

***Pression* – a performance study**

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Helmut Lachenmann's groundbreaking work, *Pression*, for solo cello (1969). Its central question is how to understand *Pression*: not as a work (self-) contained in a score, but as a live object, as performance, action and embodiment. *Pression* is one of Lachenmann's first works introducing the concept of *musique concrète instrumentale*, music that emphasizes the way sound is produced rather than how it should be heard, thus reversing traditional hierarchies. This new musical aesthetic employing performative energy as compositional material requires an analytical approach that corresponds to the nature and demands of the music. My analysis thus draws primarily upon perspectives from the field of performance studies using Erika Fischer-Lichte's concept *autopoietic feedback loop* to describe the relationship between performer and audience and *perceptual multistability* to describe that between performance and score. I discuss the *prescriptive notation* used in *Pression*, which presents actions and gestures as musical material although their primary purpose is not to produce sound. I address some important ontological implications of the challenge presented by *Pression* to the notion of the work-concept. In short, I use *Pression* as a case study for the investigation of notational, embodied, gestural and liminal aspects of performance. Throughout the investigation, I draw on my own experience as a cellist who has performed the piece.

KEY WORDS: Cello, Lachenmann, performance, *Werktreue*, *prescriptive notation*, gesture

Am Anfang war die Tat (Goethe's Faust, Part I, 1808).

Pression (translated as *Pressure*) for solo cello by Helmut Lachenmann (1969) unquestionably lives up to its title: in this piece the performer is asked to squeeze, press, jerk, slide, hit and stroke various parts of the instrument and the bow. Rather than

functioning in a traditional way, the score maps the actions of the performer. *Pression* is one of Lachenmann's first works in the style he calls *musique concrète instrumentale*,¹ an aesthetic direction that, by using traditional instruments in non-traditional ways, avoids classical hierarchical structures such as prioritizing work over performance and compositional traditions over pure sound. This new musical aesthetic calls for a new analytical approach corresponding to the nature and demands of the music. My analysis will thus primarily draw upon perspectives from the field of performance studies. The central question addressed in this article is how to understand *Pression*: not as a work (self-) contained in a score, but as a live object: as performance, action and embodiment.

My first encounter with *Pression* in performance immediately transformed my perception of musical aesthetics. In 1989, Helmut Lachenmann came to the Norwegian Academy of Music. A student had agreed to perform *Pression* in a master class with Lachenmann. The performance was curiously beautiful, if also very strange: were these whispering, grinding, crushing and squeaking sounds music? This work appeared to present sound production in every possible way on the cello; every way, that is, except the central one we had been taught to believe was normal: with the bow on the string, producing a beautiful tone. Only one note, standing out in the middle of the piece, was bowed in the conventional manner, and in this context it became something completely new and fresh. In the course of this single performance, my perception of what constituted music had been dramatically changed.

My investigation will begin by reflecting on the highly original and idiosyncratic notation of actions used in *Pression*, known as *action notation* or (to use the more established term) *prescriptive notation* (Seeger, 1958; Kanno, 2007) to distinguish it from *descriptive notation* (otherwise known as traditional notation), which describes the intended sounding result. I will then look at the significance of gestures presented as musical material even though their primary purpose is not to produce an audible outcome. I will explore the relationships between performer and audience, and performance and score respectively, using concepts introduced by the theatre studies scholar Erika Fisher-Lichte: *autopoietic feedback loop* and *perceptual multistability*. These will be illustrated by my own experiences of performing *Pression*. Before examining its performative aspects, I will look at the historical context of *Pression* and consider some important ontological implications of the challenge it presents to the notion of the work-concept.

My investigation of *Pression* involves both *studying* and *engaging in* performance. I move from practice to theory and from theory to practice, not least because of the importance of remaining aware of my own stance in this research. My study is thus best described as practice-based research: research seeking new knowledge through practice. In conclusion I will discuss the extent to which this approach has given us new knowledge about *Pression* and has further purpose and potential for development in similar contexts.

This article is part of a larger project in which I seek to formulate a performance practice for post-1950 cello music by performing and analysing central and groundbreaking works by Helmut Lachenmann, Klaus K. Hübler and Morton Feldman.²

¹ The composer introduced the term (in German, *instrumentalen Musique concrète*) in his brief account of *Pression* first published in 1972 (Lachenmann, 1996). Most people now refer to this aesthetic as *musique concrète instrumentale*, even the composer himself (Heathcote, 2010).

² I am currently a PhD researcher at the Norwegian Academy of Music where I anticipate submitting my

Helmut Lachenmann and *musique concrète instrumentale*

Helmut Lachenmann (b. 1935) is one of the most radical and innovative composers of the post-war generation in Germany. After studying with Luigi Nono and exploring serialism, he developed a distinctive personal style as he tried to “invent what music could be” through “emptying” what he already knows (Lachenmann, 2008: in this conversation he was playing with the German words for teaching [*lehren*] and emptying [*leeren*]). In this process, he found a new expressivity, a new beauty, which he problematizes in his essay *The Beautiful in Music Today*:

Except for Luigi Nono, leading composers of yesterday have exhausted their resources ... They are celebrating the comeback of the bourgeois concept of beauty ... a form sickening to anyone who sees in art – or in beauty – more than just a masquerade (Lachenmann, 1980, p. 21).³

He is highly ambivalent about tradition: several of his works engage with historical elements, yet at the same time he reformulates his style and renews it in an unequalled manner, developing a personal aesthetic through the late 1960s.⁴ *Pression* was composed in 1969 following *temA* (1968) for flute, voice and cello, and it is the first work that thoroughly explored his original aesthetic ideas through new instrumental techniques. *Pression* is part of a series of three works – the other two being *Dal niente (Intérieur III)* (1970) for clarinet, and *Guero* (1970) for piano – in which this compositional direction was further cultivated, establishing something radically new that would have a strong impact on the composing world and also become a source of controversy.⁵ Lachenmann named this new direction *musique concrète instrumentale*. About *Pression* he says:

In this sort of piece it is common for sound phenomena to be so refined and organised that they are not so much the results of musical experiences as of their own acoustic attributes. Timbres, dynamics and so on arise not of their own volition but as components of a concrete situation characterised by texture, consistency, energy, and resistance. This does not come from within but from a liberated compositional technique. At the same time it implies that our customary sharp-honed auditory habit is thwarted. The result is aesthetic provocation: beauty denying habit (Lachenmann, 1970).

The production and the mechanical properties of a sound are valued above the sound itself. Long-established instrumental performance practice is left behind, and Lachenmann cultivates what had been regarded as extra-musical sounds, mistakes, mishaps and accidents. He purifies the impure, and refines and defines a wide range of noises, drawing, in endless variations, on subtle differences of bow speed, bow pressure, angle of bow and number of bow-hairs. In Lachenmann’s music these sounds do not appear merely as extra-musical sounds or extended techniques but have become the very structural foundations of his composition. “The techniques, in short, are not optional when playing the music – they are the music. One could not, for instance, transcribe Lachenmann’s three string quartets for piano four hands; the music would simply disappear” (Alberman, 2005, p. 48).⁶ The

dissertation *New Music – New Cellist?* in 2013.

³ The original, *Zum Problem des musikalisch Schönen heute*, can be found in Lachenmann (1996). The title paraphrases Hanslick’s treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (The beautiful in music)*.

⁴ See Pace (1998) for an excellent account of Lachenmann’s oeuvre and position.

⁵ Henze (1983) criticized Lachenmann’s work for being “musica negativa” (pp. 345-346).

⁶ Nevertheless Mike Svoboda has prepared a version of *Pression* for trombone (see

actual playing of the instrument, the instrumental practice, has become the compositional material. This can be seen as an extreme idiomatic approach, beyond the instrumental idiomatic virtuosity, extended to encompass the specific instrument and musician's actions in the moment of performance. What might come as a surprise in this context is the form of *Pression*, which appears to use a traditional structure with recurring elements, themes and motives.⁷

Lachenmann's *musique concrète instrumentale* was inspired by the technique and approach of Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète* in France, which had emerged in 1948 as part of a new approach to composition. In contrast with the traditional process where the abstract musical idea was represented in an abstract score which was then manifested in concrete sound through performance, *musique concrète* took what was 'concrete' (recorded sound) and subjected it to a process of abstraction. Schaeffer's approach made the sound itself the point of departure by choosing real sounds, existing in the world, collecting, classifying and recording them and thus making them *objets musicaux*. From the core properties of concrete sounds, he would then build structures into a work, thus reversing the traditional process of composition.

New electronic technology presented Schaeffer with tools to control sound parameters such as dynamics, timbre, duration and pitch. Having fulfilled his aspiration to create a new genre he expressed his scepticism in regard to the German classical tradition thus: "...after the war, in the '45 to '48 period, we had driven back the German invasion but we hadn't driven back the invasion of Austrian music, 12-tone music" (Hodgkinson, 1987).

Inspired by Schaeffer's ideas, Lachenmann adapted his technique for use not with electronic *objets musicaux* but with acoustic instruments. He developed a rich palette of sounds, many of them physical and almost mechanical sounds similar to Schaeffer's real-world sounds. In *Pression*, he uses scordatura (the cello is tuned from top down to F, D flat, G and A flat) to prevent the open strings ringing in the familiar fifths, which effectively kills off most of the traditional overtones but at the same time offers new tone-combinations. Lachenmann says: "...composing music means inventing an imaginary 'instrument' and showing it through an exclusive and not so easily repeatable context" (quoted by Heathcote, 2010, p. 348). For each composition he 'builds' an instrument from scratch. He uses Morton Feldman's piece *The Viola in my Life* as an example: every piece should be "the cello (the piano, the violin etc.) in my life" (Lachenmann, 2008). In *Pression* the cello as the sound source we know is eliminated, so the cello as a traditional instrument with all its connotations and history is on one level erased through this compositional method. In this respect, we can say that Lachenmann has liberated not only the sounds, but also the instrument and the performer from the weight of the history of the cello.⁸ On the one hand, this can be seen as a strategy similar to Schaeffer's abstraction of the sound source in order to create something new. On the other hand, the core of Lachenmann's approach in his

<http://www.mikesvoboda.net/compositions-all/articles/pression.html>).

⁷ I will refrain from structural analysis as there are two excellent analyses of *Pression* by Jahn (1988) and Mosh (2006).

⁸ If Lachenmann has not erased that history entirely, he has at least negated it, even if it still appears extremely clearly in many of his works. For example, in *Accanto*, his clarinet concerto, a recording of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto is to be played very softly in the background throughout the performance. Another example is *Staub*, an orchestral piece commenting on Beethoven's 9th Symphony.

musique concrète instrumentale is the actual revelation of the sound source – the very material qualities and physical energies of the sound. That source is the instrument itself, and the qualities of the sound result from the material conflict between cello, bow, wood and strings. The act of performing with all the physical attributes and energies of the performer now constitutes the material of the work.

This new aesthetic direction represents a reversal of traditional hierarchies on two levels, by emphasizing the importance of the resulting sound phenomena over the sound source, and prioritizing the performance over the musical text. By organizing the instrumental sound production and material in this manner, Lachenmann shifts the focus from the score as musical text to the action embodied in performance. This shift in compositional focus calls for a complementary shift in analytical focus. And the focus on the act of performance lends itself to an analysis grounded in performance theory.

Work and performance within the *performative turn*

The emergence of performance theory and performance studies is interwoven with the so-called *performative turn* in the arts, when, for example, textual theory was replaced by performative aesthetics. It emerged from avant-garde and experimental performance such as the action painting that characterises Jackson Pollock's practice throughout most of his later career. Another example is John Cage's *Untitled Event* (1952) which dissolves the work as artefact. The performance itself becomes the object of study, and scholars have to negotiate concepts such as embodiment, action, behaviour, agency and perhaps most of all: liveness.

The performative turn acknowledged the social construction of reality through the suggestion that all human practices are performed and led to the replacement of essentialist conceptions by a more dynamic understanding of the art work:

Some call this a veritable shift of paradigm in the history of humanities – from semiotics to linguistic performance (Austin, Searle), from structuralist to performative poetics (Derrida, Felman, Hillis Miller), from textual theory to performative aesthetics (Fischer-Lichte, Schechner) and from biological to performative theories of gender identity (Butler) (Guldbrandsen, 2006, pp. 140-141).

In other words, a processual approach began to be taken. The work is no longer fixed and stable, but elusive: it takes on different temporal aspects as one looks at its behaviour rather than its permanent and structural qualities. The work formerly viewed as an object is now seen in terms of a relational interplay between multiple agents including performance, performer, work, maker, performance space and audience. The performative turn in musicology has been theorized by a number of musicologists and philosophers, such as Richard Taruskin (1995), Jonathan Dunsby (1995), Peter Kivy (1995), Lydia Goehr (1992, 1998), Stan Godlovich (1998), Nicolas Cook (2003) and Erling Guldbrandsen (2006), among others. They have, in their different ways, opened up the field. The discussion has been polarized at times, with views of the score as the pure object on one side and the performance or the performer being independent of the score on the other. I will not cover the discussion fully here, but will merely outline some important positions and look briefly at the term *Werktreue*.

We have to consider some important issues that emerge from the performative turn: if performance studies represents a shift from something that is to something that allows us

to do – a turn from essence to appearance: the manifestation of the performance as object – then this affects the epistemology of musicology: the analysis of the principles and procedures of inquiry into music as a discipline.

The investigation of music as action and performance requires a different set of perspectives and tools from that needed for a traditional textual analysis. The historical dominance of knowing over doing in musicology since the early 19th century, that is, the prioritization of theoretical models over deduction from performance practice, produced analysis predominantly based on theory and text. Our principal attitudes to music and performance are built hierarchically into our language. Grammar depicts a performance as an appendix to something: a performance *of something*. We can talk about ‘just playing’, but it is rare to speak of ‘just performing’ (Goehr, 1998; Cook, 2003). Language invites us to speak of music *and* its performance, with music as the stable text and the unstable performance as its reproduction. (I am, of course, writing about conventionally notated Western classical music, this dualism does not apply to improvised or orally transmitted music for example.) Now that the concept of the artwork is challenged, the ontological view has to change with it:

There no longer exists a work of art, independent of its creator and recipient; instead, we are dealing with an *event* that involves everybody – albeit to different degrees and in different capacities. If ‘production’ and ‘reception’ occur at the same time and place, this renders the parameters developed for a distinct aesthetics of production, work and reception ineffectual. At the very least we should re-examine their suitability (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.18).

Fischer-Lichte problematizes the way we structure the parameters of performance, and by doing so, construct meaning through their relationships. She eradicates the boundaries between the maker, executor and recipient in the moment of performance, and she names this as an *event*, which is now given its own significance.

Werktreue

Since music began to be notated, clearer distinctions between the work and its performance, and between the composer and performer, have emerged, representing multifarious views of the role of the performer. The German term *Werktreue* denotes the performer’s fidelity and loyalty to the original text. The concept of the work itself is central here, with the performance viewed as secondary. In this realm the composition is regarded as fully completed prior to performance, requiring the finished notated score to be interpreted faithfully. The loyal performer becomes transparent or even invisible as he or she is only a medium for the music: “The secret of perfection lies above all in (the performer’s) consciousness of the law imposed on him by the work he is performing” (Stravinsky, 1947, p. 127). In this context, it is as though all the information the performer needs is to be found in the score, so there is no need for an individual interpretation, just an execution or a rendering of what is already there.

At the other end of the scale we see celebrated performers who exploit the works they are playing in order to show off their virtuosity and skill. Goehr (1998) juxtaposes these two extreme attitudes, favouring either work or performance: the idea of a *perfect performance of music* is in favour of permanently existing works (works are lasting, but not performances), stresses Apollonian ideals (supporting structure and discipline) and

emphasizes *Werktreue*.⁹ *The perfect musical performance* on the other hand includes the Dionysian ideal of musicianship involved in the performance event being open-ended and spontaneous. However, Goehr's assertion (shared by some musicologists) that musicians began to take a more subservient role in the early eighteenth century is unsupported by historical evidence, which makes *Werktreue* more of a theoretical position than a historical one. Performers' views on theoretical and practical aspects of performance differ notably. For example the pianist Alfred Brendel, discussing the pedantic aura surrounding the word *Werktreue*, calls it antiquated. He writes:

In any case, the proper meaning of *Werktreue* is at best marginal and suggestive; *Texttreue* by comparison is rather more concrete. ... I have never considered myself to be merely the passive recipient of the composer's commands, preferring to promote his cause of my own free will and in my own way (Brendel, 2001, p. 30).

This illustrates the pragmatic relationship that performers have to the text they are working on: the score contains signs that have to be interpreted as the individual chooses. The pianist Leif Ove Andsnes regards himself as an actor, with each work offering him a different part which he tries to bring to life for the audience, "...to personify the composer's ideas through the means he considers suitable, on an aesthetical, technical and personal level" (Kvalbein, 2005, p. 178).¹⁰ Nicholas Cook agrees: "Thinking of the music as 'script' rather than 'text' implies a reorientation of the relationship between notation and performance" (Cook, 2003, p. 206). From this perspective he proposes an active horizontal view of successive interpretations relating to each other, departing vertically from the composer's original ideas and the text. This relational perspective is congruent with performance practice in that it follows each work through its performers' interpretations, which in turn inevitably influence each other in today's global musical community. The performer's everyday task of translating the score into sounding music necessarily includes interpretative choices however faithfully he or she approaches the score. The ideal of being loyal to the work and the text is, nevertheless, strongly alive today in performers' communities. In my experience the ingrained respect for the work-concept, for living and dead composers alike, preserves the hierarchy which places works above performance in Western classical music today.

We can also move the focus away from the work and the performer onto the performance as a product in itself: "...we are in possession, always, of *two* artworks: the work of music, and, given an outstanding or high-quality performance, the performance (product) itself" (Kivy, 1995, p. 278). Kivy describes the performance as an artwork in itself, viewed independently of the text, which opens up the role of the performer, giving it a new and important dimension and taking it to a new position.

In connection with this debate, Guldbrandsen reminds us that these discussions about performativity are based on methodological categories that have circulated for at least the last two centuries. He claims that "categories of performativity are implicit in existing concepts of 'work', 'musical form', 'interpretation', 'musical meaning', 'aesthetic

⁹ The notion of the performance as something ephemeral that exists exclusively in real time has naturally been challenged by the emergence of the recording industry. Now, recorded performances are infinitely repeatable, which opens up new possibilities and areas for investigation.

¹⁰ My translation from Norwegian.

experience', and 'tradition' (all of which are formative concepts that emerged in musicological thinking mainly through the 19th century)" (Guldbrandsen, 2006, p. 141). In studying works and performance they will always be interdependent on each other: "performances are necessarily performances of works" (Goehr, 1998, p. 141).

Performing *Pression*

Returning to the central question in this article, that of how to analyse *Pression*, not as a work (self-) contained in a score, but as a live object, as performance, action and embodiment, I will first examine its *prescriptive notation*.

***Pression* as score: prescriptive notation**

Upon opening the score of *Pression*, we are presented with an invention by Lachenmann called a *bridge clef* (see Fig. 1), which has been widely adopted by composers. The clef depicts a map of the cello, dividing the instrument's performance-space into three parts: the fingerboard and general area above the bridge, a horizontal line marking the bridge itself, and then the area below the bridge. The perspective is that of the cellist: the tailpiece is at the top of the drawing. The bridge clef represents the physical outline of the string instrument, offering the performer an accurate location for action by adding various figures and symbols such as pictures of bow and hands in addition to traditional notational symbols. The use of spatial notation with an approximate crotchet value of 66 beats per minute with occasional bar lines gives a clear indication of time and rhythm. As mentioned earlier, this method of notation is named *prescriptive* or *action notation* and describes the musician's actions or methods in creating sounds, as opposed to *descriptive* (i.e. traditional) *notation*, which describes the sounding result in terms of parameters such as pitch, rhythm, dynamics and articulation. The latter also contains several aspects of prescriptiveness, that is, for example harmonics and notation in scordatura, so there is no clear division line. According to Mieko Kanno: "...prescriptive notation points to a shift in the function of notation from representation to mediation" (Kanno, 2007, p. 231). As the purpose of the notation in *Pression* is primarily to indicate actions, rather like an instruction manual, it is predominantly prescriptive notation that is used.

In contemporary music, incongruity is frequently found between the meaning of the signs used in prescriptive notation and the sounding results of the actions indicated. As Kanno writes, "there is a critical gap between the available sounds on the one hand and the limited vocabulary in notation on the other, and the inadequacy of notation is hard to ignore" (*ibid.*, p. 234). Considering that this new aesthetic direction, originating in the music of Lachenmann in the late 60s, has only existed for forty years, we must bear Seeger's words in mind: "...our notation ... is, *par excellence*, a matter of norms determined by the vast aggregate of practice and codified by generations of workers" (Seeger, 1958, p. 193). Right now, we are in the middle of this "vast aggregate of practice", and the performer is an invaluable tool for the composer in realizing the text and a link in the feedback process that enables the improvement of notational techniques. In the present era, the co-dependence of performers and composers is evident; we are in an experimental zone, which requires creativity on both parts. Thus, monitoring the ongoing performance practices of performers and composers alike is fundamental for the development of notational norms. One consequence of the discrepancies between different notational methods is that the

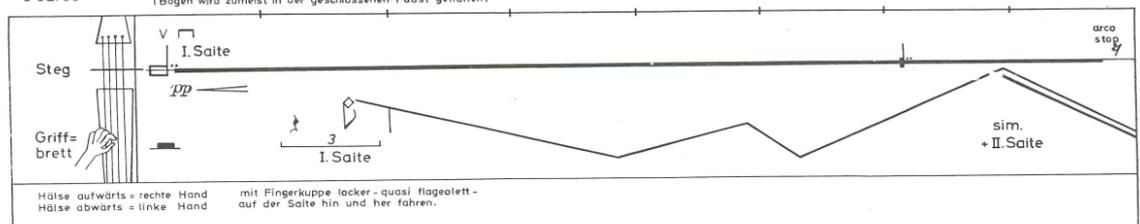
Für Werner Taube
PRESSION

für einen Cellisten / for one Cellist

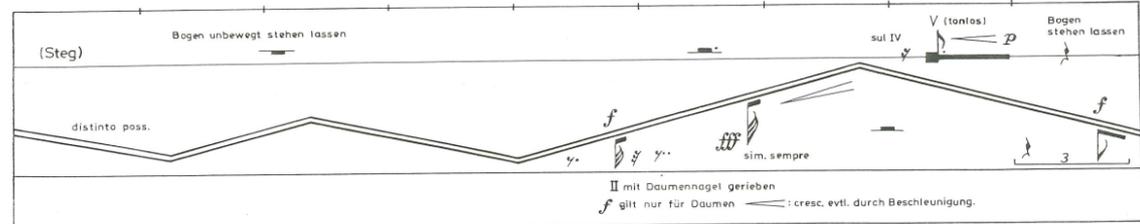
Helmut Lachenmann, 1969

Scordatura:

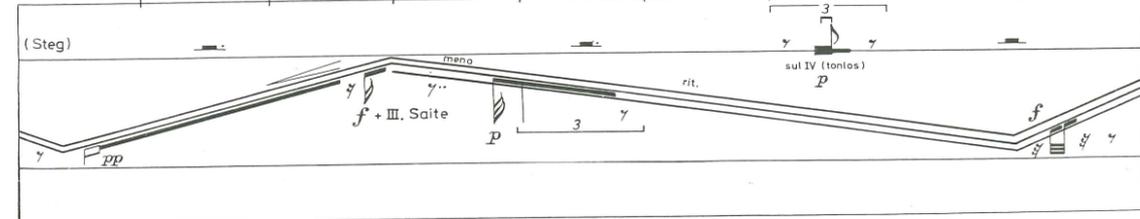

ca. 66 (Bogen wird zumeist in der geschlossenen Faust gehalten)



Häuse aufwärts = rechte Hand
 Häuse abwärts = linke Hand
 mit Fingerkuppe locker - quasi flageolett -
 auf der Saite hin und her fahren.



II mit Daumnagel gerieben
 f gilt nur für Daumen : cresc. evtl. durch Beschleunigung.



© 1972 by Musikverlag Hans Gerig, Köln / Cologne
 1980 assigned to Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden
 Printed in Germany

HG 865

Figure 1. *Pression*, page 1 (1972), by Musikverlage Hans Gerig, Köln 1980, assigned to Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden. Used by kind permission.

performer of contemporary music has had to become more specialized than hitherto, by building an extensive body of experience in performance practice: each work may have its own particularities of sound and notation. Consequently, some classically-trained performers become alienated, perceiving the gap between the *old* and the *new* music as nearly impossible to bridge.

Prescriptive notation is not as radical as one might assume, as several prescriptive elements such as natural and artificial harmonics, instructions for fingerings, bowings and mutes, have been integrated in the descriptive notation. Prescriptive notation also shares traits with the tablature mainly used for fretted string instruments and flutes from the Renaissance era, as well as in popular music today. The tablature shows literally where on the 'table' to put your fingers to produce a note, and is thus instrument-specific: Lachenmann *builds* a new cello and designs a map for navigating it, so this map cannot be translated to other instruments. Lachenmann has overcome the limitations of tablature in showing durations by simply adding lines to the tones, indicating their ending point.

When I worked with Lachenmann on *Pression*, he wanted the piece to be phrased quite freely in terms of rubato and agogic accents, something he demonstrated by his own playing of Schumann's *Träumerei*. According to him, every phrase should live its own life, and the time allowed for each of these small, unique sounds to emerge, both in terms of resonance and physical execution, was far more important than keeping strict time. Each cellist should then, guided by this performance practice, perform *Pression* adapted to their instrument, body and the acoustic, something that would present us with genuinely different interpretations. Paradoxically, Lachenmann's conception of the distinct qualities of each single sound was crystal-clear, leaving little freedom of interpretation to the performer. One example is the perforated sound quality caused by vertical bowing (see start of Fig. 2). To produce this grainy sound (every 'grain' should be heard), one has to start with a very controlled and slow bow not too close to the bridge. In spite of the score only offering instructions on how to hold the bow and the direction of the bow, Lachenmann was meticulous about the sound he required. The high degree of Lachenmann's specificity in sound details surprised me, because the prescriptive notation he uses is far from precise in its demands for specific sound results of actions, whereas the tempo and rhythm are indicated in concrete and measurable ways. Thus, the score does not provide all the information necessary to perform *Pression* according to what might be called the Lachenmann school or tradition. From this we can deduce that oral traditions and performance practice have to be taken into consideration when studying and performing a contemporary work such as *Pression*, music that introduces a new aesthetic in instrumental playing. My experience also reinforced my perception that the design of notational language for this aesthetic direction is still in its infancy, since it uses few symbols that are universally understood by performers.¹¹

Prescriptive notational practices can be seen as an invitation to the musician to take an intuitive approach to performance: the player sees the image of what to do, does it, and the action or gesture immediately generates sonic results. A visceral relationship forms between notation and performance. This doing-aspect of the score augments corporeal expression in

¹¹ A further challenge is that the symbols are rarely consistent from one composer (occasionally, even work) to another. However, several of Lachenmann's prescriptive features, such as the bridge clef, action dynamics and other graphic symbols, have been widely used by other composers. It is worth mentioning that *Pression* was revised by Lachenmann and the cellist Lucas Fels in 2010, describing the different sound qualities and techniques in greater detail. At certain points ideas previously notated graphically (prescriptive) are now notated in a more traditional manner (descriptive), and the entire piece has been formatted into bars. The experimental aspects of the prescriptive notation are still intact, but forty years' development of the performance practice and reception of *Pression* has revealed where more information was needed.

performance, enabling the musician to produce gestures that could be studied fruitfully in this new light.

***Pression* in terms of its gestures and embodiment**

The obvious significance of gesture in *Pression* leads us to question what kind of correspondence there is between its musical notation and intended gestures. The notation most often correlates directly to physical movement, for example in long lines pointing up and down and a jagged line indicating the gestures of the hand on the fingerboard (see Fig. 2). The discrepancy between the notated sign and its meaning necessitates the action inherent in performance to give meaning to the sign. The abstract (descriptive) representation of sound is replaced by corporeal (prescriptive) actions and gestures. Rather than having signs for sounds, we see signs for gestures. Can we then see the gesture as an integral component of the work, linking performance and score?

The execution of the physical gestures in the score of *Pression* creates an important and unique link between the body of the musician and the body of the instrument. In a slightly different context, Fischer-Lichte writes:

Each character is bound to the specific corporeality of the actor who engenders it. The actor's phenomenal body, their bodily being-in-the-world, constitutes the existential ground for the coming into being of the character. It does not exist beyond the individual body (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 147).¹²

Transferring this to a musical context, the body of a musician becomes an inseparable part of the music in the moment of performance, through physical and indeed almost choreographic work. When gestures are presented, themselves, as musical material rather than for the primary purpose of producing sounds, this not only requires the performer to take a different role but also represents a break with the concept of the work as an abstract object that is written down in the form of a score and fully realized only through sound. The corporeality of the performer invites him or her to take a central role in interpretation, linking the performer's own unique body with his or her instrument to produce a performance that cannot be replicated by anyone else.

To investigate further the role of gestures in *Pression*, we might consider them in the light of the theories of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. These refer to Aristotle's categories of *praxis* (action) as an end without means and *poesis* (production) as means towards an end, suggesting a third category: gesture as means without an end. By isolating familiar gestures from their context in films, he opens up new meanings for them:

The gesture is the exhibition of mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such [author's italics]. It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them (Agamben, 2000, p. 57).

The gestures at the beginning of *Pression* cover the whole range of the cello: the entire fingerboard is touched, symbolically covering the whole repertoire of cello music. The left hand running up and down the fingerboard is no longer part of a virtuosic performance but just an arm moving on the way to fulfil an action. Large gestures are clearly decontextualized as they produce hardly any sound. We see the ritual aspect in classical music and perceive echoes of the extravagant gestures in a romantic concerto. The soloist

¹² In the original German, *In-der-Welt-sein*, clearly inspired by Heidegger.

may end a phrase, for example, by lifting the bow with bravura, but all we hear are some scratches or distant white noise, the gesture contradicted by its sounding result.

4

zwischen Steg und Saitenhalter
dicht am Saitenhalter

$\frac{1}{8}$ -Haarlänge $\frac{1}{4}$ -
 $\frac{1}{2}$ → $\frac{1}{8}$ → $\frac{1}{4}$ → $\frac{1}{2}$ → ganze Haarlänge
am Frasch
f pass.
molto distinto
mit Fingerkuppen (wie anfangs)

Klemmstellen zum Frasch hin verlagern
Klemmstellen zur Spitze verlagern
Bogen (in der rechten Faust) zugleich steil quetschen und nach rechts ziehen
Linke greift „as“

am Frasch beginnend, mit viel Bogendruck
I II III IV
hinterm Steg
immer dicht am Saitenhalter auf Umspinnung
Bogen ad lib. etwas herauf- bzw. herunter verlagern,
Bogen in Faust.

mindestens 60 Sek.
molto rit.
arco unter den Saiten auf Stegwand
legno-Schlag auf Stegfuß
Steg
Bewegung verlangsamen
Schlag auf Corpus

pizz.
lunga passibile
intensivster Druck
subito
Schlag (plötzlich) aufs Griffbrett und schnelles lockeres Reiben der Saiten an der Aufschlagstelle

Bogenwechsel ad lib.
Dauer ad lib. (ca. 60 Sek.)
Corpuswand vor Steg
molto espr.
Pizz.
Bogenstange von unten gegen die Seite prallen lassen. Tonhöhenveränderungen durch Verlagerung der springenden Saiten zum Steg (höher bzw. vom Steg weg (tiefer)).

*) Bogen mit Haaren normal strichend auf Corpus bis herauf direkt unter die Saiten verlagern
*) Linke berührt leicht die Saiten (quasi flag.) um sie am Klingen zu hindern.

HG 865

Figure 2. *Pressure*, page 4, 1972 by Musikverlage Hans Gerig, Köln 1980, assigned to Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden. Used by kind permission.

Lachenmann deploys the typical and familiar movements made by cellists for hundreds of years, gestures that thus become a silent enactment of history. “What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported” (Agamben, 2000, p. 56). The quotation of classical music gestures, including

those bordering on clichés, and the display of their content and capacities, produces gesture as *means without end*. Lachenmann shows us the significance of each gesture: we see it with new eyes. Having recognised that the ritual is now emptied of meaning we can respond to Lachenmann's desire that we should listen with new ears. Through the process of defamiliarization, by importing alien and dislocated sounds and gestures into the concert hall aesthetic, Lachenmann problematizes the notion of beauty and challenges habitual listening.

Although *Pression* clearly explores the potential of gestures that are both physical and musical, Lachenmann does not consider himself an exponent of instrumental music theatre where surrealism and theatrical elements can overshadow musical factors, as for example in Mauricio Kagel's *Match* (1964), a tennis game for two cellists with a percussionist as umpire. Nevertheless, since in the preface to *Pression* he asks the performer either to play by heart or to use a low music stand so as to prioritize the visual aspects of the performance, he clearly consciously incorporates gestural aspects as compositional material.

Perceptual multistability

Fischer-Lichte introduces the term *perceptual multistability* to define and analyse the performative field in theatre and performance, a term, often associated with vision science, that refers to ambiguous perceptual experiences in which the viewer interprets the same image in two different ways. This can either happen spontaneously, or the perception can alternate over time between stable and unstable states. Fischer-Lichte describes perceptual multistability as the constant transition between two orders of perception, presence and representation: "... [the] oscillating focus between the actor's specific corporeality and the character portrayed" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 147). The order of presence relates to authenticity and immediacy whereas the order of representation is used when the actor portrays a character by generating a role in the fictive world.

The idea of representation as presenting or reflecting *something* is present in much of the classical music tradition where the work (i.e. the score) has a high status and the *Werktreue*-ideal is strong. It also presupposes the notion of art imitating life, life being primary and art secondary. Thinking of a performance of music in these terms, as though the music were imitating something, an essence or original, is problematic because, since there exists no replica in performance, each process of embodiment differs.¹³ Nevertheless the work is represented through its character. In the case of *Pression* the fictive world created by Lachenmann is transmitted through the performer's unfolding and recreation of the text of the score. Fischer-Lichte describes the 'presence' aspect of the performer's representation of a work as less predictable than the intentional acting of a role: "Based on self-referentiality, the order of presence allows meanings to emerge over which the perceiving subjects have no control" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 150). As we have seen, perceptual multistability refers to the way we perceive various degrees of embodiment, and that our perception can 'change direction' during the very act of perceiving. "The perceiving subjects remain suspended between two orders of perception, caught in a state of 'betwixt and between'. The perceiving subjects find themselves on the threshold which constitutes the transition from one order to another; they experience a liminal state" (*ibid.*, p. 148).

¹³ Except of course in recorded performances.

Schechner describes a similar 'in-between' quality "as *transitional*, suspended between 'my' behaviour and that which I am citing or imitating" (Schechner, quoted in Loxley, 2007, p. 157). He illustrates this point with the example of Laurence Olivier speaking the famous words 'To be or not to be' in Hamlet:

The words belong, or don't belong, equally to Shakespeare, Hamlet, Olivier ... So Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is also true: in this production of the play, Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field or frame of double negativity choice and virtuality remain activated (*ibid.*, p. 158).

This example of the elements in play producing perceptual multistability illustrates complexity in performance.

Performing the character of *Pression*, as given in Lachenmann's 'script', requires extensive exploration of the physical aspects of producing sounds on a cello. The gestures required to execute the actions encompass the whole instrument, bringing forward specific processes of embodiment: craftsmanship-like, tactile relations between instrument and performer as well as all the tacit knowledge inherent in practice. Each performer interpreting the piece performs an individual and unique *Pression* according to his or her specific body and instrument, distinctly different despite the seemingly precise score. The work comes to life through the diversity of individual performances, but at the same time the character of *Pression* is always present and clearly recognizable.

Schechner writes about "performances as experimenting with the boundary between 'life' and 'art'" (Schechner, quoted in Loxley, 2007, p.159), a liminal and fluid state close to Fischer-Lichte's 'betwixt and between' where the opposition between the different states lose importance. Similarly, Fischer-Lichte discusses moments of transition between orders of perception that can transform those who experience them. Such liminal experiences are based upon the "permanent, reciprocal transitions between subject and object positions" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p.177). According to her, perceivers cannot control this process, but become conscious that they actively create meaning through emergence of these perceptual fluctuations. She looks at the relationship between meaning and effect in these unpredictable modes of perception, and analyses the constitution of meaning as a reciprocal process between performers and spectators, which she names the *autopoietic feedback loop*.

The autopoietic feedback loop

Fischer-Lichte introduces the autopoietic feedback loop as follows:

Whatever the actors do elicits a response from the spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense, performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop. Hence, performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38).

Fischer-Lichte illustrates this concept with detailed accounts of the history of performance and experimental theatre since 1950. Several aspects of the realm of theatre have no obvious relevance to music, notably the more direct and even physical interaction between performers and spectators. The most significant discrepancy lies in the use of text and human gesture as carriers of meaning. Theatre refers to life, and while music certainly can refer to specific phenomena, generally speaking, most instrumental music has no such aim. Excluding singers, musicians also have a physical instrument through which they perform.

Perhaps it is not entirely safe to draw direct parallels between an actor acting a role and a musician playing a score, but the processes of internalization of a script, and performing through and with the body, are common traits. The larger perspective of the relationship between spectator, performer and (musical) text is apparent in both fields, and the reorganization of these elements presents the opportunity to take new perspectives and make new explorations.

In focusing on performance as event, Fischer-Lichte challenges the traditional subject/object relationship between actors and spectators, thus: “The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance,” quoting Herrmann’s definition of performance (Herrmann, 1981, p. 19), “played by all for all” (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 32). There is no longer a gap between the audience and the stage; both parties influence each other. The traditional spectator can have strong feelings or empathy, but observes the work from a distance without interfering (*ibid.*). This can be seen as analogous to the behaviour of the traditional audience at a classical or contemporary music concert. What is going on is a pretence: they can listen, as it were, from an intellectual distance, so that they do not have to engage, physically, with what they are hearing or seeing.

In what follows, I will look at the concept of the autopoietic feedback loop through two examples from my experience of performing *Pression*. The first event is described from two perspectives: that of the performer and that of a spectator. This is my own recollection of the performance:

This performance of *Pression* took place at 7 am during a 24-hour-long festival, *Spor*, in Aarhus, Denmark, in May 2008. The audience had been up all night listening to music and gathered drowsily around me in a close semi-circle, lying on large pillows on the floor. Performing at this time of day, with a sleepy and lazy energy in the room, influenced *Pression* towards a slower, more tranquil music to the point where my endpin [spike] suddenly slipped from its position, so that I had to use considerable force and balance in order to keep the instrument steady. Whilst striving to keep the cello up and the music going, parts of the audience appeared to wake up and straighten their backs. Their attitude seemed to change, watching and listening with sharp concentration, as if the outcome of my struggle depended on them. I felt they were sharing their strength and concentration with me, and I had a strong notion of a direct contribution of positive energy streaming from the spectators.

One member of the audience said:

This was the first time I had sat this close to a musician during a concert, something that made the performance go straight in: I felt almost as though I was the one playing ... She (the performer) seemed like she gave all she had, and she almost mistreated the cello! Due to the excitement I started to sweat. When the endpin started to move ... what drama! First I thought she did this deliberately, but suddenly, when I realized this was not planned, the excitement grew. In this moment, the performance changed from being a good performance to becoming a fantastic performance, when it appeared to be a fight for the music, so to speak. I remember thinking: “will she make it?” To me it seemed that she not only fought to hold on to the instrument, but also to hold on to the intensity of the music.¹⁴

This example shows how the unpredictable slipping of the cellist’s endpin during the performance forced the spectators to become alert. The performer perceived their concern

¹⁴ Allan Gravgaard Madsen in an e-mail to me, 22 March 2010. My translation from Danish.

and energy feeding back to her via the autopoietic loop and energising her; this in turn gave the spectators a feeling of meaningful participation. This event, producing perceptual multistability, accentuated the presence aspect of the performance, the performer's phenomenal and authentic *being-in-the-world* with her body and instrument. The embodied performance in this instance overshadowed the concept of the work and the character of *Pression* portrayed by the performer – according to the order of representation within its fictive world.

I will now describe another performance of *Pression* when a moment occurred that changed my perception of the piece in relation to the order of representation. The performance was given for an audience uneducated in contemporary music. A short way into *Pression*, when the first small, squeaky, untraditional sound occurred, a man burst out laughing. In one way, as a performer, I found this a relief: someone was at last daring to express a spontaneous response to this strange and, to some, provocative music that negates all conventional playing. Such spontaneous reactions are very rare in classical concert music. Typical audiences within this field are well behaved, and very seldom respond spontaneously as individuals or as a group to performances in the way that one might expect in other genres such as jazz and popular music, something that Fischer-Lichte discusses.¹⁵ The laughter also influenced me in another way: I wondered if the spectator's reaction might include an element of embarrassment, or perhaps a feeling of insecurity as to how to grasp this music. Feeling his embarrassment for a moment brought me out of my concentrated presence, so that I momentarily viewed myself from the outside, as though I played a strange character. The situation produced a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*: an effect of alienation, placing the actor besides rather than in the role. Alienation generates a dialectic relationship within the role as the actor offers opinions concerning the dilemma facing the character (Schechner, 2006). In this instance I found myself scrutinizing *Pression* while performing. It was challenging to restore a state of presence, and I felt as though I was having a real-time dialogue with the piece, prompted by the unarticulated commentary of the laughing spectator.¹⁶

Pression amplified and recorded

In a concert in which I had programmed works for cello and electronics, I chose to use amplification, in collaboration with the composer and performer Natasha Barrett, since this is permitted by Lachenmann.¹⁷ In *Pression*, sounds are produced using a variety of actions from a number of places on the cello. In order to pick up the very softest sounds, we attached two DPA microphones to the cello¹⁸: one on the lower side of the bridge, a second underneath the fingerboard and a third, which was a contact microphone, underneath the tailpiece. Normally one microphone centred between the *f*-holes near the bridge would

¹⁵ This could be one of the reasons that there is little research in classical music on relationships between audience and performers illustrating the autopoietic feedback loop.

¹⁶ A central topos in Lachenmann's aesthetic is *Klang-Verfremdung* (in English: defamiliarization effect), similar to Brecht's alienation effect, aiming at questioning the habitual and self-evident by placing familiar elements in unfamiliar contexts and vice versa.

¹⁷ In the preface Lachenmann writes: "The cello may be electrically amplified *ad lib.*" He has since regretted this statement, he told me in February 2010 in the course of a conversation in Bergen.

¹⁸ Microphone manufactured by DPA Microphones, Allerød, Denmark.

suffice for amplification, because this is close enough to where the sound is produced in most classical music. Barrett studied the score and projected the sound through four loudspeakers surrounding the audience. She interacted with me as an equal duo partner, in truth exerting even more influence than I did on the sound output through the speakers. This amplified performance of *Pression* was radically different from the acoustic version: the sound events were magnified so that we could hear every little detail including the smallest nuances of colour that would otherwise be perceptible only by a listener close up to the cellist. *Pression* became a different piece in this performance because amplification changed its sound aesthetics, the projection of sound creating an artificial sense of detachment as the loudspeakers became, themselves, sounding instruments.¹⁹ The direct relationship between the gestures and the sounds, so central for this work, became distorted. This transposing of sound from instrument to loudspeaker reminds us of Schaeffer's use of electronic media to reinforce the removal of sounds from their source in *musique concrète*.

The experience of hearing *Pression* as a sound recording only, without its visual aspect, is completely different from witnessing a live performance. The curious listener who turns up the volume in an attempt to hear its almost inaudible whispering is in danger of physical pain when the soft white noise is violently interrupted by loud grinding sounds: for this reason it could be described as being unsuitable for the CD medium.²⁰ While in some ways *Pression* suffers when sound is isolated from its gestures and the mechanical source of sound production, this can give it new content and meaning. The undertaking to produce a CD of *Pression* is subject here to the words of Walter Benjamin: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in a particular place" (Benjamin, 2008 p. 21). The CD medium has transformed the work into a different state. It is removed from the instrument, converted into a new format and presented through a new medium, loudspeakers or headphones. The change of medium magnifies the music on one level, as the microphones bring the smallest of sounds to our attention. Mechanizing the music in this way, however, has far-reaching consequences in terms of what is lost, what lasts and what comes into existence, as it metamorphoses into something new. Making a CD recording could be seen as a critical re-reading of the work, which appears as a result in an altered state emphasizing particular elements that would be imperceptible in a live performance. The listener may perceive that the "here and now" authenticity to which Benjamin refers, so dependent on the physicality of performance, has been lost when action is amputated and its correlation with sound removed. Regardless of what we gain from the process or output of recording, *Pression's* live, performative and visual aspects are paramount since work and performance are irrevocably interwoven.

Since it was composed 41 years ago, *Pression* has been played and recorded so frequently that it has become a classic work.²¹ Increasing knowledge among performers of

¹⁹ Transferring the sound output from cello to speakers also points toward the aesthetic of electronically generated noise music.

²⁰ Lachenmann is aware of the visual aspect: "The idea of energy remains the most important thing for me. That's why my music is sometimes difficult to understand when listened to on CD without having had the experience of a live performance" (Heathcote, 2010, p. 334).

²¹ To my knowledge there are eleven commercial recordings of *Pression* (see Appendix). In addition, there were three videos of *Pression* performances available at www.youtube.com on 17 January 2012.

the other works of Lachenmann that move in the same aesthetic direction has aided the cultivation of its own performance practice.

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This article has aimed to investigate *Pression*, first by placing it in a historical and musicological context, and then by looking at aspects of notation, performativity, action, gesture, embodiment and amplification. In addition, my analysis of its notation of gestures, interpretation of the score and meeting with the composer have enabled me to perform *Pression* as a conglomerate of all these elements.

Although Fischer-Lichte's concepts of perceptual multistability and the autopoietic feedback loop originate in the field of theatre, I think they can be useful for studying music from the perspective of performance theory by exploring the different meanings of and for, and the relationships between the performer, musical text, interpretation, embodiment, and instrument. They have the potential for offering the performer tools for perceiving and acting consciously and intentionally when they embody the musical work, interpreting it within a range of degrees of freedom. They illustrate possible shifts of perception as we experience a live performance, performers and spectators alike, freeing us from traditional hierarchies and allowing us to create our own aesthetic experience. Although it was touched upon only briefly in this article, Agamben's gestural theory opens up a new dimension of gesture analysis in which gestures are separated from their context. This could prove a fruitful direction particularly for the study and performance of contemporary music. There are several kinds of relationship between performance and notation that could be explored further, for example the *Werktreue* ideal versus approaches to the score as text, script, instruction manual or guide.

My discovery of performance studies has been revelatory to me as a performer. At last we have a perspective that is congruent with the performance practice we share, "a link between the creative process of performing and the critical process of analyzing performances" (Schechner, 2006, p. 10). The most striking realization for me, having gone through this process of studying and performing *Pression*, is that, contrary to the common assumption that it represents a radical break with tradition, it appears to be a remarkably idiomatic work in the way it treats the instrument. The direct, physical experience of touching, holding, rubbing, striking and caressing the cello seems most natural, and the actions appear to have been designed to produce sounds easily. There are no 'extended techniques', as the sound emerging from Lachenmann's new instrumental practice has become the structuring material of composition. A performative element as the central compositional parameter, that is, the performer's actions in the moment of performance, offers new possibilities of analysis as well as a psychologically different approach to a musical work. It includes performers in a respectful manner and invites them to venture on their own exploration: to draw on their entire repertoire of experience and skill and to *embody* the music from within, creating a unique performance.

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APPENDIX: RECORDINGS OF *PRESSION*

- Bach, M. (1992). cpo 999 102-2.
- Bach, M. (1990). LP ABE ERZ 1003.
- Carat B. (1998). GRAME: CB0898.
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