

5 Maerzmusik: Festival für Zeitfragen

5.1 Introduction

On the occasion of the first Berliner Festwochen in 1951, Ernst Reuter, the mayor of West Berlin, asked:

Given all that has occurred, should one really be celebrating festivals in a time when such anguished times weigh so heavily on our community and on individuals? The answer is yes, also Festspiele are important and belong in the life of our city of Berlin. For a person [*Mensch*] needs more than bread and physical nourishment. They also need to relax and indulge [*ergehen*] themselves.¹ (Berliner Festspiele 1998, 2; translation added)

As frivolous as relaxation and indulgence may sound, Reuter hones in on the importance and power of the festival format in this speech. In 1951, a divided Germany and Berlin were just beginning their long journey towards reconstruction after the total devastation of WWII. Reuter's West Berlin had by that time already been isolated from the rest of the Federal Republic of Germany and began its time as a political enclave within the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Thus the first Berliner Festwochen were more than just an opportunity for heady fun; in a time of turmoil, they gave an identity and (re)affirmed the values of the newly-formed Federal Republic.

As has been outlined in earlier chapters, the festival, and its origins in the pre-modern fest, are an ideal and established societal strategy for doing just this. They are moments that suspend the everyday (and by extension the brutal drudgery of reconstruction), and create a temporary state of exceptionality, using this to reaffirm community values, and ensure the stability and continuity of that community (see section 2.2).

1 “Ziemt es denn, so könnte man fragen, Feste zu feiern, wenn die Not der Zeit so unmittelbar auf einer Gemeinschaft und auf den einzelnen lastet? Die Antwort darauf ist ja, auch Festspiele sind nötig und gehören in das Leben unserer Stadt Berlin. Denn der Mensch braucht zum Leben nicht nur Brot und körperliche Nahrung. Er will auch einmal sich entspannen und sich ergehen.”

In this sense, the Berliner Festwochen has played an important role in the spiritual and intellectual public debates within West Germany during the second half of the 20th century. As opposed to affirming itself as legitimate per se due to its high art status, the festival has proven a canny and receptive partner to German society during this time, helping to define the major role that theatre plays in German society today (Berliner Festspiele 1998, 122). While this is true for West Germany, it holds as well for both the reunified Germany post-1990, as well as by extension its reunified capital of Berlin.

While having its origins on the other side of the Berlin Wall, the history of the Maerzmusik festival would be closely intertwined with the Berliner Festwochen in many ways. The Maerzmusik festival itself, originally under the title Musik-Biennale Berlin, began as a means for extolling the excellence of socialist composition styles from both the German Democratic Republic as well as across the communist states, while still remaining an important site of contact between composers in divided Germany. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the festival continued without interruption and largely as originally planned in 1991, becoming part of a concerted effort by the new Federal Republic to promote cohesion through culture, being integrated as part of this into the framework of the Berliner Festspiele, and therefore alongside the Berliner Festwochen. Over the course of the 1990s under the leadership of Heike Hoffmann, the festival would concentrate on stitching back together a common history of German musical development on both sides of the border, as if trying to suture a wound. Its approach to addressing this historical trauma would prove to also be typical of the leadership strategies common to the New Music community; the festival would show a persistent unwillingness to question the core presumptions of the systems that sustained it. This feature characteristic of music festivals is brought into relief in this chapter through an explosion in such approaches in the leadership of visual arts festivals during the same time period.

With the beginning of the tenure of Matthias Osterwold in 2002, the festival would change from a biennial to an annual rhythm. It would also demonstrate a new post-modernist plurality in its programming choices, expanding to embrace a plurality of musical practices, from electronic music to sound installations to concerts, and including also an explicit interest in programming contemporary classical music (CCM) from around the world.

The festival has been selected however not because of these features, but rather because of the change that it experienced under the directorship of Berno Odo Polzer as of 2015. He would give the festival the subtitle “Festival for Time Issues,” and dedicate it to the exploration through musical practice of this theme. Polzer displays an uncommon willingness to involve himself in the dramaturgy of individual concerts, even calling them for a time “composed evenings,” implying him as the composer of the concerts themselves. His choices of artist, as well as his pro-

gramming of many non-musical artists, together with this careful concert design, all point to Polzer asserting a much greater degree of subjective authorship over the festival as a whole. With this would also come an organizational shift wherein the festival is driven by its pursuit of understanding its theme and central questions, which then imply the programming of certain people and formats.

Maerzmusik becomes about an exploration of ideas through the vehicle of the concert, planned and conceived by its director. Subsuming so much power and authority into the festival's artistic director, and attaching to this a desire to deal with socially-urgent topics has few examples in the field of music, but does bear similarities to developments in the field of curating in the visual arts. In that field, the iconic figure of Harald Szeemann stands out as a classic early example of how singular authorship and a shift to conceptually-driven programming work together. It also gives the necessary historical dimensions to be able to call Polzer's work curatorial. The criticisms of Szeemann also make it possible to pre-empt tensions in the field of music going forward, as younger practitioners are increasingly working in the same conceptual space as Polzer, focusing on site-specificity and controlling the mediation and ideas of their work, in a similar way to how Szeemann was an early example of the tensions surrounding the exhibition format at the end of the 20th century.

Polzer did not however copy his playbook directly from Harald Szeemann, rather the conceptual similarity of their approaches is brought about through two very different practical approaches to leading arts events, both resulting from the specificities of their individual disciplines and historical moments. While much of the conceptual thinking around these two kind of arts leadership practice are similar, Polzer's approach has to be analyzed on the basis of the concerts that he has so far organized. His practice is thus curatorial, but informed by the discipline in which it works, music, meaning that his practice can be tentatively labeled music curating.

This specificity is presented by looking at specific concerts by the music curator, including the 2017 opening concert featuring works by Julius Eastman, and "Storytelling for Earthly Survival," a so-called composed evening exploring the philosophy of Donna Haraway.

The 2017 opening concert was a loose reenactment of a recorded concert by Eastman at Northwestern in 1980. The festival's engagement with Eastman also included a collaboration with an arts space that would include further events, as well as a research initiative that would culminate at the 2018 festival, where the composer was featured again. These efforts were all part of a strategy for addressing the composer's work in a way that both put it within its historical context, as well as sought to make it relevant to contemporary listeners. The multi-faceted, sustained engagement with the composer, while simultaneously presenting his work

in a framing that made it relevant to contemporary ears, were a significant curatorial feat for the artistic director.

The second concert, “Storytelling for Earthly Survival,” consisted, among other aspects, of a screening of a documentary on Donna Haraway, as well as readings related to her work, a performance by Alvin Lucier, and a documentary on artists inspired by Haraway’s writing. The lack of traditionally musical performances makes it difficult to call it a concert, and Polzer himself refers to it instead as one of his “composed evenings.” This is also notable in that the evening presented a large amount of material from a variety of artistic backgrounds, raising the question of its relationship to a music festival. The answer is in Polzer’s characterization of the evening as “composed,” in that he uses his musical sensibility to juxtapose heterogeneous materials into a composed whole. While the individual parts may not be explicitly musical, save for Lucier’s performance, it is argued that Polzer creates an event based on a musical, compositional logic, but that is not explicitly related to only specifically sounds. In this way, the composed evening is shown to be an important building block of Polzer’s approach, in that his approach to programming the music festival is focused more on creating a specific experience in time than on putting together individual musical works.

5.2 A Brief Prehistory to the Maerzmusik Festival

5.2.1 The Berliner Festspiele

While the Berliner Festwochen would themselves run yearly from 1951 up until 2003, the institution itself would expand and contract repeatedly over the years of its operation until taking on the shape it does today under its current name, the Berliner Festspiele. The following section will briefly detail this genealogy in order to be able to best contextualize the institutional landscape in which the current Maerzmusik festival takes place, the ultimate subject of this chapter.

In 1967, the original Berliner Festwochen would go on to found Berliner Festspiele GmbH (note the plural of Festspiel), expanding to include three other festivals with which it had been associated over its history, while continuing the Festwochen under the same name. These were the Filmfestspiele (later known as the Berlinale), which had also taken place for the first time in 1951, the Theatertreffen, founded in 1964 and known then as the Berliner Theaterwettbewerb, and the Berliner Jazztage, originally a part of the Berliner Festwochen in 1964 with a thematic focus on Africa, and later spun out into its own festival (Berliner Festspiele 1998, 32–36).

As of 1990, the Berliner Festspiele GmbH took over trusteeship of the festival known then as the Musik-Biennale Berlin (note the Italian spelling, once again in