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Gay Darmstadt: Flamboyance and Rigour at the Summer Courses for New Music

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During the late 1950s, the Darmstadt courses brought into contact a number of gay composers and theoreticians whose interactions—produced by differing attitudes towards openness and secrecy at the time—played an important part in the rapidly evolving aesthetic and technical dogmas of the European avant-garde. It is arguable whether the provocational talents of Boulez or Cage can be linked to the training in 'otherness' instilled by a gay private life. They were, however, put on their guard by Bussotti's arrival at Darmstadt in 1958. Bussotti's public flamboyance and frank use of homoerotic texts gained didactic and political strength through his relationship with Adorno's brilliant student Metzger. The impact of such overt provocation on the closeted Boulez, on the politically muddled Henze, and on such discomfited heterosexuals as Berio, Nono and Stockhausen, contributed to the aesthetic flux that characterized Darmstadt in the late fifties and early sixties.

Keywords: Darmstadt; Serialism; Modernism; Gay; Boulez; Cage; Bussotti

Introduction (Paul Attinello)

This article is a collaboration, but one in which we did not attempt what is frequently the aim in collaborative scholarship—namely, the smoothing over of different opinions and positions into a text that appears to speak with a single voice. Because we are trying to speak of a history which we believe to be important and widely misconstrued, but which is also (as is typical for many pre-Stonewall 'gay' cultural nexuses) definitively undocumented and even concealed from view, we are forced to read between many lines and bridge many gaps. Even in cases where specific facts are known, those facts may not be available in a context of normal scholarly documentation. Since our methods of gap-bridging are quite different, reflecting our differing backgrounds and epistemological stances, we have chosen to distinguish our

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voices in an antiphonal structure which, we hope, suggests a third voice that is different from either—but not utterly, or irretrievably, different.

Much of my own awareness of the ensuing anecdotes and interpretations comes from casual conversations with Sylvano Bussotti, Heinz-Klaus Metzger, Konrad Boehmer, Friedrich Hommel, Wilhelm Schlüter and Richard Toop, among others. Naturally, some of these have more or less direct experience, more or less dependable memories, or more or less investment in certain interpretations of what they saw and heard; however, although we may never have solid factual documentation to explain the network of personal relationships that made up Darmstadt, there is easily enough certainty and consensus among former participants to make some arguments entirely plausible.

During the 1950s, the Darmstadt summer courses brought into contact a number of gay composers and writers whose interactions played an important part in the rapidly evolving aesthetic and technical dogmas of the European avant-garde. Noted gay composers were present at Darmstadt from its first session in 1946, when Wolfgang Fortner brought his star student Hans-Werner Henze to the courses. In the early 1950s, as the Ferienkurse were beginning to develop as an international center of attention in modern music, Heinz-Klaus Metzger and then Pierre Boulez appeared and immediately began to influence the entire aesthetic/political direction of the courses. During that time, after they were introduced by Virgil Thomson, Boulez created and then destroyed his musically significant friendship with Cage; the apparently different attitudes of the two men towards their sexuality may have had as much to do with these changes as did any difference in their aesthetics.

Although the fifties were an era of deep conventionality and homophobia, artists and composers were expected (as so often throughout history) to reach into unnamed, and often unnamable, realms of private desire and gratification, both in their lives and in their art. However, the relatively closeted social situation allowed gay men to construct their public personas without explaining any aspect of their sexuality. Such cultural forces were brought into particularly sharp focus in the Darmstadt Ferienkurse; the situational implications of a large number of young people meeting during the summer in a town far from anyone's home, plus the attitudes imposed on the post-war avant-garde from within and without, engendered eroticized personal relations that have appeared in anecdotes and gossip shared over subsequent decades among many of the participants and their friends. Thus, casual discussion might lead one to infer how Boulez is both concealing and exposing his own sexuality in his compositions of the late 1940s. In 1958, Sylvano Bussotti was brought by Metzger to study at the courses; as the first of the Darmstadt composers to make himself flamboyantly obvious in public, he disrupted the relatively safe social worlds of his seniors, making evident some of the underlying psychosexual implications of the styles and choices of high modernism.

Ultimately, it seems clear that the personal quarrels and alliances that took place among the members of the Darmstadt circle helped to establish the significant aesthetic differences that drove much musical change between 1950 and 1968, and

which still influence musical development today. They also created some of the camaraderie, and later some of the hostility, that in turn developed and destroyed the richly supportive network of aesthetic interplay that was Darmstadt.

Part I (David Osmond-Smith)

All forms of abstract art engage the mind in a search for similarities. Indeed, it is the particular characteristic of hearing or viewing forms to which no primary 'referent' can be assigned either by established iconic convention or by interpretive clues from another medium—titles, associated texts, etc.—that the mind will buzz with multiple similarities. The solution of that pleasing confusion—the directing of interpretation along a 'dominant' path through asserting a primary interpretive focus—or instead its calculated refusal, is one of the choices that regularly confronts composers and visual artists.

It is the purpose of this article to suggest the withholding and trace the subsequent assertion of a particularly telling set of interpretive associations within the music of the post-war European generation through examining the interactions between two gay (or, to more accurately reflect the language of the era, homosexual) composers who first came to public attention a decade apart: Pierre Boulez and Sylvano Bussotti. Both came to prominence at a time remarkable for its extreme homophobia. The stylistic vocabulary pioneered by the first strongly influenced the second; but their decisions as to how best to direct the listening mind in its responses differed profoundly.

Although Boulez has always maintained a determined defense of his own privacy, he has acknowledged that his first, vivid outburst of works which, even today, maintain their stylistic authority over the fifties avant-garde were produced immediately subsequent to an intense, violently sexual relationship. He has also acknowledged, en passant, his own homosexuality. It is, of course, speculative to assume that this relationship was therefore with another man—a young man may try many paths—but if this was the case, certain features of his early artistic development fall into a pattern that make Sylvano Bussotti's reaction to them a decade later seem less than quixotic.

When the eighteen-year-old Boulez arrived in occupied Paris in 1943, we may assume that he was mindful of at least one precedent for the radical self-reinvention that he was about to undertake. He was intensely interested in poetry—the shrewd but intrusive Joan Peyser (Peyser, 1976) tells us that the bookshelf in his room held not just Char and Mallarmé, both of whom he was in due course to use as mouthpieces, but also Rimbaud: the role-model for every precocious, emotionally intense adolescent who finds no social 'representations' through which adequately to interpret his feelings and perceptions. Rather than collapse into teenage confusion, Rimbaud sought out the aesthetic discipline required to body forth representations through which he could reinvent himself: in his case through a 'systematic derangement of the senses' given meaning through an extension of Baudelaire's

theory of sensory *correspondances*. That which convention would classify as metaphor was, for Rimbaud, a new personal reality.

Boulez likewise gave a further turn of the screw to the most radical aesthetic example of the previous generation. But the discipline that he imposed upon himself was couched in strictly technical terms: the subversion of Schoenbergian organicist serialism so as to engender a 'universe in perpetual expansion' in which nothing ever repeats. Rimbaud's maxim '*Il faut être absolument modern*'—a battle cry against the formation of the self around familiar habits—here found its miniaturized correlate within the universe of the work. If its effect upon the listener was to forge a new vision of subjective potentials, this had no necessary relation with the employment of specific technical means, as Paul Attinello makes clear below in his discussion of Bussotti. But the fact that both Boulez and Rimbaud, each in their very distinct way, chose to work their way through to a new vision of subjective potentials by an arcane and private discipline is perhaps no accident.

Grasping at technical discipline is lent understandable urgency by the perception that, in one of the more fundamental ways to impinge upon a young person—sexuality—one cannot hope easily or honestly to fall in with the sober life-narrative proposed by the society around one. This is not, of course, to say that homosexual sensibility enjoys a monopoly upon aesthetic subversion or challenge, merely that it is particularly motivated to undertake this inevitably disturbing and dislocating process. And irrespective of how Boulez defined his own erotic needs at the time, his determined advance towards an 'organized delirium' in sound demanded some strategic decisions. Disdaining the anecdotal 'self-expression' of confessional art, Boulez turned first to the (eminently heterosexual) René Char to give verbal focus to the explosive, gestural music that resulted from this synthesis. But the ambitious and explicitly erotic cantata *Le visage nuptial* (1947) proved not only enduringly difficult to perform effectively (despite several revisions) but, in its reined-in intensity, curiously stilted.

It was rather through the physical immediacy of his relationship to that surrogate for intimacy, the piano, that Boulez's presence as a new and disturbing voice in the post-war musical world was achieved. His Second Piano Sonata (1947 – 1948) rapidly achieved cult status, not just as an obligatory tour de force for the young Turks of the keyboard, but as an object of fascination both for the composers who congregated annually at Darmstadt, and (due to the advocacy of John Cage and David Tudor) for New York's abstract expressionist painters and their circle. Its dense, chaotically gestural style seemed to invite a range of iconic associations that may be sorted according to their distance from, or intimate proximity to, the imaginary body: on the one hand the anarchic abundance of sight, sound and smell offered by the modern metropolis (a classic modernist 'topos' from Baudelaire on), and on the other, the unpredictable patterns of a violent and polymorphous sexuality unharnessed from interpretation through the teleology of reproductive function. Anarchic play with the sensory possibilities of the city is thus not merely a 'public' prelude to the 'private' anarchy of sexual play with another body. The confidence to

cope with that for which habit provides no seasoned response is prerequisite at both poles of this 'double eros'. It entails that post-Freudian trust in the integrity of the irrational that marks so many of the early twentieth-century 'isms': futurism, surrealism, and so on. It substitutes for the fear-haunted view of the unconscious as threat the radiant precision of a Malevich or the frenetic abundance of a Pollock.

But it is characteristic of all abstract expressionisms, whether musical or visual, that they do not acquire 'meaning' from a referent that stands beyond them and endows them with significance. Instead, their relationships of similarity with unspoken experience set up a process of feedback between unconscious or ambiguous icon and memory. The expressionist artwork establishes an ideal dimension within which the artist can fully develop the potential that direct experience seems to promise, yet never quite fulfills. The artist as 'disappointed sensualist' uses his medium to sharpen sensibility—to make richer demands upon lived experience. If those demands are frustrated, they may be partially appeased by retreating into aesthetic elaboration. We expect the erotic fruits of our prowls through city streets to live up to the idealized eros of our compositions and paintings—and we know with which imaginary bodies we may entangle ourselves by way of compensation if they don't.

Although it is not unreasonable to surmise that the 'organized delirium' of early Boulez is grounded in his negotiation of the labyrinth of this 'double eros', it is equally unsurprising that he should claim the artist's right to discretion through nominal abstraction. To do otherwise is to risk calling into play the voyeuristic mechanisms of the 'bohemian' social contract. Since the later nineteenth century, one of the few *milieux* within which a gay artist might forge an identity that bodied forth some of his private energies and desires was the 'bohemian' fringe; but such liberty was achieved only at a price. The contract between the cultured bourgeois and the 'bohemian' artist has always been in danger of lapsing into the banalities of voyeurism. Until the progressive dissolution of that contract in the later sixties and seventies—as the mores of the bohemian became indistinguishable from those of 'youth culture'—artists were paid to enact, and symbolically to body forth, that which bourgeois society had stoically renounced in order that the capitalist machine might run with maximal efficiency. A prime victim upon the altar of efficiency had always been undirected sexual pleasure. Eroticism had to know its place within the functional order—it was there to (briefly) lubricate the production of further agents of this self-perpetuating machine. It was left to the 'bohemian' to tarry with the purposeless, with the inconclusive delights of physical pleasure for its own sake. Bohemian 'decadence' was an instructive warning to the sons and daughters of the middle classes, who might peer down upon these latter-day lotus-eaters within the aesthetic cage wherein they were paid to remain.

Although it is not, perhaps, fruitful to invest excessive speculative energy into divining the private sources that shaped Boulez's aggressively abstract public display, the style that he created was a hostage to fortune. Sooner or later, someone was going to put a name to it, to hang about it symbolic interpretations of sufficient potency to compromise its abstraction. That person was Sylvano Bussotti.

Part II (Paul Attinello)

As one rapidly discovers from talking to participants, there was already an intricate, secretive dance of gay social (and occasionally sexual) relations winding through Darmstadt in the early 1950s. However, this dance became more obvious, more socially meaningful, and much more uncomfortable for some of the participants in 1958. The notable dramatic incident of 1958 was, of course, Cage being brought in to lecture in Boulez's absence, an incident that exacerbated the already poor relations between the two of them as well as those between Boulez and Stockhausen, since the latter engineered Cage's visit. However, it is clear in retrospect that the appearance of the young, spectacularly flamboyant Sylvano Bussotti was even more upsetting for a number of Darmstadt participants (although it is said that the extremely heterosexual Nono deliberately associated with Bussotti for a time in order to appear liberal, and that Maderna liked to engineer skirmishes between participants who found each other objectionable out of a sheer Rabelaisian joy at the resultant carnival of emotions and types). Bussotti made certain underlying connections between music, avant-gardism and homosexuality all too evident; while inspiring some of the younger gay figures to be less secretive about their behavior, and even apparently introducing some participants to sexual experiences heretofore only imagined by them, he also definitely alarmed and annoyed the senior figures, particularly Boulez.

Bussotti had been born into a self-consciously artistic family and encouraged to express himself with drama and preciosity from an early age. Bohemianism was, for him, the air he breathed, and a way of being an ageless *enfant terrible* (a position he constructs for himself even today). Bussotti had already angled for an invitation to the Ferienkurse as early as 1950, when he wrote to the Institut to request a scholarship; no answering letter survives. Whatever the reasons for his being ignored, that rejection resulted in his eventual move to Paris, where he must have at least heard of Boulez, and where he learned considerably more about being 'bohemian' in ways that he would use to develop his already fairly elaborate artistic and social persona. In 1957 he met Heinz-Klaus Metzger, then one of the most brilliant and uncompromising of Adorno's students. Metzger repeatedly turned his aggressively idealistic philosophy of liberation on the Darmstadt composers, engaging in an extended polemic (including public demonstrations at concerts) against Henze for 'false consciousness'; perhaps this should be interpreted on at least two levels, as Metzger regarded his own homosexuality as politically and socially significant and made sure that his peers were aware of it.

In the summer of 1958, about a month before the Ferienkurse, Bussotti and Metzger became lovers, a relationship that made the two into an imposingly influential social unit that derived remarkable power from the combination of trendy, camp style with rigorous intellectual speculation. That relationship endured through the dramatic changes that overtook the Darmstadt courses in the ensuing years, lasting until Christmas of 1963.[1] At that point it blew up in a quarrel;

Metzger and Bussotti did not speak to each other between 1964 and 1992, when they reconnected over a professional matter. This relationship was important in Bussotti's career, as the greater part of the composer's densest, most intellectually challenging work—the work that established his international reputation—was produced during or soon after his contact with Metzger.

Metzger had already appeared at the Ferienkurse several times since first attending them during Adorno's first visit in 1950. In 1958, he brought Bussotti along, who thus finally met Cage, Tudor, and Stockhausen, and who started to write his first published compositions in the seminars (especially Stockhausen's seminar in 'Musik und Grafik', where Bussotti became the star and chief representative of that aspect of high modernist composition). Bussotti attended the Ferienkurse for each of the three following years; he then had an argument with the administration over tuition fees that now seems distinctly trivial, but which resulted in his never returning to Darmstadt after 1961. Bussotti's first notable piece of music was *due voci* for soprano, ondes martenot and orchestra, written between May and December 1958. That year he also began the important song cycle *pièces de chair II*, which was finished in 1960. In 1964 Bussotti wrote his most self-consciously decadent work, *la passion selon Sade*; these three works represent not only certain musical but also cultural attitudes which were more influential at the time than is widely remembered today.

The piece *due voci*, written to a text by La Fontaine in praise of a generalized voluptuousness, is notable for the equivalence of voice and electronics, as emphasized in the title: the two voices are erotically entwined, machine and woman, and the chaotically sensual nature of their entwining is intensified by Bussotti's self-conscious rebellion:

> This is the first composition to reject the principle of serialism, now in fashion, to abandon it completely and deliberately in favor of a technique of composition that can be defined as a-serialism. In this voluntary act of going beyond serialism can be seen not only its conquest by a-serialism, but also a dialectical rebellion of the humanistic attitude in the man who writes music, against the stiff aridity of systems. (Bussotti, 1970, my translation)

Despite its apparent alignment with Boulez's ideas of the limits of pure serialism in 'On the Edge of a Fertile Land' (Boulez, 1955), this can only be read as a rather aggressive challenge to the dominance of the serial idea. Given that challenge, it is surprising to read that

> Pierre Boulez, whom the author consulted during this time, and from whom he received valuable advice, reduced the whole work to a uniform rhythmic basis; thanks to the reduction to a measurable dimension, the score and parts could be made ready for performance. (Bussotti, 1970, my translation)

In an unpublished 'performance score' available only on rental,[2] Boulez altered the metric structure of the work (in order to homogenize simultaneous different meters)

and some of the rhythmic notation (especially that of the gruppetti). He also changed Bussotti's characteristic handwriting of numbers, replacing it with plastic sans-serif press-on numbers. This ruthless rationalization of both the notation and the artwork suggests some discord, as the published version of the score remains Bussotti's original; in 1985, Bussotti rewrote the work as *Et due voci,* and deleted most of Boulez's changes. The work *due voci* is certainly not the most radical of Bussotti's erotic spectacles, but it was the only one to be qualified by such revisions.

A more direct example of Bussotti's personal and aesthetic intentions at the time is the song cycle *pièces de chair II* ('Pieces of Flesh'), which is largely based on overtly homosexual texts. Many of those texts are somewhat pedophiliac, and they inevitably emphasize bodies as erotic objects to be enjoyed or dominated, rather than any kind of emotional communion; some idealize desire itself, as an operating force for which bodies are merely the tools. All of this is heavily embedded in a classical tradition, and in fact many of the texts are translations from ancient Greek and Latin. The first song, 'amo', has the text

> I LOVE the whites but
> I LOVE also those the color of honey and the reds
> and I LOVE the browns.
> I don't say no to the boys with clear eyes
> but I LOVE
> more than all those the ones with
> black eyes that shine[3]

The identity of this first 'song' is complex, as it is also the fifth of the famous *piano pieces for David Tudor* if the text is not performed; this rhizomatic complexity is typical of Bussotti's work of this period, and suggests an atmosphere of public initiation into arcane knowledge that was apparently not unlike his approach to the outer limits of sexual behavior. Tudor, of course, was heterosexual, but much of his work occurred in the midst of a complex and not always stable knot of gay desire and relationships. Letters in the Tudor Archive at the Getty Foundation in Los Angeles suggest that at one time Cage expressed for Tudor passionate feelings which were not returned; perhaps there is something rather aggressive about Bussotti's composition of these pieces 'for David Tudor', which Bussotti has explained is not a dedication so much as a performance direction. Tudor premiered three of the piano pieces, including this one, in 1959 at Stockhausen's seminar in graphic notation; a 45 RPM recording of no. 3, which has no text in any version, was distributed as a publicity gesture for the Ferienkurse by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk in 1960. Since only one other 45 RPM recording was ever similarly released for the Ferienkurse, this indicates the importance attached to Bussotti's work at the time, and perhaps its significance at the core of Darmstadt aesthetics before the revisionist histories of the 1960s retroactively installed a more rigid and 'straighter' position on serialism.

Another important part of *pièces de chair II* is the long, fragmented, multilingual solo for female voice and piano written in 1959 and called 'voix de femme'. This is one of the chain of works that were written for Cathy Berberian in response to Cage's *Aria*. The origin of the piece took place in a charmingly familial context:

> *voix de femme* as written was modeled on the intimate musical features of Cathy; transcribed perfectly the night in which the score was finished; Luciano Berio composed in his study on the big piano, I traced my staves on the luncheon table; at one point Berio came down and, sitting on the opposite side of the table, looked at me almost as though he was to paint a portrait, he began to write a brief melodic line, complete with all twelve sounds, and he gave it to me; I inserted the quotation immediately into my score, entrusting it to the clarinet, like a kind of playful sound treatment. Cathy had baptized me 'Cherubino', and so she called me nearly always; it was in that manner that I thought about concluding the piece with a kind of sung signature, which at the same time would be a homage of thankfulness to both my benefactors—and I don't want to deny the eighteenth-century grace of it all—making Cathy sing, as a last word, the name 'Cherubino' underlined by a malicious crescendo of punctuation by the tongue. (Bussotti, 1976, my translation)

Bussotti had become a close friend of Berberian, and at first Berio evidently found this amusing. However, fairly soon, Bussotti became Berberian's closest confidant, introducing her to camp aesthetics and the pleasures of outrageous spectacle; she was an extraordinarily good student, modifying her stage persona from dark-haired wife to flamboyantly platinum-haired *grande dame* by the mid-1960s. This change was uncomfortable for Berio, and he blamed Bussotti for his part in it. Indeed, the composition of *Sequenza III* could be seen, at least partially and admittedly with some ironic self-awareness, as an attempt at the reassertion of control over her, both as singer and as wife.

But Berberian, despite her respect for high modernist composers and their cultural status, never changed her public persona back so as to fit once again into a dignified, conservative modernism. In 1964 and 1965, Bussotti wrote a piece called *la passion selon Sade* (The Passion according to Sade). This large performance work, which plunges a female soloist, instrumentalists, a mime, and the composer himself into a hallucinatory tangle of overlapping erotic situations, was written for and with Berberian. The central figure (performed by Berberian) is simultaneously Sade's Justine and his Juliette—thus both sadist and masochist in the same body—and also Pauline Réagé's O, the woman forced into elaborate dominance games who discovers her compliance with and control of the resultant situation. The approximate heterosexuality of the original text is modified in the stage version by an emphatic pan-eroticism among the performers, not to mention the voyeuristic stance of the composer in regard to everyone involved. Onlookers and colleagues saw *la passion selon Sade* as implicitly insulting to Berio, and it seems possible that he did too; after all, despite being offered the gift of *Sequenza III,* Berberian chose to tour with this outrageous and widely publicized spectacle, and of course to consort with that dreadful man.

Postlude (David Osmond-Smith)

This exercise in what Nietzsche, towards the end of his productive life, called 'physiological aesthetics' does not seek to indict Boulez for his discretion, nor simply to applaud Bussotti for his frankness. In choosing between 'occult' mimesis and 'bohemian' role-play—a choice forced upon any gay artist by the homophobia endemic to his social environment—there are gains and losses at both poles. But if Bussotti's exuberant frankness retails the delights of the ghetto with such telling force, one may at least be grateful to him for reminding us of the seminal role that gay sexuality played in bringing to the cultural foreground during the late fifties a willingness to live with the body in all its violence, delirium, and search for pleasure. Sexuality's refusal to be co-opted into the bourgeois cult of teleology, of 'function', here found a vivid and arresting icon.

Notes

[1] According to Metzger's memory, they split up on 21 or 22 December. There is some uncertainty about these dates, especially as they are sometimes in conflict with Bussotti's varied memories of their relationship.

[2] In the archive of Ricordi (now owned by BMG) in Milan, along with other related papers. The relationships between the extant manuscripts and versions of *due voci*, whether marked by the composer or by Boulez, give a complex image of their relationship at the time.

[3] AMO i bianchi ma
AMO anche quelli colore del miele e i rossi
e AMO i bruni.
Non dico di no ai raggazzi dagli occhi
chiari ma AMO
più di tutti quelli dagli
occhi neri lucenti

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