**Peter Ablinger** (1960—)

Aaron Cassidy

Photo: <http://ablinger.mur.at/images/portrait_auto300.jpg>

Peter Ablinger has arguably done more to challenge what we mean by ‘music’ than any composer since John Cage. His works include [*Sehen und Hören*](http://ablinger.mur.at/docu03.html)(1994-2003), a series of abstract photographs that Ablinger refers to as “Music Without Sounds”; *Parker Notch* (2010) for solo instrument and noise, in which an instrumentalist plays a blisteringly fast transcription of a Charlie Parker solo which is completely obliterated by a thick, dense stream of noise occupying the rest of the audio spectrum, rendering the instrumentalist’s sounds more or less inaudible; and *Weiss/Weisslich 36,* [*Kopfhörer*](http://ablinger.mur.at/docu1515.html)(1999), in which the listener dons headphones that have a microphone attached, through which she hears what the microphone picks up in real time (as Ablinger writes, ‘The same is not the same. There is a difference. At least the difference between just being here and: listening. That difference is the piece.”[[1]](#footnote-1)). In the various *Sitzen Und Hören* or [*Stühle*](http://ablinger.mur.at/docu01.html)pieces, rows of chairs are set up in various indoor and outdoor locales around the world, in which "not the sound, but the listening is the piece."[[2]](#footnote-2) The [*Landschaftsoper Ulrichsberg*](http://ablinger.mur.at/landscapeopera.html) (‘Landscape Opera’, 2009) in seven acts, [Act 1](http://ablinger.mur.at/ww26ulrichsberg.html) of which consists of planting rows of trees ‘according to acoustic criterias [sic] as, e.g., colour and intensity of noise, version’[[3]](#footnote-3); or *Quadraturen III ("Wirklichkeit")*, in which various recordings (of speech, street noise, etc.) are transcribed and reproduced with surprising verisimilitude through a computer-controlled player piano.

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muCPjK4nGY4>

Ablinger was born in Schwanenstadt, Austria in 1959. He studied composition with Gösta Neuwirth (1937-) and Roman Haubenstock-Ramati (1919-1994) in Graz and Vienna, and has lived in Berlin since 1982, working principally as a freelance musician. Ablinger’s work is difficult to summarise, as it spans a particularly wide range of materials and methods and media. It is, however, consistently provocative and conceptually daring, and at its core the work is fundamentally about listening, and perhaps even more about *how* we listen, about challenging the conventions of the perception of sound, and about questioning the procedures and practices and historical customs of European/Occidental music-making. It is also true that Ablinger’s materials tend to be, in their essential essence, quite simple – ascending or descending scales (indeed, generally ‘white note’ scales, a central thread in Ablinger’s work since the early 1980s), noise, materials from nature (wind, water, sea shells), unedited field recordings, recordings of speech – but their application is often highly complex and reliant on innovative technological developments.[[4]](#footnote-4)

His work has been organised into several strands of parallel investigation. These strands are neither ‘cycles’ nor ‘collections’, as such, but are instead defined primarily through a central question or a particular compositional or technical method (though in some cases the pieces do share some surface-level sonic characteristics as well). For example, the ongoing *Instrumente und Rauschen* series [*Instruments and Noise*, since 1995] generally combines live instrumental material with recordings of coloured noise, often with the noise layer covering or at least obfuscating the contributions of the live instrumentalist. The *IEAOV* series (*Instrumente und ElektroAkustisch Ortsbezogene Verdichtung*, or *Instruments and Electro-Acoustic Site-specific Verticalisation,* 1995-2001) involves a what Ablinger calls a ‘condensation’ of recorded sound, wherein materials played by acoustic instruments (often simple, sparse microtonal scales) are transformed and played back in real time by a computer programme that, in effect, turns the sounds on their side, the previously sequential, temporal materials now heard as a static, coloured noise.[[5]](#footnote-5) The *Quadraturen* series [*Squarings,* 1995-2000, though new applications of the technology developed in *Quadraturen III* are ongoing] explores audio ‘pixilation’, and transcribing recordings of existing sound through variable width grids of frequency (pitch) and time, thereby transforming, for example, field recordings of Berlin city soundscapes into a pulsing stack of orchestrated chords.[[6]](#footnote-6)

*Weiss/Weisslich* [*White/Whiteish,* 1980-99, though further realisations/manifestations continued through 2011] is perhaps the most sprawling of Ablinger’s series. The works are composed for, among other things: ‘noise receiver; e.g. a radio between 2 stations, or TV without antenna; -- as a fact, installation, or performance’; snail shells; ‘recordings of ground noise in 18 different Brandenburg churches’; a sequence of rooms, ‘each room covered/lined with a different resonant material, e.g. wood, stone, glass, metal, paper, carpet’; ‘the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner, and Mahler compressed into four minutes’; earplugs; ‘six chairs in a wintery field’; tunnels and passageways; white linen sheets; and indeed pieces for much more conventional instruments, including solo piano, small ensemble, etc. The series involves concert pieces, installations, sound sculptures, and a range of conceptual works (fourteen of the works ‘exist only in their titles’[[7]](#footnote-7)). These works perhaps best encompass the range of Ablinger’s investigations and activities as a composer.

In each case, what unifies these disparate investigations is a focus on music – and even sound in a more abstract way – as a fundamentally perceptual phenomenon. That is, despite its physical, acoustical realities, ‘sound’ is something that happens in the brain. Ablinger’s work is about making listeners actively aware of that phenomenon, foregrounding the ‘act of listening’, and indeed even the much more neutral ‘act of hearing’. Ablinger’s use of noise, *das Rauschen*, is central to this foregrounding. As Evan Johnson writes, ‘to hear Rauschen is not to listen to music at all, but, in Ablinger’s words, to “hear hearing.”’[[8]](#footnote-8)

**References and further reading**

At present, there is limited writing on the work of Peter Ablinger in English. Ablinger has posted many of his own writings translated into English on his website.

Link: <http://ablinger.mur.at/engl.html>

Other writings in English include:

Peter Ablinger, *HÖREN hören / hearing LISTENING*, Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, 2008.

G. Douglas Barrett, "Between Noise and Language: The Sound Installations and Music of Peter Ablinger", *Mosaic 42/4,* University of Manitoba, December 2009.

Dan Godston: "Peter Ablinger - the talking piano & composition as a tool for observation." Examiner, May 4,2012. <http://www.examiner.com/article/peter-ablinger>

Evan Johnson, “Like the Clear Blue Sky: Peter Ablinger’s 33-127.” Liner notes for *Peter Ablinger 33-127*, mode 206, 2009.

<http://ablinger.mur.at/texte.html>

A complete bibliography that contains a number of downloadable texts (primarily in German)

**List of major works**

A complete list of works is available on Ablinger’s website.

Link: <http://ablinger.mur.at/werke.html>

The list is quite extensive and is cross-referenced for each of the major series/collections of pieces in Ablinger’s output and also by instrumentation/medium.

They are organized into the following collections:

WEISS/WEISSLICH 1980-99

PIECES 1989-94

4 SERIES 1994-2001

*Sehen und Hören (Seeing and Hearing)*

*IEAOV*

*Instrumente und Rauschen (Instruments and Noise)*

*Quadraturen*

SERIES since 1997

*Das Buch der Gesänge (The Book of Songs)*

*Voices and Piano*

*Klänge auf Papier*

*OPERA/WERKE, Cityopera Graz*

*OPERA/WERKE, Landscape Opera*

*OPERA/WERKE, Cityopera Buenos Aires*

*Orte (Places)*

*Instruments &*

*Augmented Studies*

other PIECES since 1995

**Selected Discography**

*PARKER NOTCH WEISS/WEISSLICH 13*. Gareth Davis, bass clarinet. Fake Jazz FJ201105 (2011)

*VOICES AND PIANO*. Nicolas Hodges, piano. Kairos 0013082KAI (2009)

*33 – 127*. Seth Josel, electric guitar. Mode Records MDE 206 (2009)

*QUADRATUREN III ("WIRKLICHKEIT") "Fidelito/La Revolución y las Mujeres."* Tonto Records #30 (2008)

*3 MINUTEN FÜR ORCHESTER*. 3.Teil aus: Altar. SWR Sinfonieorchester, cond. Silvain Cambreling. Donaueschinger Musiktage 2003, col legno 2CD 20230 (2004)

*QUADRATUREN III ("WIRKLICHKEIT") "Gegrüßet seist Du Maria" "Guten Abend bei der Zei im Bild."* Tonto Records #25 (2004)

*ORGEL UND RAUSCHEN ("Diaphanie 3").* Hans-Peter Schulz, organ. Los Angeles River Records LAL2-21 (2003)

*Instrumente und ElektroAkustisch Ortsbezogene Verdichtung*. *"RED ON MAROON", "8 VITRINEN, PIGMENTSTAUB", Weiss/Weisslich 24, KIRCHEN VON ST. LAMBRECHT.* Gisela Mashayekhi, Wolfgang Musil, Berndt Thurner. Durian Records 021-2 (2003)

*QUADRATUREN V. ("Musik") für Orchester.* SWR Sinfonieorchester, cond. Silvain Cambreling. Donaueschinger Musiktage 2000, col legno WWE 4CD 20201 (2002)

*DER REGEN, DAS GLAS, DAS LACHEN, OHNE TITEL/14 INSTRUMENTALISTEN, QUADRATUREN IV* *("Selbstportrait mit Berlin").* Klangforum Wien, Silvain Cambreling. Kairos, 0012192KAI (2000)

*GRISAILLES 1 – 100*. Hildegard Kleeb, piano. hat(now)Art 132 (2000)

*Instrumente und ElektroAkustisch Ortsbezogene Verdichtung. ("DAS BLAUE VOM HIMMEL").* Michael Moser, cello. Durian LC-2520 (1998)

*Instrumente und ElektroAkustisch Ortsbezogene Verdichtung. ("FÜR JOHANN MICHAEL FISCHER").* Donaueschinger Musiktage 1997, col legno WWE 3CD 20026 (1998)

1. <http://ablinger.mur.at/docu1515.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://ablinger.mur.at/docu01.html>. ‘Other versions exist as text, photo-series, and as performance, but the fundamental formulation of the piece is *Weiss/Weisslich 14*, which exists just as its title that says "Sitting and Hearing". This piece, which does not consist of an object and exists only as an idea (or its title), refers to the thought that is elementary to Peter Ablinger's entire work; the thought that it is not the piece, the composition, the given structure that is important, but the listening process itself. Even the sounds are too much of an object and are not the absolute center of interest. For Peter Ablinger only the hearing itself, the relationship **between** the listener (the subject) and the sound (the object), has the quality of being art in its most immediate sense.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://ablinger.mur.at/landscapeopera.html>, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ablinger has a longstanding collaboration with Thomas Musil and the IEM Graz, who have assisted on numerous pieces, in particular the *Quadraturen* and *IEAOV* series. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://ablinger.mur.at/ieaov.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://ablinger.mur.at/images/qu4_noten-analyse.gif> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://ablinger.mur.at/werke.html#a2> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Evan Johnson, “Like the Clear Blue Sky: Peter Ablinger’s 33-127.” Liner notes for *Peter Ablinger 33-127*, 2009, mode 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)