# Lachenmann, Helmut (Friedrich) (1935–)

**Björn Heile**

One of the most influential composers to emerge from Germany after the post-war avant-garde, Lachenmann is committed to the legacy of integral serialism but at the same time sought to overcome what he regarded as its limitations. His personal breakthrough came with the development of what he calls *musique concrète instrumentale* in which he employs extended playing techniques for traditional instruments, resulting in often noise-like timbres. In his compelling writings, he has contrasted his own composition with what he considers the ‘symphonic sound’ of the traditional ‘aesthetic apparatus’, arguing that listening to his music can liberate audiences from their habits and thus open them up to new experiences. His thought with its demanding ethos concerning the social function of the composer is heavily influenced by the philosophy of Adorno: the aforementioned ‘aesthetic apparatus’ is indebted to the latter’s ‘culture industry’, and Lachenmann likewise shares Adorno’s concept of the ‘sedimented history in the material’. The sometimes polemical dialectics particularly of his earlier writings has led the composer Hans Werner Henze to infamously describe Lachenmann’s work as *musica negativa*, characterised primarily by the denial of habit and beauty as conventionally understood. From a later perspective, it seems more fruitful to concentrate on Lachenmann’s approach to creating sound, ‘building an instrument’ as he calls it, and the new listening experiences this offers, as opposed to dwelling on what he eschews (combining existing sounds). His concern for the energetic properties of sound can be likened to the concept of the ‘molecular’ in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari.

After studying composition and piano at the conservatory in his native Stuttgart, Lachenmann studied privately with Luigi Nono, whom he had met at the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music in 1957, an encounter that left a lasting impression on him. Although initially following the principles of integral serialism, during the 1960s he gradually shifted his emphasis from the complete organisation of musical structure to the anatomy of individual sounds. In a series of works for solo instruments or small ensemble, he focused on unconventional playing techniques, whereby the effort involved in producing the sound would be perceptible as energy by the listener (*temA* for flute, mezzo-soprano and cello, 1968; *Pression* for solo cello, 1969-70; *Guero* for piano, 1970). Subsequently, he applied these techniques, along with the principle of mapping the micro-structure of individual sounds to the macro-structure of entire compositions, to orchestral works (*Kontrakadenz,* 1970-71). From the mid-1970s on, Lachenmann increasingly engaged with music history – Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto in *Accanto* (1975-76), Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in *Staub* (1985-87) – without, however, losing his critical impulse. Arguably his most celebrated work is the opera, or ‘Music with Images’ as he calls it, *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (*Little Match Girl*, 1988-96, produced 1997) on texts by Hans Christian Andersen, Leonardo da Vinci and Gudrun Ensslin.

## Key Works

*Due Giri*, two studies for orchestra (1960)

String TrioNo. 1 for violin, viola and cello (1965)

*Air*, music for large orchestra with percussion solo (1968–69)

*Gran Torso*, music for string quartet (1972)

*Salut für Caudwell*, music for two guitarists (1977)

*Tanzsuite mit Deutschlandlied*, music for orchestra and string quartet (1979–80)

*Ausklang* for piano and orchestra (1984–85)

Second String Quartet *Reigen Seliger Geister* (1989)

*Serynade* for piano (1998)

*NUN* for flute, trombone, male choir and orchestra (1999)

*Concertini* for large ensemble (2005)

## Further Reading

*Contemporary Music Review* (2004), 23/3-4.

(This double issue on Lachenmann is probably the most comprehensive introduction to his music in English.)

Kaltenecker, M. (2004) *Avec Helmut Lachenmann*, Van Dieren.

(Thorough critical introduction to Lachenmann’s work, which is unfortunately difficult to get hold of.)

Lachenmann, H. (1996) *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*, Breitkopf & Härtel.

(Extremely illuminating collection of Lachenmann’s writings.)

Nonnenmann, R. (2000) *Angebot durch Verweigerung: Die Ästhetik instrumentalkonkreten Klangkomponierens in Helmut Lachenmanns frühen Orchesterwerken.* Mainz: Schott, 2000.

(Detailed critical study, although overly dependent on Lachenmann’s own views.)