

# **Composition in Essay Form. In Memory of Morten Eide Pedersen.**

Author: Rebecka Sofia Ahvenniemi

## **Abstract:**

This essay is written in memory of Morten Eide Pedersen, my former teacher in composition, who passed away unexpectedly in October 2014.

The text is divided into the following parts: “Against Tedious Academic Writing”, “The Disaster of ‘Obvious Music’”, “Guidelines for Composition in Essay Form”, “The Library of Morten Eide Pedersen”, and “Music and Vulnerability.” Throughout the sections I reflect on the “musical essay”: a vulnerable and honest music which suggests the dangerous and incomprehensible “Other.”

A musical composition can sometimes be full of “emphatic meaning,” which is incurred through an affirmative and style-centered musical language. At other times music subtly calls on us to relinquish the interpreting distance, to embrace unestablished new paths, to give in to something unknown. The latter approach I will call “composition in essay form,” in response to the concept of the “essay” as presented by Theodor W. Adorno. An essayist composition is necessarily vulnerable and lacks an affirmative voice, and is not inclined to seek reconciliation within an institutionalized, fixed musical syntax.

## **Key Words:**

Philosophy of music; Essay form; Theodor W. Adorno; Morten Eide Pedersen; Salvatore Sciarrino

# Composition in Essay Form. In Memory of Morten Eide Pedersen<sup>1</sup>

A whiteness existing far away from any ‘white’ as a sedative, metaphysical symbol with the guarantee of salvation, healing, or resurrection. The Death itself, as it is presented in art becomes more definitive, manageable and safer, than this. This is material and anti-material, this ‘something’ is vague and dissolving, which threatens us with taking away our individuality and presses us continually closer up against the big, shaking, limitless Nothingness: Come tutto è bianco...<sup>2</sup>

In this quote, Morten Eide Pedersen describes the presence of the sound in Sciarrino’s opera *Lohengrin*.<sup>3</sup> This is music which, according to Eide Pedersen, resists reduction to an existing musical style. It urges us to surrender the interpreting distance and participate completely in Elsa’s inner collapse, as Sciarrino brings it about for our senses.

Such vague and dissolving music I wish to call “composition in essay form.” It is necessarily vulnerable, and lacks an established, affirmative voice. It does not find reconciliation within an institutionalized musical syntax. It reflects affinities between form, technique and material, creating its own kind of language. Such a composition leaves “historical marks” both in compositional material and technique.

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank my composer colleague and friend Sigurd Fischer Olsen for his support and insightful thoughts on the form of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Morten Eide Pedersen, “– Come tutto è bianco! Om ‘Lohengrin’ – Sciarrino’s Azione Invisible”, *Autograf – tidsskrift for ny kunstmusikk*, 14 (2005), 7–16, (p. 16). My translation. The original quote: “En hvithet som befinner seg langt unna det 'hvite' som et beroligende metafysisk symbol med garanti om frelse, healing, eller gjenoppstandelse. Selv Døden, slik den fremstilles i kunsten blir mer definitiv, håndterlig og trygg enn dette her. Dette er materie og antimaterie, dette 'noe' er vagt og oppløsende, som truer med å ta fra oss vår individualitet og presser oss stadig nærmere opp mot den store rysende grenseløse Intetheten: Come tutto è bianco...”

<sup>3</sup> Sciarrino’s opera *Lohengrin* is a monodrama, written in 1982–1984. In Sciarrino’s version, the Grail Knight Lohengrin is an unclear and mystical character, while Elsa is the centre of the performance. Elsa, who is about to have her wedding night with Lohengrin, truly an innocent virgin, has an awakening sexuality. Lohengrin experiences Elsa as intimidating and doesn’t want to go through with it. The sounds of the opera bring the audience close to the chaotic, surreal and dreamy mental landscapes of Elsa.

The notion of essay that I will apply in this text is borrowed from that presented in Adorno's "The Essay as Form".<sup>4</sup> The "essay" literarily refers to an attempt, a sketch or an experiment. Adorno suggests the essay to be a literary form which opposes conclusive thinking and respects the affinity between language and the subject matter.

I will quote Morten Eide Pedersen at several points, from his analysis of Sciarrino's *Lohengrin*. Eide Pedersen passed away unexpectedly in October 2014. He was a composer, musicologist, writer, pedagogue, and a great conversationalist. He was able to talk about art in subtle and personal ways with great openness and generosity. As one of his former students, I wish to make a tribute to him by writing an obituary in his spirit. I will attempt to respond to his sincere and playful attitude towards composition, at the same time that I hope to contribute to the notion of "essayist music".

### **1. Against Tedious Academic Writing**

The academic guild only accepts "what is clothed in the dignity of the universal and the enduring ...", Adorno postulates in "The Essay as Form."<sup>5</sup> The "essay" of Adorno is partly a response to the Cartesian attempt to begin the analysis from a *first principle*, the search for "pure truth," something which cannot be doubted. Descartes laid the basis for a new way of viewing the world by pursuing a first principle which was supposed to lay the foundation for further cogitation. According to Adorno, Descartes did not bring us closer to something real, but he established truth in a modern way, as certainty.

The pursuit of truth in the Cartesian sense presupposes meaning as existing *as such*, as an idea which refers to the state of things. This carries consequences for language, too. The separation of *form* and *content* still seems to be the point of departure for academic discourse on language, music and meaning today. Language is viewed as sentences communicating clear ideas as unambiguous content of thought, isolated from form. According to Adorno's critical theory, language in the modern world is cursed with

---

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to the literature, volume one*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3–23

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, "The Essay as Form", p. 3.

“identity thinking”: Rather than describing the world, language reduces the world into already established categories. Objects become samples of the ideas we already possess. What is regarded as “real” is determined by the analysis of the human subject. Such objectification of the world does not result in a more objective idea of the world, but that the world becomes a product of the mind. A central question is whether language can meet the world, or the “unknown”, without such reduction to ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Language itself is part of the world. It necessarily occurs *as* form: language is performed as ink on paper, it is vocally spoken or sung, as complex organizations of words and sounds, where the slightest nuances in voice and breath have significant consequences for what is meant. The question of form and content is not a question of literary genre. Rather, it concerns the character of language as a whole. For example, it is not that academic language deals with pure meaning while poetry concerns form. When meaning is regarded as existing as such, the words and sentences, carrying the meaning, in a way become random. They are mere building blocks for abstract representation. Andrew Bowie suggests that it might not be possible to establish context-independent criteria to identify “when a piece of language can be understood purely literally, so that metaphorical, performative, ‘musical’ and other dimensions of language can be separated from it.”<sup>7</sup> According to Bowie, the assumption that this is possible relies on the claim that the representational basis of language is the basis of all language. He reasons there are strong grounds for resisting this claim.<sup>8</sup> Several thinkers have problematized the reduction of language to representation. Merleau-Ponty, who discusses language from a phenomenological perspective, and incorporates the “speaking body” in his theory of language, claims that “[w]hat we *mean* is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer

---

<sup>6</sup> I have discussed the critique of traditional philosophy of language earlier in my essay about the relationship between philosophy of language and vocal music (Rebecka Sofia Ahvenniemi, “Språk, stemme og kropp. Et essay om språkfilosofi og vokalmusikk, og hva som kan skje i møtet mellom dem,” *Lydskrift*, 3 (2013), <<http://lydskrift.no/story/språk-stemme-og-kropp>> [Accessed 22. March 2015]).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bowie, p. 4.

signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said.”<sup>9</sup> In his essay “In Praise of Philosophy,” Merleau-Ponty makes the point that most language theory is concerned with “exact forms.” They observe thoughts that have already matured in the person speaking. Both in language, music and other forms of art, ideas are not “ideas of the intellect,” he claims. The writer's work is the work of language rather than “thought.”

Operating with already established meanings in academic language carries consequences for the language employed in the field as a whole. The paradigms of academia result in somewhat “tedious” expression. This pursuit of *pure meaning* is anchored in its own kind of dramaturgy. The phenomenologist Don Ihde claims that all language is dramaturgical in a significant sense. He discusses this in an example of the dramaturgy of what I will in turn describe as “tedious” philosophical speech:

Among my tribe – the philosophers – there is a notorious and sometimes even highly valued amount of “bad” dramaturgy. A technical, detailed and better-read-than-said paper, read dryly and monotonously at a professional meeting is not undramaturgical. It often ‘says’ far more than it intends and the dominance of this kind of speech probably is one factor in the decline of undergraduate interest in philosophy in recent times. But it is its own kind of dramaturgy – a kind of dramaturgy that tries to deny itself. The “truth” is not to be found, so says the tribe, in the way it is expressed.<sup>10</sup>

The consequences of the separation of form and content are especially striking when *art* is discussed in academic terms. A work of music could be used to clarify a specific view on art, and so the analysis becomes a guarantee of the objectivity of a theory. Lydia Goehr outlines that the problem of such an approach to a musical work is not the making of false claims, but in having “left the connection between claim and phenomena – theory

---

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice. The Phenomenologies of Sound*, (New York: State University of New York, 2007), p. 196.

and practice – more disconnected than connected.”<sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag claims in her essay “Against Interpretation” that the function of criticism “should be to show *how [the art] is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.”<sup>12</sup> The search for a deeper, representational meaning, actually can push us further away from a work of music.

In his essay about Sciarrino’s *Lohengrin*, Morten Eide Pedersen reflects on the “nervous” sound objects and elusive character of Sciarrino’s musical language: “[A] question often asked is what his music *really* expresses, what lies behind the facade of timbre.”<sup>13</sup> Eide Pedersen describes how the saturated and polluted range of timbre of Sciarrino resists such reduction into meaning. It “dances between identity and dissolution, like the wuthering of the wind, fizzing from the rivers [...]”<sup>14</sup> The musical language of Sciarrino does not follow the traditional musical language of melody and motive. Sciarrino creates his own language. Eide Pedersen writes: “The musical gestures and figures remain fragments and bemused, and can’t be concatenated in a reassuring way to become a story.”<sup>15</sup> In his analysis of the music of Sciarrino, Eide Pedersen portrays how the music should not be analyzed through traditional compositional parameters. His analysis is an analysis against analysis.

There is an oxymoron in reflecting the non-reductive character of art in a reductive, academic language. Morten Eide Pedersen makes the following point in his analysis of Sciarrino’s *Lohengrin*: “[T]his presentation of the aesthetic ‘fragility’ of Sciarrino is written in an affirmative academic language. It could (perhaps more

---

<sup>11</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) p. 285.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001), 3-14, (p. 14).

<sup>13</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 15. My translation. The original quote: “Et annet spørsmål som ofte kommer, er hva musikken hans egentlig uttrykker, hva kan tenkes å ligge under eller bak klangfasaden.”

<sup>14</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 10. My translation. The original quote: “Lydens mettede, forurensede klangspektre danser mellom identitet og oppløsning. - som suset i vinden, brusset fra elvene [...]”

<sup>15</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 12. My translation. The original quote in Norwegian: ”Musikalske gester og figurer forblir fragmenterte og undrende, og kan ikke skjøtes sammen på en betryggende måte til en fortelling.”

sincerely) have tried to reflect the aesthetics by formulating it through a more artistic, searching and fragmented poetry ... ”<sup>16</sup> This attitude towards writing, which does not aim at the *pureness of thought*, often appears as strange to the “academic mind.” Yet it seems that Eide Pedersen's analysis of the music of Sciarrino resembles a form of “fragmented poetry” to a greater degree than an academic article does.

Adorno suggests the essay to be a literary form which is able to reflect the complex ways in which an object, or a subject matter, belongs to the world. He uses an example of the behavior of someone who is forced to speak a foreign language without piecing it together from its elements according to grammatical rules. Instead, the person will read without a dictionary:

If he sees the same word thirty times in continually changing contexts, he will have ascertained its meaning better than if he had looked up all the meanings listed, which are usually too narrow in relation to the changing contexts and too vague in relation to the unmistakable nuances that the context gives rise to in every individual case.<sup>17</sup>

This could simultaneously be described as a more precise and a less certain way of learning. According to Adorno the essay does not aspire to certainty. The elements of an essay come together to form a context. The complex motion of the text crystallizes as a configuration.

A common misunderstanding, though, is that an essay would be subjective, and perhaps irresponsible, as opposed to the objectivity of academic language, that the freer form would be grounded in more personal and less disciplined thinking. Some essays confuse themselves with the same false ideas. Adorno writes: “Bad essays are just as conformist as bad dissertations. Responsibility, however, respects not only authorities and

---

<sup>16</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 11. My translation. The original quote: “For å demonstrere dette poenget: denne fremstillingen av Sciarrinos estetiske 'skjørhet' er ført i et selvsikkert fagspråk. Den kunne (kanskje mer nært), forsøkt å speile denne estetikken ved å formulere dette i en mer kunstnerisk anlagt, søkende og fragmentert poesi...”

<sup>17</sup> Adorno: “The Essay as Form”, p. 13.

committees, but also the object itself.”<sup>18</sup> The essay might be said to bear more responsibility to the complex way an object belongs to the world than a text which seeks pureness of thought. Yet the “essay” should not be understood as a rejection of the tradition. As Søren Kjølrup mentions in his paper *Another Way of Knowing* (2006): “New thinking is often not created by neglecting existing thinking, but by knowing existing thinking so well that one may turn it upside down.”<sup>19</sup> This is something the disciplined essay will take into account.

## **2. The Disaster of “Obvious Music”**

Morten Eide Pedersen had been the head of musical composition for ten years when I began studying at the Grieg Academy in 2006. A special feature within this milieu was the acceptance and even encouragement of a “naïve” curiosity towards music. At the time, there was a general resistance to the idea of virtuosity as a basis for motivation. Careful reflection on musical phenomena was the point of departure both in discourse on music and artistic practice. How do you bring about a feeling of flow such as that heard in the voice-leading of Palestrina? The rules could be used to create organic melody, or one could break the rules to create the opposite effect. Or, why does serialism create systems which generate music from defined parameters? Serialist music does not necessarily sound systematic. Perhaps composers have always created musical systems?

The complex process of adapting to a compositional practice could perhaps be compared with the previously mentioned example of learning a foreign word by coming to understand it through manifold examples of its use rather than looking it up in a dictionary. By learning about counterpoint, choral harmonization, fugue, sonata form, and twelve-tone technique as rules, consisting of “rights” and “wrongs” in a solely calculative manner, one might end up with a correct prototype composition, a crystallization of style. However, listening to thirty fugues and then trying to create an idiosyncratic token of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form” p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Søren Kjølrup, *Another Way of Knowing. Baumgarten, Aesthetics, and the Concept of Sensuous Cognition* (Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2006), p. 19.



generic model, with the *help of* rules, one might end up with something less correct, but in a sense more precise. Historically, the rules of composing a proto-fugue came only after the actual fugue. Established rules tend to emerge *after* new expressions have been practiced for a while.

I would argue that there is reason to believe that contextualizing compositional technique with intuitive and creative learning, anchored in the original interests of the student, will result in more reflective music. At the Grieg Academy, compositional techniques were taught along the way, in tandem with tuition to develop personal skills. Historical styles were contextualized with creative composition. Morten Eide Pedersen advocated an attitude of *a lingering reflection (dvelende refleksjon)*: carefully including different angles without necessarily striving for solutions. *Lingering reflection* was practiced widely in the milieu of contemporary classical and experimental music in the Bergen area. I look back with fondness on my three-year period working with Eide Pedersen, when I was the producer and general manager of the concert series AVGARDE, and Eide Pedersen was the board leader. AVGARDE is a scene for experimental music, established in Bergen in 2006. The concerts frequently explore the contrasting roles associated with the performer, stage and audience. AVGARDE is a safe space for composers and musicians to try out fresh ideas. One of the most extraordinary concerts was “AVGARDE with *Beffen*,” *Beffen* being a tiny red transportation boat, iconic for Bergen, having gone back and forth between central Bergen and the peninsula Nordnes for at least 100 years. About twenty audience members sat on benches along the walls, facing each other, and the three musicians and composers, Øyvind Skarbø, Jostein Stalheim and Sigurd Fischer Olsen performed in the middle. The mechanic motor frequencies gave the boat a trembling feeling, a resonance both felt and heard. The captain joined the composition by adjusting the throttle on the motor. Instead of presenting musical pieces as entities, the musicians improvised extremely carefully with sounds that melted together with the soundscape as a whole. The concert on *Beffen* took the audience on a journey, a remarkably concrete experience, into a new “room of possibilities.” Experimental music can guide us to a sensitive way of receiving the

surrounding world. Instead of reproducing existing structural frames, it can lead us to the threshold of something unknown, and reveal prevailing structures in a new light.

Art can easily fail when solely reduced to given ideas and techniques – when the music of “talent” and “intellect” takes over. Composition can turn into technical perfection at the expense of the reflective quality of music. It is difficult to identify when this happens as all compositions are technical. They are based on historically given musical material and tools, simultaneously pointing at something “Other.” Adorno describes the consequences of reduction to technique as follows:

If technique is made absolute in the work of art; if construction becomes total and eradicates expression, its opposite and its motivating force; if art thus claims to be direct scientific knowledge and correct by scientific standards, it is sanctioning a preartistic manipulation of materials as devoid of meaning [...].<sup>20</sup>

When music becomes something “obvious,” occurring as loud and already-justified meaning, it runs empty of its enigmatic character. Music is domesticated and turned into something safe, familiar. This could even create the illusion that music is actually about pitch and rhythm. As Morten Eide Pedersen writes:

Throughout our education we're schooled through a pitch-duration regime, where single tones are chosen, and further projected on, and refined within, a bigger score. But for Sciarrino and his ‘materico’ attitude, the tone is in no way more the ‘original’ [...].<sup>21</sup>

Sciarrino's attitude, that is, his undogmatic world of timbre and unorthodox use of instruments, lives up to the claims of avant-garde for *nie erhörte Klänge*, according to Eide Pedersen. Simultaneously, Sciarrino challenges us with the fact that his “music first

---

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 14. My translation. The original quote: “Gjennom vår utdanning er vi skolert gjennom et ‘pitch-duration regime’, der enkle toner velges ut, og deretter projiseres og raffineres ut i et større partitur. Men for Sciarrino og hans ‘materico’ innstilling er ikke tonen noe mer ‘opprinnelig’, som så er prøvd illustrert ut i en annen setting.”

and foremost should be sustainable as an experience, not just a sonic analysis [*klingende analyse*].”<sup>22</sup>

One of the paradoxes of music is that it is simultaneously both based on something existent, but refers to the undefined. Adorno describes the paradox of making “things of which we do not know what they are.” Music is at once completely evident and enigmatic. “It cannot be solved, only its form can be deciphered.”<sup>23</sup> Maja Ratkje writes in her book *Eksperimentell kvinneklam* (2014) that the avant-garde makes society richer by problematizing established “truths,” in the very contexts the music is presented (concerts, galleries and so on), to show us new ways of understanding the world. Its task is to challenge the established consensus. A prevailing consensus should always be contradicted, even within the avant-garde itself.<sup>24</sup> Ratkje also quotes the composer Kaija Saariaho from a summer seminar at IRCAM in 1999, as she claims that it is always males who have the power of definition when it comes to contemporary classical music, that they “flock around the new technology” forgetting what is relevant – making good music.<sup>25</sup> Whoever it is that produces the focus on technique at the expense of music – and it is not necessarily easy to tell who – creates a disastrous counterpoint to the “truth content” of art. Adorno writes about the essay that its openness “resists the idea of a masterpiece, an idea which itself reflects the idea of creation and totality.”<sup>26</sup>

We need essayist music, too. The challenge is to establish a space where such *lingering reflection* could take place. Where does art “happen”? In the vast concert halls, the threshold for a composer to be performed is extremely high, and one often has to be

---

<sup>22</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 1. My translation. The original quote: “Hans fascinerende og høyst udogmatiske klangverden og uortodokse instrumentbruk lever i fullt monn opp til avantgardens krav om ‘nie erhørte Klänge’. Samtidig utfordrer han oss med at musikken først og fremst skal ha en bærekraft som opplevelse, ikke bare som klingende analyse.”

<sup>23</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Maja Ratkje, *Eksperimentell kvinneklam*, (Aschehoug Stemmer, 2014) p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ratkje, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” p. 17.

well established in a paradigmatic field of contemporary classical music. There is hardly any space for experimentation, failure, or surprise. Perhaps art happens at least as much on a Saturday afternoon, at a low-budget concert arranged by AVGARDE at the Bergen Public Library, presenting curious, sincere and experimental works that venture into new terrain?

### **3. Guidelines for Composition in Essay Form**

*It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about.*<sup>27</sup>

Start from the concrete world around you, from what triggers your interest in music. Perhaps you heard an appealing sound at a concert? Explore the sound, and do research on the score. Or you could contact the composer to ask about method. Choose the sound as a point of departure and write a sketch. Do it fast and graphically, and don't immediately try to force it into a traditional system of notation.

*It is radical in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character.*<sup>28</sup>

Write one musical fragment each day. It could be five seconds or shorter. Do not think too much of the result, the totality. Compose with no ambition! You will soon have a “bank of musical material.” Start to work with the fragments and you will begin to perceive different possibilities. Perhaps you even experience that the material starts to compose itself, creating its very own atmosphere which you could not have anticipated.

---

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” p. 9.

*The essay abandons the royal road to the origins [...]*<sup>29</sup>

You need not *first* go to the roots. Start with today's newspaper. Rip out a tiny strip of an article. Read the content while at the same time reflecting over the phonetic possibilities. Choose single words or accentuations. Create a miniature composition: it could, for example, be a texture of vividly whispered text, or one chosen word which is stretched out through the whole composition, so that the changes in overtones of the articulated letters create a form. It does not need to be vocally performed, but it could be translated into the timbre of a whole orchestra. Alternatively, you could make a miniature out of rustling paper sounds. Be childish!

*Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill.*<sup>30</sup>

Incorporate elements in the composition you would not ordinarily think go together. Experiment with radical form! You can go surprisingly far and the composition will still sound logical. Create intentional disharmony in form. Stretch out a section for a little too long, comprise a musical gesture to become too short. Repeat a single element for too many times. Correctly done, it will bring the musical material into "unbalance" in a way which increases the intensity.

Moreover, experiment with moving parts around. Could the composition begin some other place? Do not be afraid of radical change in the form even if you only have a few days left before a deadline. It is far better to give in an imperfect but interesting result, than a "polished," safe and unchallenging composition. You will take the discoveries with you into further compositional works.

---

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, "The Essay as Form," p. 16.

*The weakness of an essay bears witness to the very nonidentity it expresses.*<sup>31</sup>

Do not compose on the basis of your comprehension of an ideal musical work. Create your own musical laboratory. Let yourself be continually confused. Do not focus too much time on writing perfect twelve-tone compositions.

You will be taking the risk, of course, that your music will go unnoticed, at least to begin with. Perhaps it will not immediately be performed in large concert halls. The *weakness* of essayist music is that you do not know where you will end up. If your main goal is prestige, perhaps you should not compose in essay form.

#### **4. The Library of Morten Eide Pedersen**

The academic, exploratory obituary of the kind presented here is not an established literary genre, and there are no guidelines or standards for how to perform such a task. A central question which arises is how to incorporate personal depictions in an academic language, not making the leaps in literary form too large. What is “personal” and what is “public”? It might not concern the *content* itself, that is, whether quotes from Adorno, or anecdotes from the life of Morten Eide Pedersen, are presented. Rather, the challenge applies to the purpose of the text, and whether the objective is to argue for a subject matter, or to reflect back on Morten Eide Pedersen.

In a broad sense, language itself is public. Something becomes universal as soon as it is formed as language.<sup>32</sup> Private stories about Eide Pedersen are not necessarily significant because they concern a specific person, but, as they are formed in a common language, uncovering something with respect to a topic, they come to concern anybody. I have reason to believe that Morten Eide Pedersen himself would have objected to a text in his praise, depicting his life’s work, and his contributions to the field of music. He was

---

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> This view is anchored in language theories that could be called “universal”: Language as something we share, and something definitive for our understanding of the world. Both Ludwig Wittgenstein (early and late), Martin Heidegger, partly Theodor W. Adorno, and several French structuralists share this approach to language. For example, Heidegger portrays language as poetry, as “creation” or “becoming”. According to Heidegger, the world is continually on its way to language. Adorno for his part describes how, when a myth is turned into an epic, the unorganized world is turned into its opposite: general validity.

hardly egocentric, and he did not care much for formalities. But if someone were to write a text for him, I suspect that he would prefer that the work should have some creative value, which would exceed the mere focus on him as the subject matter. This attempt to write an experimental obituary of Morten Eide Pedersen is an attempt to do so in his spirit. Eide Pedersen was interested in all of the “in between’s”: what happens at the intersection between music and other forms of art, art and philosophy, music and architecture, writing literature and composing music. For him, thinking is an activity which takes place as a dialogue. He invested a great deal of time in teaching, conversations, writing extended and contemplative emails, and much more.

Next, I would like to picture the “library” of Morten Eide Pedersen. His collection of books is noteworthy in that it is a crystallization of all the “in between’s” of artistic, scientific, cultural and literary disciplines. Several of the books might not have anything apparent in common. The collection consists of compositional guides, guides to writing literature, books on architecture, political philosophy, a book comparing Hebrew thinking with Greek thinking, cookery books for cannibals, and much more. The unarticulated connections between the disciplines are everywhere – like a playful web of thoughts and question marks. There is no clear point of departure, or systematic categorization of the fields in a traditional sense. The web of threads between the books is complex, and the placement of the books on the shelves *shows* all kinds of connections. This attitude towards literature in our time is in danger of becoming extinct. In the world of digital databases, one has to know what one is looking for in a search for a specific book, author or subject. The categories are established beforehand. The value of surprise, of new and unexpected understanding, grabbing books physically and browsing through them, is not taken into account.

The encounter with what we do *not* understand, not yet at least, is generally undervalued. However, when meeting different academic disciplines, different paradigms or ways of using language, including musical languages, we learn something fundamentally important which cannot be reduced to facts: A new space of “possible connections” is created. This *not knowing* is thematized as a property of research in the

arts. Henk Borgdorff reflects on “artistic research” as follows: “Its primary importance lies not in explicating the implicit or non-implicit knowledge enclosed in art. It is more directed at a not-knowing, or a not-yet-knowing. It creates room for that which is unthought [...] the realization that we do not yet know what we don’t know.”<sup>33</sup> According to Andrew Bowie, the meeting of the unknown should be regarded as philosophically very significant.<sup>34</sup> It is even constitutive to music, in that music never has a definitive discursive way of speaking to us. Adorno describes the experience of thought as something where concepts do *not* form a continuum of events: “Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet.”<sup>35</sup>

The encounter with the “unknown” goes far beyond replacing old meaning with new meaning – it dissolves our identities and brings us to the threshold of nothingness. This is how “Elsa” breathes in Sciarrino’s *Lohengrin*. We can hear her body through the nervous instrumental and vocal sounds. The instruments breathe with her, as do we. Who is Elsa? We can hear her dissolved world in her breath, as she repeats the “echo” of her own name: *Elsa*. Eide Pedersen writes:

In the connecting of the unstable, shimmery, “nervous” objects of timbre to larger composed proceedings, Sciarrino provokes, in that he doesn't much follow traditional linguistic-mimetic codes (like melody, motive and theme) which stand as central to the mechanisms of our musical understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Eide Pedersen depicts how the music of Sciarrino moves away from the clarity of musical objects and brings about the undefined, the “in between”: “The given limits for what could be understood as a musically *singled out* object for a composer, then seem to be

---

<sup>33</sup> Henk Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” in Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (pp. 44-63), Routledge, 2011, p. 61

<sup>34</sup> Bowie, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as form,” p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 11. My translation. The original quote: “I sammensetningen av flyktige, skimrende, ‘nervøse’, klangobjekter til større utkomponerte forløp, provoserer Sciarrino ved at han i liten grad følger tradisjonelle språkmimetiske koder (som melodi, motiv, tema) som står så sentralt i vårt musikalske forståelsesapparat.”



dissolved.”<sup>37</sup> The foreground and background are relatively “narrow” and manageable, the middle ground is wide. The compositional tool in general is “directed at managing what is clear, affirmative and ready to be stated.” Sciarrino explores the middle ground, which therefore often becomes a *negative* activity. One has to move against rules.

“The ‘in between’ is what the clarity is *not*.”<sup>38</sup> The middle ground in *Lohengrin*, its complexes of vivid texture and timbre as something perceptual and concrete, is simultaneously the conceptual entrance to the piece, according to Eide Pedersen. The form cannot be separated from the material aspect of the sounds. Morten Eide Pedersen writes: “Exactly the way in which he [Sciarrino] tries to dissolve the provenience of the instruments, he wishes the musical tool to be incorporated as part of the expression, instead of becoming something factual, external and therefore unauthorized with respect to the expression.”<sup>39</sup> As we listen to the textures and gestures, we become absorbed in Elsa's body. Eide Pedersen writes further:

We sense sometimes that the big, existential Nothingness which Sciarrino moves towards in his music, actually breathes and lives. And we take part in Elsa's nervous condition through joining her in her tense breath. We suffer with her, we involuntarily remain stuck in her body and psyche because we don't manage to free ourselves from the seductive rhythm of the breath.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 13. My translation. The original quote: “Egentlig oppløses vel da de gitte grensene for hva som kan forstås som et musikalsk *enhetlig* objekt for en komponist?”

<sup>38</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 11. My translation. The original quote: “Forgrunn og bakgrunn er relativt ‘smale’ og håndterlige, mellomgrunnen er vid: dels materiale og dels kontekst. Komposisjonshåndverket er stort sett rettet inn mot å håndtere det tydelige, affirmative og utsagnsklare. Å utforske mellomgrunnen blir derfor ofte en ‘*negativ*’ aktivitet, man må gå mot reglene. Mellomrommet er det som det tydelige *ikke* er.”

<sup>39</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 11. My translation. The original quote: “Akkurat slik han forsøker å oppløse instrumentenes proveniens, ønsker han også at formverktøyet inngår som et aspekt av uttrykket, istedenfor å bli noe saklig, utenforstående og derved uvedkommende til uttrykket.”

<sup>40</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 12. My translation. The original quote: “Vi fornemmer noen ganger at det store eksistensielle Intet som Sciarrino beveger seg opp mot i musikken, faktisk puster og lever. Og vi deltar i Elsas nervøse tilstand gjennom å delta i hennes ansente pust. Vi lider med henne, vi blir uvilkarlig sittende fast i hennes kropp og psyke fordi vi ikke klarer å frigjøre oss fra åndedrettets forførende rytme.”

The potential of composition to reflect on the negative, through the process of composition, gives it the privilege of breaking through the idealism. It carries a truth of the other side, of the unarticulated.

## 5. Music and Vulnerability

Sciarrino has become known as the “explorer of silence.”<sup>41</sup> According to Morten Eide Pedersen, the limits between silence and sound are challenged in his music: he stretches the dynamics to the extreme, “over to the endless, where stillness usually prevails.” One has to focus to hear whether the sound still, *perhaps*, exists.<sup>42</sup> This becomes a “poetry of whispering,” which Eide Pedersen portrays as “an obvious criticism against the culture of listening and music consumerism.”<sup>43</sup> According to Eide Pedersen, this challenges us to reflect on our listening. “Listening” could be many things, and such music points clearly at the difference between “listening to” and having to “listen for” something.<sup>44</sup> Such music is vulnerable. It might not be caught by an interpretive ear, which only seeks the “obvious” in music. Lydia Goehr writes: “[W]e have a choice – either to listen to the work according to what we already believe it shows us, or to listen to it for something it might persuade us to rethink.”<sup>45</sup>

Vulnerable music is the opposite of the easily accessible. You cannot say exactly how the composition is essayist, or vulnerable, but it can teach us to listen. It does not merely lead us to a more nuanced listening, but in a way it dissolves our identities. It does not stay outside, in the world. It is rather something which breaks through existing meaning and shatters it – *it shatters us*. The compositional gestures themselves have a gruesome quality in that they oppose the given form. “Something is excised from the

---

<sup>41</sup> Eide Pedersen, p.9. My translation. The original quote: “stillhetens utforsker”.

<sup>42</sup> Eide Pedersen, p.9.

<sup>43</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 9. My translation. The original quote: “Målt i lydstyrke blir dette umiddelbart en ‘hviskingens poesi’. En slik musikk blir dermed en åpenbar kritikk mot lyttekultur og musikkonsum.”

<sup>44</sup> Eide Pedersen, p.9. My translation. The original quote: “‘Å lytte’ kan være flere ting, og en slik musikk peker så tydelig på den store forskjellen det er mellom å ‘lytte på’ og å måtte ‘lytte etter’ noe.”

<sup>45</sup> Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, p. iii.

living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience.”<sup>46</sup> Not finding peace within ideals, it becomes the receptor of the dark, the disaster, the displacement, what is outside of existing meaning. If the suffering is analyzed in language, reduced to words, “it remains mute and inconsequential [...]”<sup>47</sup>. The resistance to the “Other” can be observed in the pursuit of the “lovable” in music. Lydia Goehr presents an example of us listening to Beethoven's Fifth. This we know now only as a “potpourri” of its ostensible melodies. “We recognize the work, if not by its name alone, then by its isolated melodies. Recognizing the melodies – ah, yes, that one! – leads us to believe the world is in good order. There will always be that opening theme.”<sup>48</sup> This attitude towards music, as a guarantee of objectivity, is for Adorno the opposite of the enigmatic character of art.

For the same reason that art is *feared*, art is *needed*. The fear of the “Other” is simultaneously a promise. Art is needed for the dissolution of the “identical,” the dissolution of what exists, not as any “metaphysical symbol with the guarantee of salvation, healing, or resurrection.”<sup>49</sup> Such an idea would only be based on existing meaning. This “something” in a work of art is concrete. It does not imitate ideas taken from the world. Adorno writes: “Ultimately, the doctrine of imitation should be reversed; in a sublimated sense, reality should imitate the artworks. However, the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexistent. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible.”<sup>50</sup> Art is needed to show us the displacement. It is needed as the dangerous promise of other meaning.

Conversational dialogue, too, is constitutive of this process of revealing and reorganizing meaning. Language itself takes the dialogue further, and no one is entirely able to predict its directions or consequences. This perspective on dialogue characterizes

---

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 65.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum*, p. iii.

<sup>49</sup> Eide Pedersen, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota: Regents of University of Minnesota, 1997) p. 174.

the way Morten Eide Pedersen engaged in conversation: freely associating, brainstorming, with the attitude of *lingering reflection* as a basis. Several of the people came to Morten Eide Pedersen, asking for help with either literature-related or music-related issues, or themes which did not necessarily concern his field. On one occasion, in a conversation with Eide Pedersen after a concert, I talked about self-help culture, and criticized the obsessive search for solutions and life control in the Western world. I was eager to hear Eide Pedersen's thoughts on the issue. As usual, he did not act with disagreement, but neither with agreement. Rather, he built further on the idea, thinking dialectically. For him thinking was an *activity*, not a means to claim a standpoint.

The experience of ease around Morten Eide Pedersen did not owe to the solutions that he offered. On the contrary, he managed to confound to a much greater degree. In his presence "chaos" and "order" could co-exist. His way of thinking, his unique gift of communication inspire attempts to respond in the spirit of his legacy, the effects of which will continue to be felt long after his passing.

## Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W., *Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota: Regents of University of Minnesota, 1997).

Adorno, Theodor W., "On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music," in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert (Minnesota: Regents of University of Minnesota, 2002), 135-161.

Adorno, Theodor W., "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to the literature, volume one*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3-23.

Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer, *Oplysningens dialektik* (København: Gyldendal, 1995).

Ahvenniemi, Rebecka Sofia, "Språk, stemme og kropp. Et essay om språkfilosofi og vokalmusikk, og hva som kan skje i møtet mellom dem," *Lydskrift*, 3 (2013), <<http://lydskrift.no/story/sprak-stemme-og-kropp>> [Accessed 22. March 2015].

Bowie, Andrew, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Bø-Rygg, Arnfinn: "Etterord av Arnfinn Bø-Rygg," in *Musikkfilosofi*, by Theodor W. Adorno, (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2003), 181-214.

Borgdorff, Henk: "The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research," in Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson (red.): *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (pp. 44-63), Routledge, 2011.

Dehs, Jørgen: "Om opplysningens dialektik," in *Oplysningens dialektik*, by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), 7-16.

Eide Pedersen, Morten, "– Come tutto è bianco! Om 'Lohengrin' – Sciarrinos 'Azione Invisible,' *Autograf – tidsskrift for ny kunstmusikk*, 14 (2005), 7-16.

Goehr, Lydia, "Adorno, Schoenberg, and the *Totentanz der Prinzipien*—in Thirteen Steps," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol 56, No 3 (California: University of California Press), 595-636.

Goehr, Lydia, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007).

Ihde, Don, *Listening and Voice. The Phenomenologies of Sound*, (New York: State University of New York, 2007).

Kjørup, Søren, *Another Way of Knowing. Baumgarten, Aesthetics, and the Concept of Sensuous Cognition*, (Bergen: Bergen National Academy of the Arts, 2006).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Signs*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).  
Ratkje, Maja, *Eksperimentell kvinneklam*, (Aschehoug Stemmer, 2014).

Sontag, Susan, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001), 3-14.