Music or not music (a meditation on the issue of music)

One of my earliest compositions, dated 2007, was a 114 min. piece scored for bassclarinet and doublebass, entitled "Ordinary Music", which ever since has become my personal genreric term. The composition is a study in musical time, providing two individual schedules, organizing the overall duration in segments from 10 to 65 seconds, and a list of twelve material characters, distributed to these segments according to a row-principle. The characters are defined as: *improv on a 12-tone row*, *familiar tune*, *continuous sound*, *imitation*, *freestyle*, *microtonal progression*, *loop*, *shortwave-receiver*, *spoken word*, *accompaniment, sound effects* and *silence*.

The range of material was supposed to embrace any available sound-phenomenon inside or outside music, always reduced to its mere occurance, irrespective of context. During a period of nearly two hours, those characters appear in ever changing combinations, sometimes melting together, other times striving apart, thereby providing miscellaneous musical and non-musical references.

Of course the performers are free to respond to the instructions by ways of improvisational selfexpression and thereby create extraordinary music. However concerning the composition, a standard execution would be appropriate; without the performers involving themselves thoroughly.

It was not my intention to write "interesting music", not even "good music", but simply "music" at all. The most rewarding subject for research is always the average. As soon as music is becoming a subject for research, it does not have to be interesting in itself. It may rather become interesting, by the way the listener observes himself responding to it; i.e. by the way the music takes influence on his perception. My most sustainable aesthetic experiences came through works, that had initially provoked rather negative emotions in me, such as boredom, discompfort or even aversion.

Musical time is at the same time fictional time and realtime; fictional with regard to content, real with regard to performance (in musical performance the expression is fictional, the activity itself is non-fictional). In the very musical moment, realtime is supposed to be entirely suspended within fictional time. Yet in practice the listener will most likely switch back and forth between fictional and real time perception during the course of the piece; i.e. most of the time he may not be entirely absorbed by the music, but rather concerned with sensitivities, or following his own thoughts. The perfect listener, who is entirely absorbed from beginning to end, is the composer listening to his own music. In western classical music, the composer himself provides a role-model for the listener.

By contrast "Ordinary Music" is adressed to the average listener, who might not sustain a total absorbtion over almost two hours, but rather perceive the music as described above. Yet as opposed to "Ambient Music", which is expressly provided for incidental listening, "Ordinary

Music" is designed for the active listener, who pays attention to his own listening procedure. However the model suffers from the fact that the average - is generally not the active listener, but rather a mere consumer. On the other hand, a mere consumer is not even a listener, as music designed for mere consumption is not even music.

I have no substanciated criteria for what makes music "good" or "interesting". However I realized for myself, that the music I liked was very often not the music that I was supposed to appreciate. The way we respond to music does not only depend on its quality, but also on the conditions under which we listen, and the baggage of cultural conditioning and individual memories we carry. E.g. if a piece of music is employed in a movie, it will never be the same piece again thereafter. The music itself will therby not be compromised; on the contrary, it will be enriched in its communicative function. Experiencing music under changing conditions, we simply get to know it better. The same thing happens when a piece is linked to a personal experience. With a piece of New music, this happens rather infrequently, since New music is supposed to be perceived under neutral conditions, in order to be evaluated under mere musical criteria. However "mere musical criteria" are nothing but a myth. Musical history is not the history of "mere musical criteria", but substancially the history of response, within which extra-musical events and anecdotes, that wove around performances and composers life cycles, melt together with musical perception.

In the curse of the 20th century, music has gone through a deconstructional process, which tonality, rhythm, musical material, and finally musical syntax itself fell victim to. The development resulted in a situation of unconditionality. Ever since we postulate that in the realm of music, principally anything is possible. Apart from the physical limits of audibility and performability, music is no longer constricted by whatever external borders, whether regarding form, material or meaning. Finally anything that ever sounds can be refered to as "music", whereby the musicterm itself is virtually eliminated.

Nevertheless the word "music" has not been extinguished from language, neither have we discontinued to decide between "music" and other sonic phenomena, like "spoken language" or "environmental sound", at least in everyday life experience; though on the phenomenologic level, this distinction has apparently become obsolete, at the latest since John Cages silent piece "4'33".

"Music or not music", that is the question propably being raised for as long as music exists. However in the past, music may have been scrutinized for violating the rules of convention. With Cage the issue has attained a new dimension: he does not violate the rules, but simply reject musical convention at all, if not to say, the distinction of "music" and "sound". Cage himself claimed to "let the sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expression of human sentiments". However as "4'33" is presented in a conventional concert situation, the piece decidedly provokes a musical perception;

i.e. the unintentional environmental sounds occuring during the performance, are being introduced as musical material.

With a work presented in a conventional concert-situation, the question whether to be music or not, is already decided beforehand, regardless of what actually sounds. Even the question of what kind of music is involved, is generally predecided by the genre-specific codes of presentation. This does not only concern outside influences like the venue, the performers outfit or the announcements graphic design; it most of all relates to the performers attitude towards the interpretation.

I once witnessed the composer Ming Tsao being questioned, why he particularly choses the Arditti Quartet or the Ensemble Modern to perform his music. His answer was that these performers were educated for the music in the tradition of the 2nd Viennese School, and he wants his music to be performed in that manner. The point is obviously not, that those would be the only performers to meet the technical demands, but rather that they produce the stylistic indications, to position the music in the desired context. The listener, as soon as familiar with the code, shall immediately be aware of which sort of music he is dealing with; i.e. on which aspects of the sound he is supposed to focus his attention.

By contrast Cornelius Cardew requires a totally different type of performer, as he explaines in his Treatise handbook (1971): *"My most rewarding experiences with Treatise have come through people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians, i.e. play music to the full capacity of their beings".* Cardew obviously wants to keep the music clear from idiomatic indications.

The question of what music is, and how it originates may never be totally clarified, but nevertheless needs to be evaluated for as long as music ever exists. The mystery itself is contitutive for musical perception. As soon as we solve the riddle, the music stops being music; in the same way as a magician whose tricks we see through will not only forfeit his faszination, but alltogether stop being a magician. If we would ever stop scrutinizing the music, it was like we would watch the magician perform, without even trying to see through his deceptive manouveres.

As everyone knows, magic relies on diversionary tactics. When John Cage starts his famous "lecture on nothing" with the words: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it", he obviously intends to diverse the listeners attention from what he has to say.

I know, the metaphor is not truely appropriate, since the artist, as opposed to the magician, is generally committed to enlightenment; this commitment is an integral component of the ethics of art. The crucial subject-matter of art, is the illusionary character of reality itself. Enlightenment is always orientated towards absolute reality. Ordinary

reality is merely illusionary in its substance, insofar as it always submits to a certain power of interpretation. As an object in itself, the artwork belongs to ordinary reality, and therefore can never strip off its illusionary nature entirely. In its rhetoric content however it is literally disillusioning. By undermining the illusionary character of its own existence, the artwork resists whatever interpretory demands to be placed upon it. The artist is precisely the opposite of a magician: a disenchanter.

It is the artists responsibility to protect his work against misinterpretation, be it through the interpreter or through the audience. But an interpretation that is not corresponding to the artists intention is not necessarily a misinterpretation. As soon as the work leaves the studio, it enfolds an autonomous existance; comparable with a child leaving his parents' house. The parents may provide him with well-meant advices to protect him against misfortune, but they should never try to determine his journey through life according to their own ideas.

Music originates whenever two or more sounds establish an interval-relationship, and thereby distract the listeners attention from their individual features, as both sonic events and functional indicators. An interval-relationship somehow neutralizes the individual features, and introduces a rhetorical element instead; i.e. virtually a contribution to the issue of music. Music is like a chemical reaction between sounds, taking place within the listeners mind; in the most joyful moments this happens spontaneously: as a sudden aesthetic awakening from daily routine.

Composers establish interval-relationships on purpose, by projecting sounds into aesthetic time. As opposed to realtime, which is fluent, aesthetic time is solid state: time standing still, while the sounds pass through. Yet not only the sounds. In the very moment of a temporal still, the listener may even become aware of his own transcience. Aesthetic time is an allegory of death. Ironically that makes it even more real than "realtime" itself, for in face of absolute reality, it is actually not time passing by, it is rather ourselves.

Interval-relationships can appear in form of harmony, dissonance and counterpoint. On the sociological level, these characters correspond to sympathy, antipathy and tolerance. As resembled to human relations, sound relations are often characterized by mixture ratios rather than monosemy. In this respect, a work of music is kind of a model for the composers attitude towards society.

However in view of human relations, harmony is definitely prefereable to dissonance or counterpoint, and essentially this is also valid for music. Yet harmonic relationships are often incompatible to individual characteristics. In that case, the most desireable objective is a truthful relationship; i.e. one that allows the conflict to emerge on the surface, rather than being obscured by cowardice, hypocracy or corruption.

The vast majority of contemporary music is still conventional, in terms of tonality, rhythm and instrumental sound as its general material, and every music that breaks with these conventions is labeled "experimental". Even if atonality and noise have been introduced for more than a century ago, we still notice the application of those elements as an effect of estrangement. The devision of the "musical" and the "non-musical" sphere is still in force. There may no longer be an external border, that seperates music from ordinary sound, or even protects it against it, but within music, we still distinguish between its "musical" and "non-musical" aspects.
New music is often refered to as "negative music", for its approach to "music" is generally a negative one. The "New" in New music is always the "non-musical", so to speak "a-musical" element.

The border however shall not be conceived as a clean cut between the spheres, that would allow to assign one sound to the musical, and another to the non-musical sphere. It may rather be conceived as a zone, like the border region between two countries, where customs intermingle, both languages are spoken and both currencies accepted.

Even the artterm has become debordered within the curse of the 20th century; art-forms and life-forms permeate each other. The tear between "art" and "non-art" can be experienced with any work of modern art. In painting this is achieved by the application of non-art material, like script-signs or everyday-objects, and not least by a non-illusionary application of paint, whereby the material reveals itself in its immediate physical presence. The modern work of art is always located within the transitional zone between art and ordinary reality. It actually constitutes a gate of perception, through which everyday phenomena intrude into the art-sphere, and in exchange aesthetic experience is becoming part of everyday life.

Experimental music is virtually not in itself "music", but rather a critical perspective on the subject of music, within the medium of sound. Experimentality is not a style, but rather an approach. The music is the result of an experiment; which is to say, the composition is based on an issue rather than on a statement. Experimental music explores the limits of what ever is refered to as "music", by challenging listening customs as well as criteria of evaluation.

Back in the 1980s, I discovered an interesting record in an underground record store. The cover art woke my interest, and the musicians name Derek Bailey somehow sounded promising. Since I had never heard of him before, I asked the store owner to put the record on. As soon as the first few notes had sounded, he remarked: "but this is not music". I was not quite sure if he was serious, but I found his remark very interesting. To be honest I had thought the same about the previously played record, which had provided some radically monotone Hardcore Punk. Anyway I was instantly convinced to buy the record, even though I was not quite sure whether I really liked it.

Even after repeated listening, I still found the music quite enigmatic. As I used to improvise on guitar myself, I tried to imitate the style, to figure it out. I somehow managed to produce a similar texture, but could never be sure, whether my idea of the music had anything to do with what this music really was. However I did some research, through this channel encountered Evan Parker, Anthony Braxton and the Music Improvisation Company, and learned about "non-idiomatic improvisation".

It was about the same time I got in touch with the music of John Cage, Anton Webern and Karlheinz Stockhausen. I was in my late twenties, and had hardly ever dealt with anything beyond Pop music up to then. As a result for the time being, I could not appreciate Pop music anymore. I could hardly remember what I had ever appreciated about it. My listening customs had simply converted.

Pop music affords sound orientated listening. However as opposed to New Music, the term "sound" in Pop Music does not simply indicate timbre, but rather the characteristic features of an individual style or sub-genre, which partly depend on studio production, partly on musicians' individual attitude, and partly on brands and types of musical instruments (like the moog sythesizer or the telecaster). The reservoir of chords and tunes is usually conventional, and often even radically limited: Blues, Rock'n Roll and Punk, are basically founded on the same three chords. Yet this limitation is the genres basic condition, so to speak the medium itself, as it facilitates a direct comparison of individual styles on the level of "sound".

Younger composers, who grew up with Pop music, are often tempted to integrate Pop elements, such as amplification, feedback and sampling in their own compositions. The result is for the most part dreadful. Those composers obviously fail to recognize, that Pop music relies on Pop musicians; i.e. the musicians have to be "cool". This attitude however is not to be composed.

Generally every musical genre affords a different listening-approach. As for transidiomatic music, one particularly has to take this in account. Transidiomatic music requires a multi-dimensional musical perception. The problem with those styles circulating under the label of "fusion", i.e. composites of Jazz, Clubmusic, or even New music with so called "ethnic" style-elements, is that the western idiom usually prescribes the overall direction, whereby the "ethnic" element is applied as an exotic condiment. Neither the audience nor the musicians themselves ever have to reconsider their habitual approach towards the music.

At this point I should mention the "Prague Experiment" of which I have read with the composer and musicologist Jakob Ullmann. As I can no longer find the part, I must rely on my memory: The experiment took place in the 1930s. An african flute player visited the town of Prague to perform one of his compositions. A western flute player, who had the reputation of being able to repeat any piece of music after a single listening, was engaged to replay the Africans composition. So he

repeated note for note of what he believed to have heard. However the African claimed that this was not at all his music. So he was required to play his composition again himself. But then no one in the audience could recognize any correspondence between the first and the second recital.

The audience was obviously accustomed to focus on melodic progression, i.e. sequence of pitches and durations; and so was the western flute player. The African instead focussed on the shape of the sound itself, i.e. the subtle mixture ratios of tone and breath; pitch and duration were not even secondary parameters. Since the western audience was not familiar with the code, they were literally unable to hear the music. Again, the misunderstanding was based on a confusion of medium and form.

A similar thing can happen when one mimics a foreign language. E.g. with the Hungarian one has to pay particular attention to phonetics. The words "szakács" (szokatsch) and "szokás" (szokasch) are spelled differently, but sound very similar to foreigners ears; however their meaning is clearly distinguished: "szakács" means cook, "szokás" means habit.

Though the anology of music and language may not be completely coherent, the two media at least coincide in that they are both defined as codified sound. Phonetic poetry, as a genre that emphasizes the sonic aspects of speech and thereby evokes a semi-musical perception, is situated somewhere in the intersection. Language is being disassembled into its phonetic components, and recomposed upon sonic and rhythmic criteria; virtually regardless of syntax or meaning. The phonems themselves may appear as voided characters, yet again not reduced to mere musical features, insofar as they still carry a linguistic background as fragmented words. With respect to the original idiom, they may still contain linguistic gestures as remainders of spoken language.

In my own phonetic poetry I have explored the border area between linguistic gesture and meaning; i.e. between sense and non-sense. I recomposed the phonems to nonexisting words, and sometimes inserted conjunctions, as elements of existing language. The non-sense words thereby were designed in such way, that they sounded natural, with respect to the original idiom; i.e. they resembled existing words. The desired effect was that the listener, in his effort to decode the linguistic characters, may thereby to some degree recompose a meaningful content for himself.

To illustrate the before mentioned, I should give tree examples of my own phonetic poetry, actually with regard to the french, the english and the german idiom; to start with the french:

Ne sai en so reo
Ne chate en sa our
Out ce que tient la role
Maine de race et our

As I do not speak french myself, I have very limited control over the linguistic indications. As for the english, I have a more secure access, yet still not full control:

Old sip odd of all thin
Range pars of ledge and dim war
Grinds ought you lack some else
You veen cond away ragic

With the german the procedure was the most difficult, since I was in access of all levels of indication, and this access somehow demanded to be employed:

Mit unlein ent du ich
Ent du ich ein auserkon
War aut im alzung
Ein üsch ich der gesilt eis

With my music I employ similar procedures. Musical speech is being segmented to its motivic components, and recomposed, however not according to sonic and rythmic, but to mere structural criteria. Due to the loss of overall-coherence, the harmonic and rhythmic functions within the single phrase are being emphasized. The sounds form individual connections, virtually build musical cells, but thereby refuse to take on a prefabricated form. The overall context remains a mere structural one; i.e. a regulating principle that is supposed to avoid individual elements to claim for a leading position.

Arnold Schönberg already had predicted that in the music of the future, pitch will be no more regarded a primary parameter, but only a single aspect of timbre. The development was supposed to result in a "melody of timbres" (Klangfarbenmelodie); i.e. a new musical syntax based on timbral relations instead of pitch relations. With Anton Webern, this was only partly implemented; the melody may proceed diagonally through the individual parts, thereby providing a different timbre for each note; yet the syntax itself remains founded on pitch relations, as established by the row. In John Cages randomized compositions, the predominance of timbre over pitch is archieved; however he only sets the traditional syntax out of force, without the intention to establish a new one.

With regard to timbre, one needs to evaluate, how many aspects of the sound the listener can be expected to follow simultaneously. If the listener is focussed on melodic progression, counterpoint, harmony and form, his capacity may run up against its limits with an additional differenciation of timbres. Serial music therefore is often found to look better on paper than it actually sounds. Cages solution was to eliminate musical syntax by ways of chance operation, so that the listener could pay maximum attention to the individual sounds. Yet if the listener does not have the information that the music is non-syntactic, he will propably still try to detect a musical context within the highly complex pitch relations.

There is no such thing as *absolute* music, since the way we perceive music, always depends on extra-musical information, introduced by extra-musical media, such as words or images. This nonewithstanding, the composer must not necessarily rely on idiomatic references, in order to position his music within an existing context; he may as well try to establish his own idiom, with the confidence that the respective extra-musical information, will by some way gradually leak through to collective musical perception over time.

The first successful design of a of timbral syntax was introduced by Morton Feldman. Musical progression is being reduced to a minimum, in form of the pattern; in its very function as a medium for developing variation, the pattern provides moments of comparison, that promote a differenciated perception of timbral relations. Within each singular tact, the parametric settings are being slightly shifted, whereby the instrumental tone exposes itself in its mere sensual presence, since he transmits the modified settings immediately in form of his own sonic properties. With Feldman, the whole organizational framework is of an auxiliary function, with respect to timbre. However his concept of timbre does not involve extended techniques or noise components, but generally the vertical coordination of more or less ordinary instrumental sounds.

It has often been said about John Cages "4'33", that it reduces composition to mere time-structure. Yet the piece can also be perceived in a quite different way, regardless of the composers intention; namely as a paradigm for authorship, as a constitutive element for musical perception. Though the sounds themselves appear deliberated from authorship, the event as such, in its very function as an artwork, still remains to be authorized. Not knowing that this is a composition by John Cage, the listener will most likely not even listen, but rather perceive the event as a spectacle. The informed listener as opposed, will not simply hear the sounds themselves, but project an image onto the environment; an image that has been shaped by John Cages work and reputation as an artist. If the piece were written by someone else, it would be a different image.

On a tribute CD to John Cage, Frank Zappa contributed a version of "4'33". One does not necessarily have to listen to it to understand the difference. With 4 min. and 33 sec. of digital silence, Zappa not only replaces the image, but even the material substance. As opposed to Cages concept of silence as unintentional sound, digital silence is total silence. The original may evoke the question whether to be music or not; Zappas interpretation is doubtlessly on the non-musical side.

As a conclusion I would like to say a few words about my recent work "two of a kind", for two clarinets. The intention was to create a fictional genre; i.e. a musical style that avoids genre-specific indications of whatever kind, and therefore remains basically neutral as regards to listening attitudes. Ideally such music should not even give clues about its temporal or geographic origin.

The procedure involves three organizational principles: (a) chance, as an other-directed component with regard to interval structure; (b) language, as an external reference point with regard to form and rhythm; (c) intuition, as an element of subjective evidence, with regard to combination.

With regard to counterpoint and harmony, I simply trusted in the procedure itself, as a machine to coordinate the vertical relations. If the procedure were not to be trusted in, the composer could never restore the music by pushing the notes around; yet if the procedure will prove consistency in its core, it will assimilate any possible outcome.