

# HERE COMES NEWER DESPAIR: AN AESTHETIC PRIMER FOR THE NEW CONCEPTUALISM OF JOHANNES KREIDLER

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to clarify the aesthetic precedents for New Conceptualism generally, and Johannes Kreidler's work in particular. Pursuant to this end, I examine how Kreidler's approaches to musical and political material are ideologically indebted to his teacher, Mathias Spahlinger, whose dictum that New Music can be socially relevant without resorting to political clichés is taken by Kreidler into the digital age. Finally, by means of a conclusion, I attempt to provide a broad examination of how Kreidler's aesthetic concerns differ from – and sometimes radically conflict with – those other composers who are grouped under the New Conceptualism letterhead.

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## Introduction – Anatomy of a Movement

At the point of writing, New Conceptualism is truly new. It is arguably the first coherent aesthetic 'school' in New Music of the twenty-first century. It is also unquestionably a plural phenomenon: practitioners come from at least four different continents and use extremely differentiated means for extremely differentiated ends. I would like, then, to begin with an rough taxonomy of New Conceptualism. This is useful because it will enable me to locate my particular topic, and because it hasn't really been done yet.

To begin, New Conceptualism can be (very) broadly defined as a manner of compositional thinking that treats concepts – aesthetic, philosophical, technological, social – as generating compositional material, rather than sounds. Within this platform, different perspectives of conceptual thought can be defined (again, broadly, and with a great deal of overlap between the following definitions). There are a certain group of composers whose works incorporate elaborate and seemingly invasive technological elements whilst retaining the gestural qualities and performative affect of the Western art music tradition. This school of thought could be called *Cyborg Virtuosity*. Composers in this group include Leopold Hurt (who is also an e-zither player and frequently performs his own and other composers' *konzeptmusik*), Stefan Prins, Simon Löffler and Celeste Oram (whose article<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Darmstadt's New Wave Modernism', *TEMPO*, Vol. 69, No. 271 (2015), pp. 57–65.

on the uses of technology at the 2014 Darmstadt Ferienkurse I have drawn on in no small part in this analysis). Next there are composers who seem primarily concerned with the social implications of the new media and technology, especially within internet/fringe communities. We can provisionally call this category *memecore glitchrave*. Composers of *memecore glitchrave* include Jennifer Walshe and Alexander Schubert. Finally, there are those who downplay the traditional boundaries of music – i.e. sounds being produced by resonant bodies – in favour of an increased emphasis on the cultural and aesthetic-philosophic power structures that develop around and inform musical creation. The result is *Hypermodern Art*.<sup>2</sup> Among this last group are Hannes Seidl,<sup>3</sup> Patrick Frank and Johannes Kreidler, the last of whom is the main subject of this article.

Kreidler has recently been the subject of considerable critical interest, much of it curtly dismissive. I believe a large part of this criticism and dismissal arises from a misunderstanding of Kreidler's compositional aesthetics: he is often understood as a one-man hype machine creating a series of anti-music stunts, whereas Kreidler considers himself to be a 'composer of art music'.<sup>4</sup> Such deliberate historical-aesthetic positioning demonstrates both a continuation and a refinement of the compositional thought of another 'composer of art music', Mathias Spahlinger, with whom Kreidler studied in Freiburg. In the following two sections I will demonstrate how Spahlinger's attitudes towards 1) engagement and detachment with political content and 2) the construction and manipulation of musical material provide an essential aesthetic framework necessary to understand the work of Johannes Kreidler.

### Will New Music Sink The FDP?

perhaps a political not completely irrelevant music without esoteric social justice aesthetics is possible: music can make something about existence known by exposing the ciphers that give reality its meaning

Mathias Spahlinger<sup>5</sup>

At the premiere of his *Widowers' Houses*, George Bernard Shaw remarked that the objective of his work was 'to induce people to vote on the Progressive side at the next County Council election in London'.<sup>6</sup> A century later, at the premiere of his *Fremdarbeit*, Kreidler remarked similarly, 'Tonight's goal is that no one here tonight will ever vote for the FDP again'. The difference between Shaw's and Kreidler's remarks is the key to understanding just what

<sup>2</sup> This is Kreidler's term and should not be confused with the 'Second Modernity' of Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf.

<sup>3</sup> Seidl offers a concise and engaging elaboration on the ideology I have roughly summarised here. See his essay 'Music as a Social Situation', in *Substance and Content in Music Today*, ed. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox and Wolfram Schurig, New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Vol. 9 (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014), pp. 151–62.

<sup>4</sup> See his video-CV from early 2016: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5\\_Shkj-wnc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5_Shkj-wnc) (accessed 25 January 2016). It is almost certainly an instance of intentional irony that Kreidler states this as voiceover for a multi-screen segment where he is shirtless on a snowy roof, breathing heavily into a microphone.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Peter Niklas Wilson, 'Musik als Sprach-Spiel und Gesellschafts-Spiel: Zu drei Kompositionen Mathias Spahlinger' in the liner notes to a recording of Spahlinger's works on the WERGO label (WER 65132). The formatting/capitalisation (here and elsewhere) are Spahlinger's; the translation is mine. I have rendered the untranslatable phrase 'ballonmützen-ästhetik' (literally 'balloon-hat-aesthetics') in a way that I believe accurately conveys the dismissive contempt and impatience of the German.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, ed. Christopher Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 110.

it is his music really *does*, and points directly towards to the political ideas of his teacher.

Spahlinger's politics are complex and difficult to untangle, and their manifestation in his music is even more complicated. Accordingly, an article of this size cannot hope to do more than offer a reductive overview. Broadly speaking, Spahlinger seems to hold anarchic views, in the Deleuzian sense of the term, which reveal themselves in certain 'liberating' gestures from performers (for example, in the first few bars of *inter-mezzo* [1986], a percussionist knocks over a cymbal stand). These concerns lead him to temper even his most overtly political music (cf. *trauermusik für salvador allende* [1973/80]) with a mistrust of hierarchical modes of expression. Spahlinger is wary of telling his audiences what to think or what to do.

Spahlinger's political aesthetics are most comprehensively demonstrated in a piece for choir groups and playback, *in dem ganzen ozean von empfindungen eine welle absondern, sie anhalten* ('in the entire ocean of sensations, it can single out and immobilise a single wave'), written in 1985. The choir groups sing semantic content derived from what Spahlinger terms *tatsachentexte* – 'fact-texts'. As might be expected, these comprise various news items, statistics, scientific reports, and so on, in this case all relating to world hunger in particular and, more generally, the degradation of the 'third' world. The texts are broadly unintelligible (no doubt less so to a native German speaker) with occasional words or phrases making a vague semantic impression. Likewise, the harmonic language, while immediately identifiable as non-tonal and incorporating sounds broadcast from radio and television, is not terribly differentiated.<sup>7</sup> To give a reductive account, the piece continues on like this for about 15-odd minutes until suddenly, towards the end, a solo soprano speaks (without accompaniment) the factoid that 'The wealthy possess seven-eighths of this planet. Two thirds of humanity must perish on the remaining eighth. Every two seconds a human being dies of hunger'. This retroactively explains why the choir groups were periodically chanting the word 'jetzt' (now) 200 times at the beginning of the piece to represent the 200 people who would have died of starvation during the ensuing performance.

Thus the format of this piece is rather extraordinary in a manner that exceeds the expected experimentation of New Music. Given, all the requisite functions are being performed, there is the spatialisation of the different choir groups, the exploration of 'unusual timbres', and other nominally 'boundary pushing' functions well anticipated in a piece making a claim to be New Music. But the forceful juxtaposition and engagement with socio-political events in *real time* creates a harrowing sense of complicity in the listener, a complicity that belies a self-critical approach towards New Music itself.

Spahlinger describes his intentions thus: 'by incorporating materials foreign to art, like photographs or news items, one is confronted with the artificial in the hope that the presentation of total impotency, the

<sup>7</sup> In phenomenological (if not aesthetic, as I hope to demonstrate) terms, Spahlinger's music bears a strong resemblance to many of the other 'experimental' works of New Music that were written in the late 1960s and 1970s in Germany: cf. Dieter Schnebel's *Orchestra* (1974–1977) and *Diapason* (1977); Klaus Huber's . . . *Inwendig voller Figur* . . . (1971), *Transpositio ad infinitum* (1976), and . . . *ohne grenze und rand* . . . (1977); Dieter Schönbach's *Canonzen da sonar* series (1966–1979); Johannes Fritsch's *Sul G* (1970), *Sul B* (1972), and *Play V* (1977); and especially Nicolaus A. Huber's works, including *Information über die Töne e-f* (1965–6), *Aion* (for four-track tape and odours, 1968/72), *dasselbe ist nicht dasselbe* (1978), and *Presente* (1979).

impossibility of expression awakens expression'. The critique, then, while nominally about world hunger, is actually implicitly directed towards the expressive apparatus, the grand syntagmatique, of New Music. The surface level, denotative political agitation of *in dem ganzen ozean* – if it can be said to exist at all – amounts to little more than a largely undifferentiated item in a news magazine. Its true potency is in asserting the impotency of the medium (i.e. Neue Musik as funded by German institutions) to address or even speak of contemporary issues. This categorical impotency of the arts fuels a feedback loop maintaining both the exploitation of late capitalism and the ghettoised/hermetic function of the artwork within culture. Jameson puts it thus: 'You don't want to have to think about Third World women every time you pull yourself up to your word processor'.<sup>8</sup> Spahlinger's poesis confronts this functionality of art. To make a slight contemporising emendation, he wants you to think of Third World women every time you load Sibelius 7.

Spahlinger's unique positioning of political meaning is certainly of interest for a new generation of composers for whom the ontological confines of New Music have proved to be insufficient – as Michael Beil puts it, 'the specific [musical] material composers choose to use and the structural contexts which they place it are no longer decisive to the success of their music'.<sup>9</sup> But the results of this 'material shift' (or 'substance-aesthetic turn', in Lehmann's terms)<sup>10</sup> lack the self-critical implications of Spahlinger's praxis. Johannes Kreidler's music, however, does not. Kreidler shares with his teacher the generating concept that music, especially art music, is at its most politically potent when it is asserting its impotency. The most readily obvious testament to this can be found in Kreidler's article devoted to Spahlinger, which immediately begins with the following polemical (although perfectly sensible) statement: 'No one can argue that Anton Webern's Quartet op. 22 contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall'.<sup>11</sup> But such ideas can be readily seen and heard in Kreidler's compositional output as well. In a portion of the seven-hour-long music theatre piece *Audioguide* (2014),<sup>12</sup> videos of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 are superimposed with different musical symbols. Juxtaposed with the spectacular slaughter and destruction of the attacks, the musical symbols are useless, both semantically, since the video is silent, and politically.

However, the most well-known Kreidler piece with overt socio-political content is almost certainly *Fremdarbeit* (2009), which recently has been the subject of an article in *TEMPO* by Martin Iddon.<sup>13</sup> I will attempt to summarise briefly both the piece and Iddon's assessment of it. According to the material provided in the score, Kreidler received a

<sup>8</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 215

<sup>9</sup> Michael Beil, 'Material Shift', in *Musical Material Today*, ed. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Frank Cox and Wolfram Schurig, *New Music and Aesthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vol. 8* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2012), pp. 9–20.

<sup>10</sup> See Harry Lehmann, 'Avant-Garde Today' in *Critical Composition Today*, ed. Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2006), pp. 9–42.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Kreidler, 'Mathias Spahlingers Zumutungen: Gegen Unendlich und gegen Krieg' in *Mathias Spahlinger*, ed. Ulrich Tadday, *Musik-Konzepte*, 155 (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2012), pp. 23–30, here p. 23. The translation is my own.

<sup>12</sup> Rightly described as 'Wagnerian' by Iddon, not least because the first semantic use of language in the piece immediately complains about Wagner. See Martin Iddon 'Outsourcing Progress: On Conceptual Music', *TEMPO*, 70:275 (2015), pp. 36–49, here p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Iddon, 'Outsourcing Progress'.

commission for the piece that was to become *Fremdarbeit*, and, realising that it would be more efficient to outsource the time-consuming compositional work, hired a Chinese composer who cheaply makes imitations of European music. Having legally, contractually purchased the resulting composition from the Chinese composer, Kreidler then presents it as his own in concerts, fulfilling his commission. In the broadest terms, Iddon takes issue with this process claiming that if what Kreidler says about the creation of the piece is true, it duplicates the exploitation that it seeks to criticise, and that if it is a fabrication, then it ventriloquizes colonial perspectives.

One could apply the first critique equally well to Spahlinger's piece. Nothing in the dramaturgy or programme note, and certainly nothing in the musical material, makes any sort of effort at direct criticism. World hunger, poverty, and income disparity are presented as extant concepts, but abstractly, non-evocatively, as statistics and factoids. This dispassionate mode of presentation is in stark contrast with the subjective/evocative treatment of material favoured by other composers of politically engaged New Music, most notably in pieces by Nono and Henze. But, as Kreidler has pointed out to us earlier, neither *Intolleranza 1960* nor *Der Floß der Medusa* contributed to the fall of the Berlin wall.<sup>14</sup>

Taken at face value, both Kreidler's dictum and my defence of it immediately above rely on straw men: no one is really making a case for Webern's contribution to the reunification of Berlin. While this may be true, the issue at stake is not necessarily a matter of historical record as it is a pervasive self-satisfied attitude and concomitant mode of production within the New Music apparatus. Under these auspices, the 'politically engaged' composer writes 'protest music' which laments the fate of this or that marginalised group (although with the rise of nominalism, the group is often reduced to a single martyr, see below) using a familiar (but differentiated, lest they be accused of writing simple *musica negativa*) aesthetic toolkit. And indeed, composers are writing such music today. As recently as 2015, Georg Friedrich Haas has written a piece for solo trumpet called *I Can't Breathe (In Memoriam Eric Garner)*. Eric Garner was a black man who was choked to death by a police officer in New York City, ostensibly for resisting arrest on the grounds of selling loose un-taxed cigarettes. Video footage widely shared after the event showed Garner saying 'I can't breathe' 11 times during the attack. It is unsurprising that such a horrifying and disturbing event would serve as inspiration to an artist, but exactly *how* the artist translates this topical material into an aesthetic context determines the power dynamics of the resultant artwork.

With this point in mind, I will attempt to demonstrate exactly what Haas's piece is doing. Its harmonic material immediately identifies it as the creation of a second-generation spectralist, but Haas has attempted to give this material specific dramatic/political significance. The programme note<sup>15</sup> identifies a gradual 'constriction' from 12-tone space to a 16-note scale, which parallels the physical constriction of Eric Garner's trachea from being placed in a chokehold and shoved

<sup>14</sup> It could certainly be argued that their creators had no intention of any such contribution. Still, I don't believe this significantly detracts from the central issue that politically engaged pieces of New Music position themselves and their critique outside the culture they are critiquing.

<sup>15</sup> [www.musikfabrik.eu/en/blog/georg-friedrich-haas-i-give-no-sound-perpetrators-ein-kommentar](http://www.musikfabrik.eu/en/blog/georg-friedrich-haas-i-give-no-sound-perpetrators-ein-kommentar) (accessed 15 March 2016)

into the sidewalk by NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo. Drawing further connections between virtuosic trumpet performance and the death throes of an unarmed black man, the note also identifies 'trumpet notes of extreme registers and changing colours', which Haas intends as 'cautionary symbols . . . of the world from which the victim was violently torn away'. These assertions unequivocally position the piece as programme music, or, more accurately, western art music snuff.

It is clear from his programme note that Haas nevertheless believes that his music is protesting something. He concludes it by stating 'I leave no notes to the perpetrators'. This statement identifies an object of political critique – 'the perpetrators' – whilst simultaneously extricating the subject (composer/artwork/audience) from the object of critique. The object of critique is exactly that; it remains fundamentally *over there*, safely removed from composer and audience to observe and lament. But such a distinction between perpetrator and artist (and the plural indicates Haas is condemning more than just Pantaleo) undermines any substantive<sup>16</sup> action, since the hierarchy between audience and music, between subject and object, is maintained as firmly as it is in a performance of Bruckner – a rupture that is made uncomfortably obvious by the claims to potency Haas makes of his music. The callous, self-righteous solipsism, the 'leaving no notes to the perpetrators' and then moving on to other commissions, characteristic of certain New Music composers and audiences – here exemplified in an admittedly extreme form – is what makes Spahlinger and Kreidler's critique necessary, effective, and, at best, genuinely transformative, for the exact same reason it draws condemnation from Iddon and others: it refuses to extricate itself from its object of critique. *I Can't Breathe* enacts a praxis of self-satisfied, self-perpetuating detachment; *Fremdarbeit* offers self-implicating entanglement.

Of course, their critique (and, ironically, Iddon's analysis of it) necessarily draws attention to the current cultural-political impotency of New Music itself. Iddon is perceptive enough to realise the implicit power disparity of a healthy white artist criticising the wages of global capitalism through performative exploitation, but he is not quite self-aware enough to grasp the inanity of a healthy white artist criticising a healthy white artist criticising global capitalism, and as a result we now have a healthy white artist (I flatter myself on two of these accounts) criticising a healthy white artist criticising a healthy white artist criticising global capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Neither this article, nor Iddon's, nor *Fremdarbeit*, will contribute to the closing of Nauru or damage

<sup>16</sup> In pragmatic terms, for Haas's statement to have any sort of meaning, let alone that which he seemingly intends, a certain number of unlikely factors need to coalesce: 1) someone affiliated with the NYPD would have to directly encounter Haas's piece; 2) they would also have a working knowledge of the aesthetic foundations of the post-war European musical avant-garde; 3) they would have to read the programme note (since the snub to the NYPD would be otherwise quite literally immaterial); 4) they would have to understand Haas's exclusion of their institutional affiliation from the dramaturgy of his microtonal trumpet étude as a political act that is somehow inseparable from the sounds being generated; and 5) the combination of programme note and trumpet sounds would have to coalesce into a convincing call to action. Thus, Haas's piece is at least five degrees removed from even the most rudimentary criteria of effective political protest.

<sup>17</sup> I find Iddon's concluding quotation about the 'bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie' of the Colonial gaze perplexing and sensational. As Iddon himself previously states, Kreidler just sounds like MIDI. (Additionally, we're all men too, but this might be beating a dead horse).

Donald Trump's presidential campaign, any more than Haas's micro-tonal étude brought justice to Eric Garner's attacker.

But Kreidler has foreseen this dead end. Towards the six-hour mark of *Audioguide* (2014), he himself appears onstage (to scattered applause) and declares that he has run out of ideas. So, he announces that he had decided to do a redux of *Fremdarbeit*, but a problem arose when he could no longer get in contact with Xia Non Xiang, the composer he hired previously. To work around this, Kreidler himself travelled to China in order to imitate the existence of a Chinese subsistence-composer; the result is then played. Kreidler then explains that he ran out of funds in China before the project was completed, but he found work ghost-writing music for European avant-garde composers; the result of this is now played. Afterwards, Kreidler explains, 'I must admit, the fake is even bigger'; he did not actually go to China or ever hire a composer. What he did was play himself, directing himself as a Chinese composer, who was imitating Kreidler, who was directing himself as a Chinese composer, who was imitating Kreidler, and so on. 'But', Kreidler concludes, 'there is, again, an outcome'; and naturally this is also played.<sup>18</sup>

Whose voices are being appropriated here, or, as Iddon would have it, who is the ventriloquist and who is the dummy? It would appear that Kreidler has only used Xia Non Xiang as an avatar to goad perceptive but overeager critics into dismantling a signifying apparatus with which they themselves are entwined. Kreidler's oriental puppet show is a distraction, the only voice he is ventriloquizing is his own. While the philosophical implications of this certainly far exceed the scope of this article, the political ones are rather more manageable: engagement with an artwork (in this case, listening to music) is not a hermetic exercise, it is an activity complicit with the social, political, and economic power structures that produced the artwork. Kreidler's aesthetics – an extension of Spahlinger's – present the power structures in question as transparently as possible while foregrounding the limits and impotency of the medium. The criticism is ultimately not aimed at the FDP (which, admittedly, is a fairly broad critical target) but at the institutions, composers and audiences of New Music themselves.

### Function, And Form

i believe it is very significant that most of us cannot remember what we felt when we either heard or played the chromatic scale for the first time: the bad infinity, where one can always say '+1', that can never find closure.

Mathias Spahlinger<sup>19</sup>

Struktur, Struktur!

Johannes Kreidler<sup>20</sup>

As Iddon has previously (and correctly) noted, Kreidler's accusation that 'composers who do nothing but write their little structures should be ashamed', made in response to a hostile but perhaps not

<sup>18</sup> It should go without saying that all of these pieces are virtually indistinguishable from the 'original' *Fremdarbeit*.

<sup>19</sup> In 'political implications of the material of new music', *Contemporary Music Review*, 34:2–3 (2015), pp. 127–66.

<sup>20</sup> Spoken by the 'sidekick' character in *Audioguide*.

unstaged interruption of a performance of *Fremdarbeit*, requires further scrutiny. In this section I will attempt to demonstrate that both Kreidler and Spahlinger 'solve' the problem of structure not by eschewing it (which, for any temporal medium, is perhaps impossible) but by contextualising it against historical paradigms of musical signification. In essence, one could say the political transparency that characterises their work is simultaneously directed inwards to the structural foundations of the music.

In his article 'political implications of the material of new music',<sup>21</sup> from which the above epigraph is extracted, Mathias Spahlinger describes a metric he created in 1991 outlining the four political aspects of music: 'function, content, means of production, and the poetic'. Spahlinger claims to be most concerned with the latter function, which he further describes as 'the methods by which the music is made'. For him, this is the pivotal category where New Music must differentiate itself. Spahlinger's conception of New Music positions purely melodic innovation and novelty as insufficient characteristics of 'methods by which the music is made'. He is not interested in new sounds, he is interested in new hierarchies of sounds.

The most comprehensive testament to this belief is the piece for voice, clarinet, and cello *128 erfüllte augenblicke – systematisch geordnet, variabel zu spielen* (128 filled moments,<sup>22</sup> systematically ordered, to be played variably), written in 1976. As might be anticipated, the piece contains 128 self-contained musical phrases, which were created by imposing a three-dimensional parametric continuum between axes of duration (short/long), pitch structure (identical/extremely dissimilar) and timbre (pure tones/noise). Each of these axes are given four gradations from which 64 *augenblicke* are derived ( $4 \times 4 \times 4$ ), identified by a three-digit code (each digit identifying the value of one of the three parameters). Additionally, these properties may either increase or decrease during the course of each individual *augenblick*, which leads to the total of  $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 2 = 128$ .<sup>23</sup>

This simultaneously hierarchical and nonlinear organisation has specific political applications in Spahlinger's compositional thinking. He explains that traditional music enacts a sort of dictatorial aural control over the listener, since from a few motives the development of a piece can be relatively anticipated due to the human capacity to 'fill [things] in (ergänzungsleistung)'.<sup>24</sup> The foil to this tendency, the 'newness' of New Music, is its ability to present listeners with a multiplicity of interpretations through its 'open form'.<sup>25</sup> As Blume elegantly puts it, the *augenblicke* 'cannot express anything other than their grid position'.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, any signification must be undertaken by

<sup>21</sup> *Contemporary Music Review*, 34:2–3 (2015), pp. 127–66.

<sup>22</sup> This title is sometimes translated as '128 fulfilled moments' (e.g. in the Blume article cited in n. 23 below). I think translating *erfüllte* as 'fulfilled' rather than simply 'filled' assigns a purposive aspect to the piece that is not evinced by the material or its organisation.

<sup>23</sup> This analysis is heavily indebted to Philipp Blume's excellent and perceptive article 'Mathias Spahlinger's 128 erfüllte augenblicke and the Parameters of Listening', *Contemporary Music Review*, 27:6 (2008), pp. 625–42.

<sup>24</sup> See Spahlinger, 'political implications', p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> To this end, Spahlinger positions Satie's *Vexations* (ca. 1894, a short piece with an indication that it is to be repeated 840 times) as the first piece of New Music ('political implication', p. 130). Spahlinger mistakenly identifies the total duration of *Vexations* as 28 hours; a complete performance actually lasts around 18 hours. See Harold Schonberg, 'A Long, Long Night (and Day) at the Piano; Satie's "Vexations" Played 840 Times by Relay Team', *New York Times*, 11 September 1963, p. 45).

<sup>26</sup> Blume, 'Mathias Spahlinger's 128 erfüllte augenblicke', p. 632.

the listener. Here again we see expressive impotency in service of aesthetic liberation.

Spahlinger pursues these ideas further, resulting in increasingly extreme structural ambivalence. The late orchestral piece *doppelt bejaht* (2009) operates on the same assumptions regarding the ordering/performing/interpretation of musical material, except these new *augenblicke* (the number has been reduced from 128 to 24) are neither systematically organised nor played variably. Here the hierarchical structuring of *128 erfüllte augenblicke* (which both Spahlinger and Blume characterise as ‘post-serial’)<sup>27</sup> gives way to a wholesale loosening of formal procedures: there is no conductor, any ensemble can play the piece, and ‘a performance can begin and end anywhere’.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, *gegen unendlich* (1995) presents an aesthetic sandbox where significance has been fundamentally ‘decoupled’ from the musical material, leaving it orphaned until an enterprising listener adopts it with new signification.

This is a rather laboured metaphor, but it does point towards existential questions about the structuring of material (and the compositional intentionality therein) that Spahlinger evades. In his conception of ‘open form’ music, while there is no inherent supra-organisational significance contained in a piece it is given such a significance (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) by the listener. In this, Spahlinger still retains trace vestiges of Romantic thinking; he does not categorically reject the concept of musical expression.

Kreidler nurtures no such vestige. While retaining the non-interventionist attitude towards form familiar from Spahlinger, Kreidler presents his material the same way a lecturer presents bullet points on a slide. Indeed, Kreidler’s compositions frequently use this exact mode of conveyance. His piece ‘Introduction to the Sociology of Music’,<sup>29</sup> modularly attached to both *Feeds. Hören TV* (2010) and *Audioguide*, comprises a series of slides with a sub-genre of music on each (in *Feeds. Hören TV* the sub-genres are varieties of metal; in *Audioguide*, metal and house). A performer reads the sub-genre in a diagnostic tone (‘This is Black Doom Metal’) and then a short sample is played, accompanied by a short dance. This occurs for each of the 50-odd subgenres. Here the presentation of the musical material refuses the ambiguity that Spahlinger conscientiously maintains. Rather than presenting collections of sounds that a listener can enter and construct their own meaning from, Kreidler’s material functions didactically. At this point, an obvious contrast may be drawn: Kreidler’s *augenblicke* are systematically organised, but they are not meant to be played variably. They are fully, unmistakably itemised, like products on a supermarket shelf. The signification is not absent, it is empty.

Kreidler outlines his philosophy towards musical material in the essay ‘Style Melody’.<sup>30</sup> Framed cheekily as a twenty-first-century answer to Klangfarbenmelodie, Stilmelodie refers to Kreidler’s practice of putting a short (about four bars) musical phrase into simple music production software (e.g. Microsoft Songsmith) and then

<sup>27</sup> It may be noted in passing that Blume’s opinion of serialism’s legacy (‘short and inglorious’) is rather grimmer than Spahlinger’s.

<sup>28</sup> Spahlinger, ‘political implications’, p. 156

<sup>29</sup> One of several cheeky Adorno nods (a character at one point sports a t-shirt with ‘PORNO ADORNO’ written on it in a cursive-glitter font).

<sup>30</sup> Translated with palpable contempt by Wieland Hoban in *Musical Material Today*, pp. 105–16

cycling through the different 'style' selections the software offers. These are then incorporated into Kreidler's compositions (the *Stil* series), where each different style is punctuated by a percussive tone cluster from the live instruments. Towards the end of the article, Kreidler distinguishes this aesthetic from the 'polystylism' practiced by Schnittke et al. In the process, he makes a crucial admission: 'The difference is that the styles I employ are not musical tendencies that appeal to me; I don't identify with them, and that is not the point'.<sup>31</sup> This is an aesthetics of rejection; rejection of affinities, identifications, and, most importantly, affectations. For Kreidler, material exists only to be consumed, or, better yet, exhausted.

In fact, Kreidler often expands the topos of musical exhaustion into the physical (and/or performative?) realm. In his *Lame Hand Studies* (2014), a performer lifts up a limp hand and lets it fall inert on a cluster of piano keys, and then does this many more times. In one of his *Kinect Studies* (2011/13), a performer falls down into a virtual keyboard, and then gets back up and does this many more times. In *Beginninglessness – Anfanglosigkeit* (2015), a performer continuously raises and lowers the lid of a baby grand piano. In the *guitar piece* from *Diminuendo by shame* (2014) a performer cuts the strings from a guitar and stuffs them into his mouth, gagging and chewing for around two minutes. This adds an unsettling, if not unhumorous, dimension to the critical discourse, since the exhaustion of musical material becomes literally, physically exhausting.

To resolve the issue raised at the beginning of this section: the criticism of composers 'writing little structures' is not a self-excepting one. Kreidler is ashamed of his own structures, and he lives their failure himself: the 'performer' mentioned in the above paragraph is always Kreidler himself. This, ultimately, is where the listener fits into Kreidler's music, as one invited to share in failure. The role is a cathartic one, and the enduring popularity of Kreidler's work perhaps in part derives from its resonance within the same New Music scene it critiques: liberation or exploitation, 'way out' or 'dead end', this music has struck a sore nerve that has before gone unnoticed.

### Conclusion – Dissection of a movement

My intention in this article was to clear up what I consider to be misconceptions and misguided critiques of Kreidler's work, which I believe stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of his aesthetic concerns. In an attempt to clear up these misunderstandings (and, in the process, valorise Kreidler) I hope I have demonstrated some of his concerns and where they came from. But, going back to my introductory taxonomy, it is important to note that the subject of this article is only a small one part of New Conceptualism and that the critical interest in Johannes Kreidler only scratches the surface of the hugely diverse phenomenon of New Conceptualism.

First of all, it should be noted that Kreidler's attitude towards his material (i.e. boredom, contempt and above all else exhaustion) is almost dialectically opposed to that of the other de facto figurehead of the New Conceptualism, Jennifer Walshe. Seeing internet micro-communities not as the sad run-off that mainstream society shuns, accumulating into a sort of digital/existential mire, but instead as a vital, pre-Raphaelite engine of genuine creativity, Walshe repeatedly,

<sup>31</sup> 'Style Melody', p. 115

emphatically and, most importantly, sincerely describes herself as an outsider artist<sup>32</sup> (or rather, as the soul of one trapped in the body of an international artist), while Kreidler insists on belonging to a tradition of ‘art music’.

Some composers of New Conceptualism have removed themselves even further from the strictures of ‘music-as-sound’. The most interesting example of this I know of is the Zurich-based composer Patrick Frank, whose ‘Theorieoper’ *Freiheit – die eutopische Gesellschaft* was premiered at Donaueschingen in 2015, and performed again in Zurich in early 2016 with (among others) Slavoj Žižek. The ‘opera’ as such mostly comprises a series of provocative and abstract lectures with occasional musical interjections.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, there is a huge breadth of 20-somethings (‘emerging composers’ in institutional terms) tackling the aesthetic problems that New Conceptualism has exposed (and often created). The sheer variety and scope of these threaten to break the already generalised taxonomy outlined above.<sup>34</sup> To take just one example, Celeste Oram has been working extensively with video- and audio-scores. Her piece *mirror #1* (2013) has performers duplicate the everyday actions they see performed, or, more accurately, they are asked to map the gestures they see onto the body of their instruments (e.g. a cellist’s score is a video of a man shaving). This same concept was used by Johannes Kreidler a year later in the ‘Intermezzo’ to *Audioguide*. Oram’s more recent projects deal with the invasive productivity-optimisation applications of new technologies (‘Big Data’) in the workplace: in *Soft Sonic Surveillance* (2015–), performers download an application that, once launched, records two seconds of audio for every minute of practice. This data is then catalogued (chronologically, timbrally, etc.) and is used to create a more efficient labour structure for musicians.<sup>35</sup>

My intent in assembling this tentative sampler platter of New Conceptualism is to demonstrate, if only on a surface level, the degree to which it is both a plural phenomenon and a truly contemporary one. While it is perhaps worthwhile to devote space in journals to defending or criticising the techniques of individual composers in the movement, attempts to denounce it wholesale consign themselves to irrelevance. New Conceptualism marches on.

<sup>32</sup> See the multiple outsider artist personae she adopts in her work, a.o. the collective Grúpat.

<sup>33</sup> The overture, where a speaker can be heard breathlessly repeating ‘I will write my concert for Donaueschingen’, can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAX69B2A4xk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAX69B2A4xk) (accessed 13 March 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps an additional phylum of *augmented performance* would be required to classify a group of younger composers whose work is deeply concerned with the bodies, dynamics and personalities of the performers themselves. Examples of this can be found in my own works and those of Maximilian Marcoll and Maya Verlaak.

<sup>35</sup> For a more interesting and comprehensive explanation, see <http://celesteoram.com/Soft-Sonic-Surveillance-2015-a-sonic-datafication-tool> (accessed 30 June 2016).