

# Wolfgang Rihm's Orchestra

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The sumptuous palette of the orchestra's colours, the multitude of their uses and combinations, from the slightest gossamer wisps of sound to sheer, unchained force, have been recapturing Wolfgang Rihm's imagination all his life, since the days of his youth when he discovered the richness of their scope. It was no accident that his artistic breakthrough was thanks to the Donaueschinger Festival in 1974, where his *Morphonie* for orchestra and solo string quartet (1972) was performed. Other works for large ensembles followed in close succession, among them *Dis-Kontur*, *Sub-Kontur* and the *Third Symphony*. A deep involvement with the orchestra and its resources has remained a constant in his compositional work to this day.

Fundamental to Rihm's pieces for orchestra was his decision to refrain from transforming the orchestra into a large, structurally controlled "sound generator" and from reinventing the ensemble by taking the approach of reorganising it according to "internal, social" assumptions – a co-op effort of equally entitled individuals or a self-regulating social and musical system, for instance.

Despite experimentation with the scoring as each occasion arose, Rihm remained true to the orchestra as an instrumental entity in its traditional, ripened form. Accordingly, the traces of convention still clinging to the orchestral resources, such as the choice of range or tessitura – were no hindrance to Rihm, as they were for many others; he integrates them into his work. The traditional orchestra's potential for use and development is still a long way from being exhausted in Rihm's direct compositional accessing of sound, founded on the "poetics of tactility."



Rihm neigte in den frühen Orchesterwerken der Siebzigerjahre zur heftigen Geste, zum vehementen Ausbruch.

Rihm's decision to work with matured orchestral forces was influenced by the fact that, in his orchestral work, further aspects of composition come into view far beyond the palette and its innumerable options of mixture and graduation. The special physicality of the orchestral sound – the palette of qualities in this regard extends from sheer bulk and weight to diaphanous gossamer, irrespective of how the instruments are played and the number of performers – or the options of energetically loading the orchestral mass, of expressing varying states of excitement, whether tensely anticipatory or in full charge, of deliberately playing with the interdependence of pitch and tone-colour – Arnold Schönberg addressed this phenomenon on the final pages of his *Harmonielehre* (published by Universal Edition in 1911), finding in it special musical potential for the future.

Ultimately, the orchestra is responsible for the spatial arrangement of the sound, since the ensemble becomes sonically expansive in different ways according to its size. Therefore, composing for orchestra always means composing sonic motion in space. Rihm's deployment of the orchestra often reflects that directly, as when he scores for multiple doublings and works with orchestral groups as in *Im Anfang* ["In the Beginning"] (1998/2000).

If Rihm had a tendency for impetuous gestures and vehement eruptions in his early orchestral works of the 1970s, his music in the following decade leaned more toward the objective, the sculptural (exemplified by *Klangbeschreibung III* ["Sonic Description III"] [1984–87]), before his interest again changed in the early 1990s to become more attentive to other aspects of composition, and

not just orchestral works – his focus increasingly turned to line, texture, layering and overlapping simultaneous incidents – to polyphony, in short.

As an example of his work with sonic superposition, take the repeated “overpainting,” a complex, multilayered process in *Vers une symphonie fleuve IV* (1997–98) (taken from *et nunc I* for wind and percussion, 1992), in which Rihm differentiates the genetically various, elder layers again and again, not neglecting the variety of the timbral qualities within their sonic ranges. His newest, the “Séraphin”-Symphonie (scheduled for its premiere soon at Donaueschingen), some of which is based on material already frequently reworked from his musical-theatre piece *Séraphin* (1993–94), is derived from a double over-writing of *Séraphin III* (2006–07), most recently with the new addition of a layer for large orchestra.

Now, whether it is a layer – with a wide brush, as it were – or a more or less compact stroke made with a fine “painting tool” – the line and thus the togetherness, the dialoguing or opposition of simultaneously occurring events is one of Rihm’s compositional “obsessions” (as he himself it) of the past few years, especially in music for orchestra. His newly written *Nähe fern 1* is a good example of this.

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Since Rihm uses the customary forces with all their inherent historical aspects in his work for orchestra, they are still receptive to the grand orchestral tradition. This approach allows him to work with orchestral inflexions and play a complex game of deception. That becomes especially evident where there have been direct points of reference in composing; his one-act *Das Gehege* [“The Compound”] (2004–05, libretto by Botho Strauß), written to complement Richard Strauss’ *Salome*, contains many allusions to that scandal-rouser with its luxurious orchestration of 100 years earlier.

Other recent works could be named in this connection, including the “opera-fantasy” *Dionysos* (2009–10), with its many Wagnerisms and allusions to Strauss, as well as *Nähe fern 1*, a newly-begun cycle of orchestral “responses” to the symphonies of Johannes Brahms. To date, Rihm’s work for orchestra testifies again and again to the options opened to him by “inclusive composing” (rather than “exclusive”) – composing which “achieves a result saturated by the present by integrating and encompassing all areas touched and revealed by imagination and economy of work” (Rihm, 1978, at the Darmstadt Summer Courses in New Music).



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