

The Darmstadt Legacy

By Andrew Glover-Whitley



South of Frankfurt lies the large town/city of Darmstadt. Its history is varied as have been its cultural influences on German and international music. In many ways, Darmstadt is a typical German city. It has a local beer (*Darmstadter*, and very good it is too), an opera house, parks and museums and an efficient tram network. One night in September 1944 it was devastated by an Allied bombing raid. When the townsfolk emerged from the shelters, they discovered a town in which four out of every five buildings had been flattened. A year later, with the war over, reconstruction began. The physical fabric of the city was slowly restored – buildings, jobs, a political structure – and in the process, by accident really, something remarkable happened.

Looking around for ways to regenerate cultural life in the city, and de-Nazify the people, its new mayor, Ludwig Metzger, was persuaded by a local musicologist, Wolfgang Steinecke, to consider the establishment of an institute for contemporary music. As Darmstadt was in the American-controlled zone of then occupied Germany, Metzger and Steinecke needed the approval of the American forces to develop their ideas and just by coincidence the officer in charge of such initiatives was a former Harvard University music student, Everett Helms. Permission was granted, and in the summer of 1946, US army trucks delivered grand pianos to a hunting lodge on the outskirts of Darmstadt, the temporary home for the first “courses for international new music”.

The courses were initially intended to de-Nazify German musicians by introducing them to the modern music of the 1930s and 40s, music by Bartók, Hindemith, Schulhoff, Schoenberg, Goldschmidt, Ullmann, Stravinsky etc, as well as Mahler and Mendelssohn too, all of which had been outlawed as “degenerate” (*Entartete Musik*) under Hitler. Soon new music by the next generation of composers became part of the courses too and by the early 1950s, the summer school, now re-designated as the “international courses for new music”, was acquiring a reputation as the meeting place for aspiring avant-gardists not only from Germany but across Europe and beyond.

Four composers in particular – the Frenchman Pierre Boulez, the German Karlheinz Stockhausen, and the Italians Bruno Maderna and Luigi Nono – emerged as the leading

names at these courses. In 1958 Nono came up with a name for this collegial grouping, the "Darmstadt School", but as is often the case, no sooner was the tendency named than it split apart, divided by the usual mixture of musical differences and rampant careerism, so for most of the 1960s Stockhausen alone dominated proceedings. Darmstadt still attracted ambitious young musicians from around the world but the courses were stagnating, stifled by what American composer Morton Feldman called a "*hardening of the categories*". "Darmstadt" became an umbrella term used to describe dry unemotional abstract music, glass bead games with notes and, like all clichés, it contained some truth. There were some marvellous works that came out of these courses such as Stockhausen's "Gruppen" and "Telemusik" as well as Boulez's "Le marteau sans maître" and "Pli Selon Pli" but much was dry academic exercise style music with little emotion or musical merit.

The antidote to this creative inertia arrived in 1980 when a new director, Friedrich Hommel, installed the Coventry born, and Birmingham School of Music educated, British composer Brian Ferneyhough – coordinator of Darmstadt's composition course from 1984 to 1994. Ferneyhough and his near-contemporary Michael Finnissy had made reputations for themselves on the European new music scene with boldly ambitious scores whose intricate notations pushed performers over the boundaries of what they had thought was possible. This style of music dubbed "New Complexity" by music critics became a breath of fresh air in a stagnant European musical world. One of their great supporters, the critic Harry Halbreich, said that for the first time since the 15th century, British music was influencing developments in the rest of Europe. In turn, Ferneyhough and Finnissy inspired a generation of younger British composers to be similarly bold (Fox, Barrett, Clarke etc) and Hommel encouraged musicians and composers alike to see the Darmstadt courses as an ideal home for the summers, a respite from the conservatism of insular musical life that was again encroaching on all of musical life in Europe as a whole.

There is a documentary that follows the history of the Darmstadt courses by David Ryan and Andrew Chesher, entitled "Knots and Fields", it is a fascinating documentary that examines the history of the Darmstadt courses and the ways in which that history still shapes the courses today.

The evolution of the courses over the last 60 years has provided one of the most telling case studies in the institutionalisation of modernism, the process music historian Richard Taruskin sees as "the transformation of the avant-garde into the arrière-garde" and continues by stating that this "...is precisely because of its commitment to an old concept of the new", a process to which Darmstadt has sometimes assimilated, sometimes resisted.

Darmstadt's British decade of influence with the likes of Ferneyhough, Finnissy, Fox, Barrett et al offered a rare example of a moment when UK music was, if not ahead of the game, at least in the same game as our continental colleagues, we have somewhat fallen behind again by the over dominance of the Faber publishing house and their money minded pressures on promoters, and the fact that we are always too scared to lead for long and look to other countries to copy, so much so that this lead has been somewhat blunted of late. Take a look at the way the "Dutch School" now influences many British Conservatoire and University Departments thinking, or the way the Polish and Baltic Composers have infiltrated into the spiritual psyche of many of the younger generation of British composers,

as well as the way American Minimalism has swept all before it thus ensuring our own invention of "New Complexity" has been brushed aside in favour of these more foreign influences due to the fact they are more accessible to the music listener. Gone is the challenge that Darmstadt once stood for. The ever declamatory cry of musical revolution has now become somewhat dimmed by us being scared to open up as we once did and explore, to challenge concepts for musicians, and music listeners alike.

Above all the Darmstadt courses have played a part in the creation of some great music. From the early days there's Messiaen's "Cantéyodjayâ", a piano piece begun in Darmstadt in 1949 during the composer's first visit to the city and given its German premiere there during the 1952 courses. James Clarke's stunning "Oboe Quintet" is perhaps the pick of the Hommel crop, alternating concentrated bursts of instrumental crying and wailing with moments of wounded respite and repose, like a cross between free jazz and eastern Mediterranean folk music heard under the influence of some potent beverage. Typical Darmstadt? Maybe Darmstadt wasn't so typical after all. Maybe the British influence was its death-knell, only time will tell. Maybe there will be a sudden re-birth of a new movement that rekindles Darmstadt's influence for the good of us all. One thing is for sure though Darmstadt will always be part of history, the beginning of the way we think of music now and for the foreseeable future.