

**COLLECTION**  
**BBVA FOUNDATION - NEOS**

**Helmut Lachenmann**  
**String Quartets**

**COMPOSING IN THE TONUS VIRGINEUS**

The String Quartets of Helmut Lachenmann

*I enigmatise the material*

*by disrobing it.*

Anselm Kiefer

When Helmut Lachenmann was honoured for his life's work with the Golden Lion at the 2008 Venice Biennale, the committee explained its decision by saying he had helped "the material of sound to attain a new virginity". This touches on a central aspect of his creative work that has also, in many facets, found its way into his string quartets. This genre, so full of taboos, so marked by the taint of complacency in the age of student rebellions (despite important fresh approaches by composers of the stature of Boulez, Maderna and Ligeti): this genre has now found one of its most significant and original champions. 'New virginity' means, in his case, a rejection of anything adopted without reflection. It also means opposition to anything that twists perception into misperception. But it also means 'repetition' – namely, of the great compositional discoveries that have been increasingly eclipsed and buried in the course of reception history, thereby making tradition effective as innovation. That such a 'back to the roots' mentality can become the source of entirely new and subtle experiences, opening up the full panoply of the previously unheard, points to the dialectical basis of Lachenmann's compositional aesthetic. Perhaps this basis can be most tidily summed up in the phrase 'presenting by retracting'. Listening to Lachenmann's string quartets, we sense how their aural landscape turns from a 'field of rubble' into a 'field of tension' – how scrapings, draggings, scratchings and rustlings can fulfil the promise of a 'new beauty' by avoiding the habitual. But we also sense how reflection and merriment can exist dialectically alongside and with each other. The *tonus virgineus* of the string quartets, for example, embodies music as an 'existential experience' – unspoilt, unaffected, disembarassed of semantic baggage. But the same virginal inflection also seems to fulfil Lachenmann's appeal to the responsibilities of the composer, one of which is "to create situations of individually altered perception and, at the same time, to provide

an acoustical counterfoil to the world, drawn from the potential universe of sounds". Lachenmann's string quartets are just such situations, and in this respect they are related to that Archaic Torso of Apollo that caused Rilke, while gazing at it, to hear the call "Change your life".

*Gran Torso* marks a turning point in Lachenmann's approach to composition. It exemplifies a concept of material defined no longer by sound as an event compounded from abstract constructs, but by the mechanical and dynamic conditions of sound production itself, and on the idea of *musique concrète instrumentale*. Having mutated into a resonating body of sixteen strings, the quartet's musicians, guided by copious explanatory notes on notation and performance, far exceed the limits of the way instruments are normally handled. The explanatory notes, worded with great fastidiousness, unparalleled imagination and a playful spirit of discovery, reveal Lachenmann to be a *ne plus ultra* inventor and explorer of sound. The instructions for tuning and retuning the instruments, for executing the many fingering and damping marks, for the various actions with the bow and for playing on the body, ribs and tuning pegs are worded with maximum precision, suggesting that the title *Gran Torso* indicates not so much an *opus defectum* as a work perfectly rounded in its seeming incompleteness. In this light, the performance of *Gran Torso* on our recording allows the listener to envision a quarry of sound from which the players hew a sort of torso with unprecedented tactile presence.

This image applies equally, albeit in a different way, to the String Quartet No. 2, *Reigen seliger Geister* (Dance of the Blessed Spirits). This work stands out with its evanescent whisperings, its staggered, shadowy *flautandi* (and their timbral opposite, an effectively staged landscape of *pizzicati*) and the 'wild scordatura' of its concluding section, caused by randomly twisting the tuning pegs. If the work's subtitle, *Reigen seliger Geister*, recalls the disembodied spirit-world of Gluck's *Orfeo*, the subtitle of the String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*, points to the work's *dramatis personae* and dedicatees: the Arditti Quartet. The initials of the first names of its then members – Graeme Jennings (second violin), Rohan de Saram (cello), Irvine Arditti (first violin) and Dov Scheidlin (viola) – yield '*grido*', the Italian word for 'scream'. Here new and conventional playing techniques give rise to a new expressivity, but with no hint that Lachenmann has mellowed with age. This piece, too, has fissures, reflective fractures and a mystery – the mystery that accompanies all explorations of sound and which, though allegedly a by-product, is in fact the heart and *raison d'être* of music, as in every other art.

Peter Becker

*Translation from the German: J. Bradford Robinson*

## THE SURROUND SOUND PHILOSOPHY

The unusual aural panorama on our surround-sound recordings was chosen in order to make the rhythmically and sonically complex structures of the string quartets more translucent. The composer uses many different options for generating sounds on and with a string instrument, creating a tight-knit nexus of pitches and noises. In an attempt to approximate this nexus, our recording takes an analytical approach, but without preventing the musical events from blending at the listening point. Listeners no longer hear the ensemble in front of them, as in a concert (or in stereo versions), but find themselves in the midst of the string quartet and can assign a direction to each of the four musicians. The four instruments are placed as follows: Violin I (front right), Violin II (rear right), Viola (rear left), Violoncello (front left). This surround-sound panorama matches the musicians' placement in the concert hall and results from rotating the listening point 180 degrees compared to frontal reproduction: the listener looks out from the middle of the ensemble, between the violoncello and the first violin, toward the 'auditorium', and thus directly into the eyes of his alter ego, the stereo listener.

Andreas Fischer

*Translation from the German: J. Bradford Robinson*