



Multiplicity

German composer Dieter Mack pleads for diversity and pluralism

IF YOU CLOSED your eyes and listened to the music of German composer Dieter Mack, you'd never imagine that he spent the formative years of his composer's career in Indonesia, trekking in the footsteps of generations of those like he, who had heard the gongs and been lured by the magic of Bali Hai to the archipelago.

The horrific undertones of his *Kammermusik IV*, which he demonstrated during his lecture in August at the Auckland University School of Music, held his audience in a trance as the piece negotiated cascades of sounds of frightening intensity and fragile delicacy, a tribute to the great German legacy leading up to the late Stockhausen and beyond.

Curiously, the work, written in late 2004, was completed on December 26, the day the great Tsunami struck Southeast Asia. The final bars of the score instructs the soprano to exhale, 'like in the process of dying'. Whether premonition or a late artistic response to the catastrophe, there

is something deeply engaging about Mack's work, and he says it is the result of his years in Bali.

A renowned specialist in Indonesian classical music who speaks fluent Indonesian, Mack continues to return to Surakarta where he is involved in the teaching of modern composition for gamelan. Originally intending to conduct this interview by email, by a strange twist of karma I learned of Mack's arrival in Auckland on the very day that I had planned to pen the email.

I find Mack sitting in the atrium of the music school, enjoying a beam of sunshine that is a prized commodity in wintry New Zealand. We have never met, but by instinct he looks up at me and smiles. 'You are looking for me?'

OTE: How did your fascination with Indonesia begin?

Dieter Mack: That happened in '77 during my studies in Freiburg, when my teacher

Brian Ferneyhough asked all the students of the class to prepare a paper on the music of their respective cultural backgrounds. Not knowing that his Japanese students didn't know anything about Japanese music, and Korean didn't know anything about Korean music, the original plan failed miserably! But he thought; why not continue in that way to ask them to look at the music of another culture? So I started to prepare something on Balinese gamelan, because just by chance the Dean of Musicology in Basel was known as a specialist in Bali, [and was able to] help me with my material.

Then I started to prepare that paper with those records and literature available at that time, but after it was finished I had quite mixed feelings. On the one hand I didn't understand what the music was, even though I had done the paper; on the other I was quite curious – the music caught me, so I decided I had to go to Indonesia.

I went there in July '78 and I can say today that it changed my life 180 degrees.

BLOOMBERG



Left to right Ensemble Surplus; Mack lecture



So if Ferneyhough had given me the topic 'Malaysian music', I would have started in Malaysia! From a distance today, I would say that it was a kind of coincidence because there are some elements in the music itself that was already found in my imagination. It's the same thing with Debussy and gamelan, gamelan did not influence Debussy but it was similar to some musical ideas Debussy had in mind.

In what way did the experience with Indonesia change your life?

Various ways! Personally, I grew up in very secure surroundings in a typical middle-class small town German family, nothing happened in that town actually, and I grew up with strong belief in modern economic development, and then I went to this small village in Bali with no electricity, no road – at least at that time – and the people were so physically close and natural but rich and open in consciousness... I was so thrown back ... a psychological shock!

But as much as it had been a shock, it was also a kind of rebirth process for myself, experiencing people living in such complete balance with nature, so different from the kind of life I was used to.

That was one aspect. The second was, I felt that there was a social structure that was signified by hierarchy and equality at the same time. It is something that is hard to explain... it is completely obvious that people are quite individual but interconnected in a system that is highly democratic on the one hand and highly hierarchical on the other. And I came to realise that people who lived in such a 'primitive' society [Mack stresses the huge inverted commas], or rather, close to nature, was something special.

This changed my consciousness and

when I came back to Germany I at once started getting in contact with the villagers, and I started to sing in the church choir, and arrange for the brass band – it changed my social behaviour.

It was less the music and much more the social influence that had an effect on me.

And the music?

The music in the beginning was still a secret to me, and I had disappointing experiences. I had started to learn a piece with a teacher who was the head of the family, the late I Gusti Gede Raka – famous for the Legong dance by the way – and after two weeks, he said that I would know now the whole piece. When it came the time for the rehearsal of the local group I was very excited to listen to the real gamelan, and when they started to play the piece that I had learned, I did not recognise it! It was for my untrained ears completely different from what I had learned. Today I know what the problem was, what he taught me was a basic melody which never appears in the gamelan, it was just an outline.

The second problem was that they would practice five pieces and they sounded all the same to me. It's like a foreign language; if you don't know the language it sounds like uncoordinated utterings of sounds! And so after some months my situation changed significantly, and today you just need to play a few pitches and I know now what piece it is.

I think the most exciting experience for me was when they allowed me to join their group, that special type of collective playing without losing the individual - again the dichotomy between individual and the collective... this kind of hierarchy with the gong as the foundation going up to the top with the figuration or the counterpoint drumming – a functional hierarchy.

What impact did all this have on your own music?

At first I did not compose for a year [after that experience]... I was completely confused. Before that time I had composed exclusively electronic music – that was one of the reasons I went to Freiburg because of the Experimental Studio of the Heinrich-Strobel-Stiftung at the Südwestrundfunk, where I became assistant after a while in 1976.

Then for my first commission I still applied live-electronics once again, using purely sounds from that village Saba in Bali for a tape. The piece then called *Saba* was written for vocal trio, tape and live electronics. You can say that was a very romantic approach, but as a matter of fact, I still love the piece today...

After that I decided to stop completely from using electronics. Because the kind of collective playing that I had experienced in Bali, the intensity during the music making, brought me back to the importance and uniqueness of live performances, the idea of physicality in music-making that till today is an obsession for me.

Then my first pieces in the early Eighties were completely puristic; I felt I had to go back to the roots, to the very basics, not just because of Bali but also because of my experience with Buddhist philosophy that I had experienced in Japan, which made me want to go back to the pure basics. So actually my first compositions in a way sounded more Japanese than Balinese if at all one of both!

How do you compare your experiences with the music scene in Europe at the time?

In the Eighties it was very difficult. In Germany there was another composer who had been influenced by Indian music, Peter



Composer Dieter Mack (left)

Michael Hamel, and both of us received very sharp criticism. What we were doing was regarded as a neo-colonialist attitude. It goes back to the whole influence of Adorno philosophy in the post-Darmstadt school, that because of Germany's history in fascism, anything of the sort was considered neo-colonialist.

It was very hard to come to terms in Germany with a composer with such a background as mine. Even though in my music you won't find any obvious elements of Balinese music, when music critics read my biography I was instantly marked as someone with a neo-colonialist attitude, they would say I was a 'Bali-influenced' composer. Someone once wrote in an encyclopaedia that I was trying to make new music with Balinese instruments, but I never did that, I don't know where they got that idea from!

Did things eventually get better?

The situation changed in the late Nineties. I cannot say why... maybe it was just a change in the climate in Europe, a new generation who hadn't experienced the Second World War, and who was more open to other cultures and accepted a special experience (other cultures) of same importance than a temporal (own history). However, it was not until the late Nineties that I became more accepted. And today it's almost established, and I am now someone who sometimes criticises someone who just borrows from another culture without reflecting about it.

I agree that one should not use another culture as a supermarket, just because you do not have any personal ideas, so I think that sort of negative post-modern attitude in so-called 'world music' ... where some composers take that instrument from Tibet, this scale from Japan [and put it in their music].... I have a real problem with that if it does not achieve a transformational

character into something completely new and individual where the potential respective origins completely vanish.

I always did distance myself from such a materialistic supermarket as that – I could never work like that.

As a German with that whole tradition of Bach to Stockhausen, how do you define new music today?

There is no direction, I think the scene is pluralistic. There are some main tendencies and composers who try to develop new schools - there is one German composer who is eager to write a book every year about what music is supposed to be... in a way I feel he does it for himself, to give him some points of justification and a basis to compose.

I don't need that, I speak much more about individual styles and leave it to the musicologists fifty years from now to define whether there are any unifying tendencies, and I don't care, as long as I am working now!

There is probably only one thing of significance – that very radical movement in Europe in the Sixties, against serialism; you won't find something like that anymore. Yet, I am convinced that the acceptance of plurality does not extinguish a thorough critical and responsible approach of a composer. It is always, like it was stated by [German composer] Helmut Lachenmann, an exegetic process to define one's own language.

Does that mean composers are less shackled today by avant garde conventions?

I would say yes, but this is something that has to do with historic development. The situation after the Second World War was so unique, that strong and almost authoritarian influence of that Darmstadt-Cologne school [of composers]... I suppose that had to happen in some way, to redefine the music... I didn't experience that time,

but I try to understand what it was for those people... But there came a time when this thinking had to be abolished and this happened after a while.

Going back to the regional music scene, it appears that our composers still take Europe as a model, is that something you recommend?

For me it's interesting in Asia to see how composers develop their music, based on their own roots and living experiences. This combination is important and I will tell you why: let's take Indonesia...in Indonesia I was exclusively interested in those contemporary compositions that came out of the respective local traditions, say gamelan, than in those composers who just followed western models. I was even completely uninterested to teach western music in Indonesia.

But on the other hand I must admit that composers like Slamet Syukur or Tony Prabowo, just to name two in the field of some others, have validity. Especially Tony, who composes in a completely western idiom, he is on the other hand still a full-scale Indonesian, and I wouldn't say he has alienated himself from his culture. It's just that he feels more comfortable going in this way, and I can accept that his personal culture is more attached to western music.

And Slamet composes in a very individual idiom, it's a result of eastern living philosophy and western composition technique, a combination of these, so I think contemporary music cannot be reduced to one special ideology or philosophy. I wouldn't say a Malaysian composer has to sound Malaysian, that would ethnicise people and composers, and I wouldn't agree with that. The important thing is that a composer is open to developing a social consciousness with his own culture.

My experiences cannot be the same as yours, and historical consciousness is very strong in Europe, while in Asia it is not so strong. I recommend for Asian composers to develop a consciousness of their own historical context. It's hard in Indonesia, for example, because a lot of the history is oral, but we have to try.

One last word – we should try not to speak about one contemporary modernity or post modernity or avant garde, but of multiple contemporary scenes, multiple avant gardes and modernities. A Malaysian modernity, an Indonesia one, a European one. We must more and more develop this kind of pluralism in consciousness and understanding. And if you still say Europe is a model I would ask why is that necessary? Try to find a model in yourself. ■

*Dieter Mack is a guest composer and jury member at the upcoming KL Contemporary Music Festival 09, from November 27 to 29. He will be delivering a paper titled *Composing in a bi-cultural environment – a European composer and the gamelan experience* during the conference, and you can also hear his work *Trio IV* in concert.*

COMMENTS offtheedge@bizedge.com