

# *On the magic of reduction*

Daniel Ender

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"I wrote the concerto for percussion and orchestra in 2007/08 for the extraordinary young percussionist Martin Grubinger." Friedrich Cerha

Friedrich Cerha's late works are characterised by a haunting elegy and utter serenity. Nevertheless, a serious element is discernible beneath all the light-heartedness. At the other end of the emotional scale, Cerha writes music that is capable of mourning, yet without giving way to depression. However dark or sombre the colours may become, a feeling of humanity and serenity remains.

If Friedrich Cerha, who was born in Vienna in 1926, had decided to retire on his 75th birthday, he would have already been assured a permanent place in the history of new music with the works he had composed thus far.

Fortunately, he never seems to have considered retiring. On the contrary: Cerha keeps on composing. Over the past few years, he has added a considerable number of new pieces to his already vast catalogue of works. These include large-scale and important compositions, such as his *Concerto for Soprano Saxophone and Orchestra* (2003–04) and *Concerto for Percussion and Orchestra* (2007–08). These pieces re-explore the central theme of his works for stage – relationships between the individual and the group – on a purely musical level, from threatening conflict situations to joyful, musical discussions and relaxed harmony.

Often – and quite rightly – described as the “doyen of Austrian music”, Cerha offers his listeners a moving insight into the origins of his ideas, reporting that they often come to him in dreams. The mental clarity with which he composes his works is only one of the many impressive features of his recent compositions.

“If major late works have a common characteristic, it has to be that of the mind breaking through the form,” Theodor W. Adorno wrote in his *Aesthetic Theory* – enigmatic words describing an enigmatic phenomenon which, however, seems almost palpably obvious in Friedrich Cerha’s case. Although Cerha has always produced superbly crafted scores, the composer has never appeared to have the need to prove anything. In recent years, however, his scores have displayed a blend of perfect craftsmanship and an even greater power that defies explanation, but can be clearly felt. The fact that a piece can be both hauntingly elegiac and utterly serene is one of the paradoxes marking this phase of Cerha’s latest work.

*Ideas often come to Cerha in dreams.*

Although historical verdicts on the present should always be viewed with caution, everything points towards this being a genuine late style. “I don’t

believe I have a style,” the composer once said in an interview. Nevertheless, an unmistakable “Cerha sound” clearly does exist. But it goes beyond superficial stylistic idioms and seems to strip away the earthiness of the notes, revealing the underlying intellectual idea – to return to Adorno.

Whatever tone Cerha strikes, he always offers a reminder of the past – resonances of his early, wonderful experiments with sound, which now have an even clearer implicitness and naturalness.

In his ethereal *Bruchstück, geträumt* (2009), a continuous vibration from the strings is woven through with the sound of tubular bells, resulting in an interplay between sound surfaces and impulses of iridescent clarity. Cerha achieves a similar “magic of the moment” in his rapidly changing symphonic scenes, *Instants* for orchestra (2006–08), which are also fragments (*Bruchstücke*) connected as though by an invisible thread. The same is true of *Momente* for orchestra (2005): its eleven parts have different characters, yet communicate on a fundamental level. In recent years, the composer has frequently returned to and transformed earlier works: *Les Adieux* (2005) had its origins in a piano piece from the 1960s and contrasts slowly fading tones with sporadic sequences of impulses. Anyone who has ever experienced the magic that can be conveyed by just a few of his notes knows that there is a truly great mind at work.

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## WORKS

### **Instants (for orchestra) (2006–2008)**

3 2 3 3 - 4 3 4 0 - timp, perc(4), hp, cel, sop.sax(Bb), mand, vln.I(3), vln.II, vla, vc, cb  
duration: 30 min.  
prem. 20.11.2009: Philharmonie Cologne, WDR SO Cologne, cond. Peter Rundel

### **Concerto for percussion and orchestra (2007–2008)**

3 2 3 3 - 4 4 4 1 - timp(2), perc(4), hp, cel, sop.sax, str(14 12 10 8 6)  
duration: 35 min.  
prem. 04.10.2009: Grosses Festspielhaus Salzburg, Mozarteum Orchester Salzburg, cond. Ivor Bolton, Martin Grubinger, perc

### **Concerto for soprano saxophone and orchestra (2003–2004)**

1 1 2 1 - 2 2 2 0 - perc(3), hp, alto sax, str(10 8 6 5 3)  
duration: 35 min.  
prem. 09.03.2006: Frederiksvaerk, Denmark, Sjaellands Symphony Orchestra, cond. HK Gruber, Johannes Ernst, sax

### **Momente (for orchestra) (2005)**

2 2 3 3 - 4 3 4 2 - perc(4), hp, cel, acc, str  
duration: 22 min.

prem. 01.12.2006: Herkulessaal Munich, RSO Munich, cond. Arturo Tamayo

**Les Adieux (for ensemble, new version) (2005)**

2 1 2 2 - 2 1 2 0 - perc(2), cel, pno, vln(2), vla, vc, cb

duration: 22 min.

prem. 08.10.2007: Tese delle Vergini, Venice, Klangforum Wien, cond. Stefan Asbury

**Bruchstück, geträumt (for ensemble) (2009)**

0 0 0 0 - 2 0 1 0 - perc(3), hp, pno, vln(3), vla(2), vc

duration: 18 min.

prem. 23.04.2010: Witten, Klangforum Wien, cond. Stefan Asbury