premiered at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin), *For Philip Guston* (1984, premiered in Buffalo, NY), and *For Christian Wolff* (1986, premiered at the International Summer Courses for New Music, Darmstadt).

Since 1975, Eberhard performed Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate* over a hundred times, even if he did not give the premiere, as was incorrectly stated in an obituary in a Berlin newspaper.[6] As well as his work as a musician and vocal performer, Eberhard was also a master of the design of cleverly thought-out concert programmes – *Positions of the modern* (1988), *Stations of musical modernism* (1989), *Stefan Wolpe and the musical avant-garde* (1990), *With different ears* (1991), *The art of the series* (1993)[7], and most recently, in 2012, together with Erhard Grosskopf, the series *From the discipline of anarchy* at the Akademie der Künste, which finally realised a long-cherished plan to present John Cage as a composer of traditionally notated music.

Of his work as a musician Eberhard once said: "I always try [...] to see myself not as an interpreter but as an implementer. This includes all kinds of scores, from the conventionally notated to conceptual pieces [...]. I'm just trying to implement the composer's idea in reality." And to my objection, whether it was not one of the pitfalls of hermeneutics to deny the illusion of being able to reconstruct the composer's intention, Eberhard replied, with his usual mixture of determination and triumphant defiance: "It is an illusion, and to the utopia of coming close to compositions I dedicate my whole life." [8]

He did that. Eberhard Blum became the artistic authority in matters relating to Cage, Feldman, Brown and Wolff, Stockhausen, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Haubenstock-Ramati, Takemitsu, Hosokawa, Grosskopf and Fritsch. His many recordings are reference recordings of this repertoire.[9] Recently at a conference in Boston, a flautist who gave a lecture about Open Form was unable to answer a question about Haubenstock-Ramati. She said, as if it could be taken for granted: "I don't know. Eberhard Blum would know."

He would have known. If he had not known, Eberhard would not perform the work in question. He always put the integrity of the implementing artist above the effect of the performing musician. "Whenever people do their worst thing, they connect it with my name." – Eberhard liked to quote this resigned statement of Cage's whenever he himself strove for meticulously rehearsed performances planned in every detail of their presentation. Programming, stage design, lighting, printed materials (often using the congenial designs of his partner, Ann Holyoke Lehmann) – Eberhard understood the concert as an aesthetic event, without letting the presentation become an end in itself. As an organizer, it was a pleasure to work with him, even though his high standards were not always easy to satisfy. It seemed to me sometimes as if Eberhard was the conscience of contemporary music. This role made him both friends and enemies, but was valuable in itself. There are for sure many of us who have learned from him on many levels, and owe to him many unforgettable concert experiences.

With the same intensity and consistency which Eberhard Blum devoted to music, he pursued, since the 1980s, his visual work.[10] On the basis of Morton Feldman's notion of *abstract experience* Eberhard moved between the poles of intellectual conception and manual realization. He loved to tell how Feldman stood in his studio for a long time in front of his large-scale drawings, and finally said just one sentence: "Eberhard, you found something." As we are inclined in composed music to accept an aesthetic object beyond the individual performance, so Eberhard's drawings seem, despite their abstract – or, if you like, concrete – form, to be aiming at an aesthetic reality beyond their material presence. This is particularly

evident in the conceptual work, such as the *59 Transformations* (2003) in which the colour selection of vertical lines is determined by serial principles.[11] Here conceptual art learns from the thinking of new music. For Eberhard, there was no art without music.

On the other hand, for Eberhard, music was not tied to the category of progressive and countable time. He defended with great determination the concept of the timeless musical work, which ennobled the musical text and thus the musical graphics. Where other representatives of the avant-garde talked of "pieces", "studies" or "compositions", Eberhard always spoke of "works."

It appears comforting to me in this moment, that Eberhard, as Feldman had demanded in his key text *Between Categories*[12], did not reduce the essence of time in music to its execution. In a fantasy notation on a music page, Eberhard set an eighth note over an infinity sign as the time signature numerator and denominator.[13] How does time pass here? The rapid, flute-like leaps and the speech sounds remain silent, and are nevertheless present.

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In the preface to *Silence*, John Cage responds to the question of why he didn't give conventional lectures, but temporally and/or structurally composed texts: "I don't give these lectures to surprise people, but out of a need for poetry." [14] Perhaps it is this attitude – which Eberhard shared with Cage – that, since I first saw him on stage in my early twenties, so greatly impressed me: the belief in the poetic necessity that lies in the abstract material, not in a meaning or impression. The material reveals to us its quality, to which we expose ourselves existentially. So it is no coincidence that in the *Lecture on Nothing* Cage talks not only about structure, time and silence, but also about life and death – from which there is no escape, just as little as from the bickering neighbours or the squeak of the pedal of the piano:

"... So that | listening to this | music ... one | takes as a ... spring- | board ... the first | sound that comes along | ; ... the first | something springs us ... | into nothing and ... | out of that nothing ... a- | rises ... the | next something; ... | etc. ... like an al- | ternating current. ... | Not one sound fears ... | the silence that ...ex- | tinguishes it. ... And | no silence exists ... | that is not pregnant ... | ... with | sound ... | "[15]

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[English translation by Chris Villars, with corrections by Peter Söderberg.]

Notes

[1] John Cage: "45' für einen Sprecher " [45' for a speaker, 1954], translated by Ernst Jandl in *Silence*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987, pp. 63-157, here: 5'40".

[2] John Cage: "45' for a speaker" [1954], in: Cage, *Silence. Lectures and Writings*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press 1961, pp. 146-192, here: 5'40".

[3] See Eberhard Blum: *Choice & Chance. Bilder und Berichte aus meinem Leben als Musiker*. Berlin: Berlinische Galerie 2008.

[4] Eberhard Blum, 12/02/1998.

[5] See Eberhard Blum: *Choice & Chance*, pp. 54-58.

[6] See Jens Hinrichsen: "Streiter für das Unerhörte. Flötist und Künstler: Eberhard Blum ist tot", in: *Der Tagesspiegel*, 10/03/2013.

- [7] See Eberhard Blum: *Choice & Chance*, pp. 196-219.
- [8] Eberhard Blum and Volker Straebel: "Zur Interpretation Neuer Musik. Zwei Gespräche über ausgewählte Werke (I)", in: *Positionen*, No. 31 (May 1997), pp. 40-45, here p 40.
- [9] See the annotated selective discography in Eberhard Blum: *Recordings on CD, 1990-1997*. Berlin: Self-published 1997. A selection of solo works composed for Eberhard Blum are included in Eberhard Blum: *Anthology 1968-1998*. Berlin: Self-published 2000, 2 CDs.
- [10] See Eberhard Blum: *Visual Work, 1980-98*. Berlin: Self-published 1998, and Eberhard Blum: *Visual Work, 1992-2005*, edited by Günter Braun and Waldtraut Braun. Berlin: Self-published 2006.
- [11] The score for this series is reproduced in Eberhard Blum: *Choice & Chance*, p 190.
- [12] See Morton Feldman: "Between Categories" [1969], in: *Give My Regards to Eighth Street. Collected Writings*, edited by B H Friedman. Cambridge: Exact Change 2000, pp. 83-89, also in German in Morton Feldman: *Essays*, edited by Walter Zimmermann. Cologne: Beginner Press 1985.
- [13] Eberhard Blum: *Fragment für V.S.*, manuscript, dated 4/1/2010.
- [14] John Cage: *Silence. Lectures and Writings*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press 1961, p x.
- [15] John Cage "Lecture on Nothing" in *Silence. Lectures and Writings*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press 1961, pp. 128-145, here p 135.