

Ona Jarmalavičiūtė

## Interview with Karlheinz Essl Jr.

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Karlheinz Essl Jr. (b.1960) as an artist is wearing a lot of different masks at once. Some see him as a composer, others as an improviser, as well as sound artist, performer or teacher. His interest in music varies from double bass studies and creation of instrumental, generative, algorithmic or electronic contemporary music as well as interactive sound installations. In his creative work, Essl combines his passion for work with computers and serial music composing techniques being the author of music software. He also collaborates with artists from other artistic fields, creating music for paintings, art installations, dance, and poetry. Ona Jarmalavičiūtė, a musicologist, held an interview with Karlheinz Essl and talked about the struggle of juggling multiple professional paths and the turning points in his career that made him the artist he is today.

*First of all, it would be interesting to talk about pre-composition. How did you perceive the phenomenon of pre-composition?*

I think everyone would agree that composition just doesn't emerge out of nothing. It is always based on concepts and ideas. And in order to start a new composition, at least for me it is necessary to construct, find and truly understand your music material. This might be called the pre-composition phase. However, this is just one aspect, because the material cannot be perceived solely as sounds, harmony or other parameters. Moreover, also compositional procedures can be regarded as material.

*How do you start composing? Are you waiting for inspiration? Or maybe you are doing a research on the chosen topic? How does work with primary music ideas happen?*

Compositional methods may vary by each piece. For example, my percussion trio [\*Hypostasis\*](#) (2010) has a strong pre-compositional aspect. Perhaps it is not obvious when looking at the score, but this piece of music cannot be perceived solely by the score because it attempts to touch spiritual themes. Since there are many different ideas in the process, I tried to formulate them in numerous sketches. But in fact, music can also be born differently. For example, over the past fifteen years I have started to make music from improvisation. I usually improvise with new instruments that I am interested in, or with the instruments that I have invented myself – including my own [computer programs](#) for algorithmic composition and free improvisation.

Sometimes it really happens that an idea unexpectedly drops into the head and thus the composing process is started. It happened to me recently when I got a commission to write an orchestral interlude for an opera, performed by a baroque orchestra. The premiere will take place in Kyoto, Japan in

November 2019. A quite mediocre baroque opera, written by a Jesuit monk in Vienna in 1698. It tells the story of a Japanese noble woman, Princess Gracia Hosokawa (1563-1600), who converted from Buddhism to Christianity when Portuguese missionaries came to Japan. This woman was secretly baptized and when her husband, a traditional Japanese shogun, learned the news, he offered his wife several options: either to return back to Buddhism, or to be killed. Of course, the woman did not abandon her faith and was therefore punished by death penalty. Even today, she is regarded as a saint – and not only by Christians, but also by Buddhists which is truly special. So she became a very important historical and religious figure. This opera is called *Mulier Fortis*, – translated to english "a strong woman". It is quite uncommon for an opera at this time to feature a woman as a protagonist. This so-called Jesuit drama was performed by students of the Jesuit school and was somehow related to the “semi operas” of Henry Purcell (1659-1695).

After studying the original score and libretto for a quite a while, I finally found a starting point when I was attracted by the metaphorical character "Constantia" (consistency) who represents the main virtue of this heroic woman Gracia Hosokawa. My interlude comes immediately after the original Aria and the musical material emerges from its final chord. I use the same harmony and strive to create a smooth transition between Baroque opera and my composition. Constance's aria is written in G major and my interlude is heavily relied upon to pitch G. Although not being tonal in the orthodox sense, a consistent, all-embracing harmonic pulsation is being developed in the course of the work.

When composing this interlude, I was driven by a strong inspiration. I composed everything in ten days. However, at that time I had to teach and prepare for my seminars. I don't know how I got everything done. Sometimes, this happens and the work just comes up out of the blue. At other times, the composition process can be painful, taking very long time to find its shape. You never know what kind of compositional process is waiting for you.

*Is the beginning of your composition process usually based on the commissioners references?*

This might be a trigger composing, but not necessarily. Sometimes I write without a commission and just compose what I want. In recent years, I have often felt directly inspired by extra-european musical instruments, new playing techniques or unconventional instruments like [toy pianos](#). A few years ago I recorded the CD *whatever shall be* with my compositions for this instrument which looks like a tiny piano, but without its cultural and historical context. But it sounds more like a percussion instrument. Reminiscent of Gamelan rather than Beethoven or Rachmaninoff. When I wrote my first toy piano piece *Kalimba*, I borrowed an instruments from Isabel Ettenauer who commissioned the piece. I improvised with it for a long time, and suddenly the compositions was born.

*How do you make new music by improvisation? How does composing take place in such conditions?*

Of course, [improvisation](#) does not mean absolute freedom. It also has its own structure, rules and models. For example, when writing *Kalimba*, I was improvising on an eight-tone scale composed of

major and minor seconds (Messiaen, 2nd mode). It has no tonal center, so the sound stays in permanent movement. I processed a recording of this scale with a computer program written in Max, which creates a 5-part canon with very slight transformations in time and transposition. The sonic output of this program formed the beginning of my composition. And then, I started to improvise with it again which finally led to the notation of the toy piano part.

When a musician performs *Kalimba* on the stage, we hide a small loudspeaker inside the piano. In the beginning, the player simply replicates the playback, creating the illusion of playing. Finally, when the playback intensifies, the musician actually starts playing the toy piano part, but at the same time the overall sound becomes a sonic maelstrom of swirling sounds. In the end, this work does not resemble traditional piano music, but rather models of African Mbira music with its “inherent patterns”.

*In my understanding, you are composing both by hand and by computer programs. How do you decide what compositional principles you will apply to one or another idea?*

Usually, the musical idea cannot be separated from a certain compositional principle. Computer-aided creation of algorithmic music offers different possibilities and limitations than handwriting. Perhaps other composers have one work model that repeats itself during his career. In my case, each composition is a separate matter; I like doing a lot different things. But in terms of influences, one could say that I am being formed by the second Viennese School, J. S. Bach and Early Music. I try to draw inspiration from everything without reproducing it. As Schoenberg has said, *"the same thing but always different"*. That's why I don't like sound loops. Although “Kalimba” is based on repetition, it uses so many different loops at the same time that the principle of loop repetition is destroyed by itself. But usually I do not like repetitions in creation or in life. As a result, my compositional process is usually hard to predict.

*Do you sketch music? How does this process look in your creative work?*

When my professional career started in the late 1980ies, I often sketched musical ideas on paper. I usually wrote texts to describe my ideas, along with notation-like sketches. Today, I also work with computer programs from the very beginning when composing electronic music. In this way, I sketch differently: writing code, not words. But sometimes I notate musical ideas that have matured in my mind.

*What were the most important moments in your career? How did they determine your life and form you as a composer you are today?*

There have been several strong moments. Foremost, my acquaintance with the music of Anton Webern in 1983, the year of Webern's 100th birthday. At this time, I was a student of [Friedrich Cerha](#) (b. 1926) who invited me to listen to a Webern concert after our lesson. I was 23 years old and always hated

dodecaphonic music; instead, I was mostly interested in counterpoint and ancient music. After this concert I felt as if I was sort of brainwashed by this beautiful music. Unable to compose music myself, I decided to explore the work of Webern, Berg and Schoenberg. I started with an analysis of Alban Berg's *1<sup>st</sup> string quartet* and my goal was to understand the function of every note in the score. This helped me to understand this music much better, and this provided new directions for my own composing.

Later I studied musicology and wrote a dissertation about "[\*The Idea of Synthesis of Anton Webern\*](#)", exploring how Webern attempted to create a synthesis of vertical and horizontal representation of musical thoughts. Combining harmonic principles and counterpoint, Webern tried to link Bach and Beethoven in order to create a synthesis of their musical thinking. Departing from Webern, I finally arrived at Serialism and composer like Stockhausen, Boulez and others.

At the same time, my friend [Gerhard Eckel](#) (who is now teaching at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz) introduced me to the computer. He explained that my ideas about algorithms and structure can be elaborated much faster and more elegant with computer programs. While writing my dissertation, I lived in a friend's apartment who allowed me to use his PC for writing my dissertation. After his return it became clear that I could no longer work without a computer, as I have already written a good part of my thesis on his machine. He advised me to wait for the new Atari ST computer which was released a few month later. So I invested my saved money and was one of the first in Austria who bought this new machine.

However, it was very difficult working with this machine as it was a entirely new computer system with almost no software, and its word processor was rather poor. So I wasn't able to import the text I had already written – I had to rewrite everything. On the other hand, this was a great practice, as I was able to read it again, understand and correct the errors found by rewriting the part of my dissertation.

Shortly afterwards I discovered an experimental programming language called "Logo" which was designed by two scholars for children to learn programming. The children were given very simple and basic tools to create their own worlds. And a device called "turtle" was supplied which resembles a turtle; attached to its "head" was a pen for drawing, and pupils had to program commands which the turtle would execute: simple procedures, such as moving forward, backward, turning 90 degrees, etc. By this, one can create drawings. Maybe this is a toy for kids, but the possibility to construct your own language was very interesting for me. By expanding the basic grammar of Logo, I could create my own software library for compositional purposes, creating my own and personal "Microworlds". For me, this creative principle is extremely fascinating. That's how I got acquainted with the possibilities of computer music.

The third important point in my career was probably the discovery of algorithmic music. I have always loved to analyze compositions, and once in the library I found a string quartet by [Gottfried Michael Koenig](#), composed in 1959. I liked listening to this composition, it was such a fantastic music. When I started to analyze this piece, I couldn't figure out how it was composed, no matter how hard I tried. Finally I wrote a letter to the composer and explained my situation. He answered with a very nice letter.

He said he understood why it was difficult for me to continue this analysis because the piece was composed with random operations. I have not expect this answer, as his string quartet sounded very clear to me, not random at all. We continued our discussion by letters and soon became friends. This relationship was extremely important fo me as Koenig introduced me to his work and the ideas of algorithmic music and generative composition, from which I got a lot of inspiration and ideas. I felt like being his student. He introduced me to the serial music which became another creative impetus in my life as a composer.

After finishing my university studies, I received a commission from the IRCAM Research Center in Paris, to write a composition for ensemble using the same realtime computer system which was created for Pierre Boulez in 1988. He had a highly sophisticated ideas about sound processing and audio specialization and other things. For this purpose, a new computer language was created called Max which I am still using today. That's how I really pulled into computer music. This was the next step.

Well, there were many of them...

*In your biography you are named as a composer, performer, improviser, media creator, teacher – you are also interested in different topics, areas and compositional techniques. Your identity seems to be scattered and hard to define. How would you describe yourself?*

It seems to me that I am something between all these descriptions. I don't have a single label – I'm doing a lot of things. At one time, composing scores was most important to me. Later I became more interested in improvising music. Sometimes I get caught up in media compositions. My field of interest is constantly changing – and hence myself, and my identity is never the same for a long time. There are many different things that inspire me, I can't do anything about that.

*You create music for projects related to other arts – photography, architecture, etc. I wanted to ask how do you associate and unite music with other arts in such cases?*

My first project in this domain was a collaboration with the graffiti artist [Harald Naegeli](#) (b. 1939). He was much older than me and an anarchist, but he was not a vandalist and did not participate in the subculture of graffiti artists. However, he created art by expressing himself through graffiti. He had to remain anonymous because his art was highly political and critical. His graffitis have never been long-lasting as they have been wiped out shortly after their creation – most of his paintings are not existing any more. Fortunately, photographers who captured his graffitis right after being sprayed published several books and catalogues with Naegeli's paintings. At one point he got into jail, but many prominent figures from the art world like Josepg Beuys were advocating for him which finally led to his release from prison.

I met Harald Naegeli in 1990 through my wife. At this time I was still an emerging composer, but he was a famous artist with a name. He came up with the idea of creating a graffiti performance together

with a new piece of mine. I spontaneously agreed, but felt strange because I had never done this kind of music and I was completely unaware of what I needed to do. It wouldn't be appropriate to write a conventional score for musicians when Naegeli was improvising with his spray cans. As you might imagine, it was a great challenge for me. This led to the idea that I could use the same sound components as Harald Naegeli when drawing his graffiti. Essentially, he did three things: drawing dots, spraying lines, and shaking the can before drawing. So I decided that it will restrict myself to just three basic sound types – dots, lines, and grids – performed by three “musical spray cans” such as flute, bass clarinet and saxophone. For this piece, I invented a non-traditional graphical notation elaborated with a computer program based on algorithmic and stochastic principles. So I created different parts for each musician which are played independently from each other. The work called [Partikel-Bewegungen](#) was performed in several art museums and galleries in Düsseldorf, Zurich, Darmstadt and Vienna – a truly successful project with uniqueness and freshness.

*Could you share your opinion on the contemporary music scene in Austria? What do you see most in your professional environment?*

I find it difficult to answer your question, especially because I am also part of this scene. It is quite interesting for me to observe today's young composers and to witness how their understanding of music has changed and how different it is from my generation. When I grew up, the image of a composer was like someone sitting alone at a table, inventing new worlds while writing scores. Nowadays, everything became quite different. And I had to adapt myself to this change. The biggest transformation took place in 1997, after my presentation at the Salzburg Festival which was quite successful – wonderful performances, good press and a favorable reception by the audience. Afterwards, however, I fell into a sort of depression. After this climax, I didn't know where to go and what to do. I realized that I won't like sitting alone in splendid isolation as before, writing scores. All of this started under enormous pressure. Then I tried to figure out what I would like to do next and remembered my experience as a performer in adolescence when I was playing in experimental Rock and Jazz bands. So I started to improvise again on stage. At that time I was somewhat distant from the traditional composition and started creating electronic music. And later I combined these two areas proportionally in my work.

*Do you imagine yourself as part of the stage of Viennese improvisational music?*

Not that much at the time being. Nowadays, I'm rather focussing on collaboration with other artists. I make music for texts – and I am currently working with the writer Erwin Uhrmann on an interesting crossover project, without any commission, just out of pure pleasure.

Besides that, I am also occupied with field recordings. I am constantly searching for interesting acoustic environment which I record with special binaural microphones in order to capture the sound in all its dimensions, far beyond stereo. Other people are creating videos or taking pictures of their life's impressions. But I do sound recording, and when I listen to them later I can remember the situation and

its atmosphere very well. A year ago, I discovered a new recording technique with microphones that are placed inside your ears. With our two ears, we can hear three-dimensional sound – we can not only indicate what sounds we hear, but also what direction they are spreading from, how far away they are from us. Conventional sound recordings appear flat and one-dimensional. There is no depth of sound. Similarly, when we see a magnificent view and make it a photo. You can't feel so many things and aspects from the impression that you experienced when you saw the original image. However, if you put your microphones in your ears, they capture the sounds of the environment just as you hear them. The sound becomes three-dimensional which opens up a completely different listening experience.

This is not new. Such microphones have been in use since 1970ies. At that time, they were called the "artificial head" (Kunstkopf), anatomically accurate head model with microphones in its ear conches. But this artificial head was big and heavy, and very unpractical for recording in public places. And also, it was extremely expensive – around 7,000 euros. It was hard to get and hard to use. Especially in order to record sounds in a more intimate, subtle environment – like in a restaurant or elsewhere. Thus, such recordings required microphones that are less visible or at least less extravagant. So I use headset-like microphones which I plug into my ears, and my own head turns into a "Kunstkopf".

I have done a lot of such recordings which all contribute to a project called [\*H.E.A.D.\*](#) (Hearing Entirely Artificial Dreams). For this work-in-progress, I am recording sounds in various spaces, cities, landscapes, environments, and situations. In Graz, for instance, I've recorded a farmers market, the tram station, the park of the music university and a busy street crossing. With a custom made computer program created by myself, the listener flies along the sounds from one situation or environment to another, like in a dream. But, on the other hand, as the situations appear so hyper-realistic thanks to the Kunstkopf technology, the listeners get the impression that they are actually within that environment – a fantastic and immersive experience! I have done such pieces in many different cities around the world. For example, in Oslo, at the Danube delta or in Romania. Recently, I asked the chef of a famous restaurant for his permission to record his kitchen. It was also an unusual experience. The kitchen brigade reminded me of musicians playing together. There was also a lot of humor in the kitchen and a rather positive atmosphere.

Later, I added poetry to these recordings. I asked my friend [\*Erwin Uhrmann\*](#), a poet, to listen to the recordings and to write lyrical texts which reflecting his inner thoughts. The recording of his voice reading his texts was added to the soundscape afterwards, pushing the project to new horizons.

*Did you have any idea in your creative practice that could not be implemented or was impossible to implement from the beginning?*

Yes, in an early orchestra piece of mine called [\*In girum. Imus. Nocte\*](#). I had the idea of not using any conventional instrumental sounds – just noises caused by extended playing techniques. It is possible to do this with an orchestra, but it requires many rehearsals and you need to have great authority as a composer in order to explain professional musicians how you want them to play their instrument which is completely against their own practice.

This happened at the beginning of my career in 1991. The musicians were professionals and had performed contemporary music before. Nevertheless, they didn't know how to play my piece. In the end, it became a horrible fiasco. The musicians did not know what they were playing and tried to mimic the sounds I expected. Finally, the premiere took place, the piece was performed and even recorded. But the result was a tragicomedy. This was really a painful experience in my professional life.

*I know you have created your own musical instrument – a computer program called Amazing Maze. How did you come up with the idea of creating something like that?*

This happened right after my desperate situation, caused by the Salzburg Festival. I wanted something new in my life. I was even thinking of becoming a musician and a performer, but I didn't know how to play decently an existing instrument. That's why I created a new instrument for myself which is based on the creative principles of improvisation. This happened in 1998. when a new computer chip was created (the Motorola G3) which was fast enough to process electronic sounds in realtime on a computer. However, the possibilities were rather limited and I had to use sound sample that I had recorded or created myself. That's how [Amazing Maze](#) was born.

Later, it has transformed into a full-grown electronics instrument called [m@ze°2](#) (Modular Algorithmic Zound Environment) which I frequently use for free improvisation like in my duo [OUT OF THE BLUE](#) with singer Agnes Heginger. We do never rehearse and meet only on stage. Agnes is a great singer who knows contemporary and extra-european vocal techniques and lots of different singing styles. She can react very quickly to changing situations. Agnes always prepares poems for our live improvisation which she uses as her material. No one knows what the final result will be on stage – it's completely open. But the audience often thinks that we are performing composed pieces!

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*NB: The interview took place at Karlheinz Essl's office at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. You can listen to the original recording here:*

<https://anchor.fm/ona-jarmalaviciute/episodes/Interview-with--Karlheinz-Essl-Jr-e4srnf>