

# “Freedom is a state of being

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Gertraud and Friedrich Cerha

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*Would it be true to say that the idea of freedom is central to your life?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** That is a difficult question. In my youth I was confronted with political systems that placed restrictions and very little value on the freedom of the individual. In this context I always mention a dramatic childhood incident: in 1934, when I was seven years old, just after the bloody conflicts of the quasi civil war in Vienna, my father took me to the battle sites, where I saw the bullet-riddled houses and the bloody asphalt, and where my childish sense of safety and security was confronted with death and conflict. This experience made me very alert to actions that restrict liberty, all the way to national-socialist dictates.

Like my parents, I did not participate in the general celebrations in 1938, a fact that got me into trouble afterwards. I also deserted twice when I was a soldier in the German Wehrmacht.

*There is a touching scene in a film about you. In the mountains, you look after a bird as it flies away and say: “I wish I could fly like that.”*

**Friedrich Cerha:** That was on Lamsenjoch, I was there after the war. I walked from Göttingen to Tyrol by way of the Thuringian Forest, suffering great hardship and danger on the way. I had left all my papers in the Thuringian Forest and wanted to escape all captivity. That only left escape into the mountains. During my wanderings I came upon this hut at Lamsenjoch. I was given the task of guarding it and doing a little farming. This summer and autumn of 1945 in the mountains was a very important time for me, because it allowed me to rediscover myself, so to speak, in the solitude of the mountains, after the terrible experiences of war that of course left me utterly distraught and traumatised. I am very fond of that time.

*Deserting from the Wehrmacht meant risking your life. You were prepared to pay with your life for the idea of being free. Would it be right to put it like that?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes, I did not want to serve this system, for which I had the

deepest contempt and hatred, I wanted to avoid serving it as far as possible. And of course deserting was a good way of doing this, although there was a personal interest as well, which was to play for time and not be deployed on the front line where I would have been blown to smithereens.

*It appears that you have had since childhood a sense of what is and is not morally right.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes, certainly. My childhood violin teacher also contributed to it. He was Czech, and he pointed out to me many things that were wrong – in political terms. One example: as a child, I had unbelievable trust in the printed word, and was simply unable to imagine that anyone would print something untrue on purpose, or that many of the reports on the radio were untrue. This fact, that people lie systematically was so foreign to me, I was unable to believe it for a long time.

*“I have never fanatically advocated artistic goals, I always acted from an inner conviction.”*

Friedrich Cerha

*The new German President Joachim Gauck has said: “The Germans are capable of freedom.” That is an interesting turn of phrase: is freedom something one can be capable of?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** I don't think so. Freedom is something that is connected not just to the head, but to the whole human vegetative system. Freedom is not just an attitude, something you arrive at. Freedom is a state of being, it is linked to existence.

*I am talking about the issue of freedom so exhaustively because Wolfgang Rihm wrote, in a letter he wrote for your 85th birthday, that he greatly prizes your “free music, which in turn makes freedom possible”. Is that a conscious matter, to enable access to freedom as a composer?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Being free means being at one with yourself and finding peace within yourself, so to speak. And this sentence from Rihm naturally pleased me, because when it came to debates about new music and dodecaphony and serialism and various dictates or prohibitions that came up in that context, I always retained my inner freedom and never fell prey to such dictates.

*Are your experiences in the war also responsible for your being unreceptive to the musical dogmas of the post-war era?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Without a doubt, yes. Because my experiences in the war, and above all this solitude in which I lived in the mountains and which forced me to rely on my own resources, were important to me in finding my identity. I have never fanatically advocated artistic goals, I always acted from an inner conviction. But I never fully rejected the priorities set by serialism, even if I very soon kept clear of them.

*Nor are you necessarily associated with the Darmstadt or Donaueschingen circles, of which you had to be a member in some way if you wanted to be successful.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** From 1956 to 1958 I was to a certain degree part of the Darmstadt circle, that was a very important time. Composers from all over the world went there, there were heated discussions about New Music, and I performed my own pieces there as well, the first Spiegel piece, for instance, in 1964. When I felt I had finished with “Klangflächenkomposition” (the composition of sound textures) and was looking for a new clarity of drawing, I returned to traditional elements and consciously grappled with them. So I was never that remote – except for one piece, Sinfonie, where I went straight back to Webern, and which I performed in Royan in 1976. Royan was the centre of the avant-garde at the time, and this symphony was the reason I was subject to contempt from the German avant-garde for 10 years, but I suffered this with calm and dignity. I am still pleased that I actually shocked the avant-garde of the day with that piece. Alfred Schlee incidentally was particularly fond of this piece, surprisingly.

*You have often been declared a successor to Berg for your occasional use of the espressivo, something you were not too pleased with.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes, that was very strange. Before the third act of *Lulu* had its world première, nobody ever connected me to Berg, but in the years after, this suddenly happened all the time. People detected a connection to Berg, which is of course nonsense.

**Gertraud Cerha:** When Rihm was very young he was also described as the new Mahler. Espressivo is espressivo – what is Mahler about *Jakob Lenz*? Nothing! For Cerha, people say Berg. Any type of espressivo is interpreted as being like Mahler/Berg.

*Recently you said you had actually written the Spiegel pieces to put them in the drawer.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Young composers in the 50s and early 60s did not have the opportunity to be performed. It was difficult for writers and painters as well. We performed small concerts together in coffee houses, carpet stores and at women's clubs.

I wrote my first orchestra piece in the mid-50s. *Espressioni fondamentali*. Ernst Krenek visited me at that time and saw the score. He performed it in Berlin. In the *Spiegel* pieces, I continued several thoughts from the *Espressioni*, and then *Movements I–III* emerged, studies of a completely different type. The second is already a type of carpet of sound perforated with brief notes from the brass section, a theme I developed further in the fourth part of the *Spiegel*.

The third *Movement* is a constantly changing cloud of sound, which also became important later for the *Spiegel*. But before that, there was another piece: *Fasce*. For me, that was a blow that freed me from everything conventional, written for a gigantic orchestra, far removed from the hope for any performance. *Fasce* was immediately followed by this concept of the *Spiegel Cycle*. This happened very quickly. The composition then took 10 years. I never expected to hear the *Spiegel*. But the advantage was that I did not need to consider any practicalities – whether an orchestra has such and such an instrumentation, whether it is capable of this, or whether the suggested line-up will be tolerated or not. I was surprised when people did turn up to the individual performances and then to the full performance.

*“Ligeti came to me and said: ‘You are composing my piece!’”* □

*"Klangflächenkomposition" was clearly in the air; György Ligeti composed Atmosphères at the same time as the first Spiegel pieces.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes, the well-known story of how Ligeti came to me, found the *Spiegel* on my desk and said excitedly: "You are composing my piece!" Ligeti's *Atmosphères* and the *Apparitions* composed earlier are something fundamentally different. These pieces are first and foremost determined by a static character, while the *Spiegel* and *Fasce* are full of fluid processes. One thing develops and leads to another, processes influence each other, interfere with and displace each other. But Ligeti had the advantage with *Atmosphères* that they were performed in Cologne immediately, because he was there. During that time I was sat here in Vienna, with the *Spiegel* pieces in my drawer. People only hesitantly became aware of them.

It was interesting for me when the *Spiegel* were published by Kairos: Peter Oswald sent different recordings of the cycle to different renowned composers without my knowledge and asked them to comment. It turned out that the majority did not know the *Spiegel* at all. People suddenly reacted with fervent praise, people I would not have expected to react like this at all. Johann Nestroy said: "Time changes many things".

At the last Wien Modern festival, I read that the *Spiegel* are a classic piece, however I was attacked so viciously there when the *Spiegel* were performed for the first time. Thank goodness, the way that the *Spiegel* were received changed completely after the first performance, they were described as an intellectual experiment, as music for the head. It was nothing like that for me, it came from an elementary need to express myself; it was not until the 80s that I discovered to how great an extent I freed myself from my experiences of war with this music.

*In what way?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** In my tonal imaginings, many of these experiences of war were flushed to the top again.

Can you explain how traumatic experiences in war materialise in music?

**Friedrich Cerha:** There are very dark and oppressive events in the *Spiegel*.

**Gertraud Cerha:** I think that might just be your interpretation.

**Friedrich Cerha:** Hm, I don't think so.

*You know the music business as a teacher, conductor, composer and instrumentalist – are you amused by these phenomena of rejection and late redress?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Well, I did read the reviews of the *Spiegel* with a certain amusement. Of course I am glad, but I am not that surprised, because we do know this process of immediate rejection and subsequent entry into the canon of music repertoire from history, from late Beethoven to Wagner, Bruckner, and even Schönberg and Webern to a certain degree.

This inner calm that I gained around 1945 actually made me untouchable, so there was no effect on my attitude at all. I never reacted to it inwardly.

*“This inner calm that I gained around 1945 actually made me untouchable.”*

Friedrich Cerha

*The discovery that even great masters like Mozart reused their work again and again was like a release for you recently.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Fed by the developing tonal imagination, a repertoire of gestures and ideas develops in which you live. Of course this memory changes continuously. Some things are deleted by and by, in the way these things happen in the brain. But of course there is the occasional temptation to take up certain gestures again, and I resisted for a long time – whenever I noticed this was happening – because I perceived this to be repetition.

It is well-known in the fine arts for painters to use a shtick, a gesture, for a period of time, and to repeat themselves. As a result, everyone can recognise from afar who the painter is. And of course that raises the prices as well. Things are different in music, thank goodness, even though these repetitions do of course exist. So I have become more tolerant towards myself,

challenging myself to think more variably and greatly enriching the possibilities open to me. You can see this in the pieces of the last five or six years.

*Your descriptions of your work clearly mirror this. On Instants, you wrote: "A rigorous reductionism produced exceedingly interesting works in the last century, but when adhered to rigidly it often resulted in an impression of poverty and monotony, and I became ever more aware that richness and variety are, or can be, a quality of art." To whom were you referring with the phrase "rigorous reductionism"?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** I was referring directly to minimalism, that was definitely not aimed at Webern. Maybe I was also referring to a decision to surrender to a method that then becomes routine.

**Gertraud Cerha:** Actually also against your own purism from around 1960 – in the *Exercises* you were beginning to liberate yourself from it.

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes.

*We keep coming back to this topic: You sense that something is constricting you, and then you resolve it. In Momente, for example: "I am tired of the monomaniac spinning-out of musical ideas, of expansion by means of 'working-out', and I have often caught myself being bored when listening to such contemporary music."*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Yes, that is one of the reasons why I have preferred shorter forms in recent years, or rather for my cyclical thinking. Webern always returned to this subject, he worked on his cycles of songs or orchestral pieces for a very long time before finding the final sequence. The *Momente* have been around since 2004, but of course the sequence of such shorter pieces is not a random one, the individual elements have an inner connection, there are relationships. In the full cycle you can even detect an overall process. These small units are also to be found in the organ pieces and most recent orchestra pieces.

*You have also repeatedly packaged quotes from the old masters in your works.*

**Friedrich Cerha:** It has always fascinated me that personalities of composers appear behind my music in my musical dreams – completely blurred in a grey lack of knowledge. Every now and then I wanted to let the audience become aware of the proximity of these composers. This was the case with Stravinsky; in *Sinfonie*, it was quite clearly Webern, and in *Doppelkonzert*, it was Satie. I have always enjoyed hiding quotes in my music, mostly so well that nobody ever finds them, but sometimes also quite consciously: in *Doppelkonzert*, for

instance.

*“Thank goodness that there is a certain degree of insecurity  
in any artistic work.”*

Friedrich Cerha

*Is there such a thing as a personal style of Friedrich Cerha?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** I have read that there is such a thing. And there is certainly a very specific way of thinking and imagining music and composition that is repeatedly viewed in the context of the Viennese School. There may be some truth in it, because my long-term involvement has certainly had a strong influence on me, but the stereotypical way of putting it today is rather exaggerated.

*In reference to Spiegel, it is interesting that the compositional processes in the formal sequence there can be applied to the Baal-Gesänge almost one to one. These are parallels that nobody would ever notice at first glance. Are these conscious parallels?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** The process is that things come, and that you only become aware of them once they have arrived. The end of *Baal* is a “Klangflächen” music that arrived in this way. Of course I very quickly became aware that it is related to the *Spiegel* pieces. And of course other sections in *Baal* are also connected to the *Spiegel*.

**Gertraud Cerha:** Next to these direct influences and parallels, there are also indirect ones that are not as obvious. I believe it is this developmental thinking that people refer to as your personal style.

**Friedrich Cerha:** Developmental thinking on one hand, but also a very precisely controlled harmony that is deployed quite consciously as a progression of tension.

**Gertraud Cerha:** I don't necessarily mean it in the traditional sense. In *Bruchstück*, for example, which nobody would ever associate with terms such as “traditional” or “conventional”, there is this very controlled harmony that is



subject to a very slowly changing tension.

**Friedrich Cerha:** One needs to be careful with that term. In the last ten years or so, a certain collage-way of thinking has been appearing in harmonious terms, for instance in the most recent string quartet or the three orchestral pieces that I have just written.

*What compositional challenges do you want to set yourself in future? Where is the journey going?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** I don't really have a long journey ahead of me anymore [laughs]. The best journeys are always those where you do not know where they will take you. At work you are naturally always encountering unexplored territories, places where you are insecure, so to speak. I always like to say: when you get lost in the woods, you retrace your steps for a bit to find a new path where you are once again on reasonably secure ground. Thank goodness there is a certain degree of insecurity in any artistic work.

*You are a very regular attendee of concerts, particularly those of young composers. Few others have such a clear view of what is happening amongst the younger generation in international terms. As a teacher and a listener, what message would you give to these composers?*

**Friedrich Cerha:** Christian Ofenbauer was asked what he learnt from me. He said he learnt to ask questions all the time. Questioning yourself and asking questions about everything you do is a very important activity on the way to finding yourself. Teaching, insofar as it relates to composition, should consist of helping people to find themselves, to develop an identity. And that does seem very important to me, also because of the freedom that you can then take advantage of in your artistic work.

And we are back to freedom again ...

Cerha laughs.

*Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler*

## KOMPONISTEN ÜBER CERHAS SPIEGEL

### **Pierre Boulez**

Ich habe Friedrich Cerha immer als eine der wichtigsten Persönlichkeiten seiner Generation betrachtet. Ich habe seine Werke mit viel Interesse verfolgt, wenn ich sie im Laufe ihrer Entstehung lesen oder hören konnte. Es freut mich, dass sie nun auf einem Album erscheinen, das es erlaubt, diese bemerkenswerte Entwicklung zu überblicken. Und ich hoffe, dass man sich auf diese Weise ihrer wahrhaften Bedeutung innern wird.

### **György Kurtág**

Friedrich Cerhas Spiegel haben mich tief beeindruckt. Die impulsive Dramatik, die ständigen – manchmal sehr verlangsamten – Gemütsbewegungen ergriffen mich aber derart, dass es mir beinahe entging, dass ich schon 80 Minuten Musik hörte.

### **Helmut Lachenmann**

Ich habe endlich Cerhas Spiegel-Zyklus – zweimal – gehört! Ja, das sind eindrucksvolle Klanglandschaften mit souveränem, gleichsam prophetischem Klungsinn komponiert.

### **Hans Zender**

Gerade in der Vielfarbigkeit seiner stilistischen Palette verkörpert Cerha in seinem Gesamtwerk den Geist nicht einer doktrinären, sondern einer die Mittel als solche frei nutzenden und immer wieder neu bestimmenden lebendigen Moderne auf einzigartige Weise.

### **Georg Friedrich Haas**

Friedrich Cerhas virtuos komponiertes Orchesterwerk Spiegel ist ein Meilenstein der Musikgeschichte. Während eineinhalb Stunden entwickelt sich ein Drama aus wechselnden Klangdichten, Dynamik und kontrastierenden Strukturen. Die rationale Kalkulation des Werkes schafft emotionale Sogwirkungen. 1972 – als junger Mann, zu Beginn meines Musikstudiums – konnte ich die Uraufführung des gesamten Zyklus in Graz erleben. Diese Aufführung zählt zu jenen Eindrücken, die mein musikalisches Denken maßgeblich geprägt haben.

### **Beat Furrer**

Seine Orchester- und Musiktheaterwerke zeugen von einer großartigen Meisterschaft – insbesondere die in den 60er-Jahren geschriebenen Spiegel sind wegweisend und radikal, was die Entwicklung der Form aus dem Klang selbst betrifft – sie haben bis heute nichts von ihrer Kraft und Frische eingebüßt.

### **Michael Jarrell**

Cerhas Spiegel-Zyklus gehört für mich zu den beeindruckendsten Orchesterzyklen der 2. Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts.

### **Johannes Maria Staud**

Cerhas Spiegel-Zyklus, dieser gigantische Steinbruch der Ideen und Texturen, diese Goldmine entfesselter Klanglichkeit und unerhörter Wendungen, dieses Kaleidoskop schillernder Schattierungen und orgiastischer Klangballungen ist ein Werk, dessen Sogwirkung einen nicht mehr loslässt, wenn man einmal in seine Fänge geraten ist.