

Experiences¹

by Peter Zacher

Beside Thomas Kupsch, I know of no other composer whose expression has changed so dramatically in such a relatively short time. During the eighties, when I first encountered his compositions, I was more irritated by them than moved. It was not that I found this music apparently more concerned with digesting the musical history of the seventies, than with dealing with the actual problems issuing from a young composer's surroundings?

But such reconsideration was perhaps an inner necessity for young composers, who grew up in the GDR — an intermediate phase. Kupsch, born in 1959, worked first of all as a nurse, and from 1980 onwards, studied privately under Rainer Lischka and Ruth Bodenstein-Hoyme. In 1984 he began studying full-time at the Dresden College of Music, under Rainer Lischka, Wilfried Krätzschar and Ilse Brähler. He worked for a time at the young Generation Theatre in Dresden, and was then a master pupil in composition at the Berlin Academy of Arts, under Georg Katzer.

Gradually, his compositional style transformed, and to my mind, this was a consequence of a change in his personality. If at first Kupsch refused to make almost any verbal remarks about his music, he was later to open himself more and more, and in a three-fold way: his ability to communicate grew, his self — different to what it had been before — become more conspicuous in his compositions, and his awareness of the responsibilities of the artist active in the public space, took on a new dimension too. In 1994, almost unnoticed — his modesty is most heartening — Kupsch obtained his PhD, and immersed himself deeper and deeper into the musical history of Dresden in the twenties. Kupsch set up the NOVUM concert series in the riesa efau cultural centre in Dresden, forged links with Israeli musicians, gave up his teaching opening of the 1998 season, subsequently the director of the Meissen Theatre.

This is perhaps none of it typical or even relevant for a composer. But it shows us that musicians may live up to social demands, without forfeiting their creativity. It is often the case that the fulfilment of public duties may even intensify artistic capabilities. Whether and to what degree this applies to Thomas Kupsch, we shall not examine here; this increase here meaning an increase there — would be quite spurious.

Decisive, in the end, is the audible result. And this seems quite remarkable. Kupsch writes an extraordinarily dense music, whose constitutive details first become clear, when we combine our audible impressions with a study of the score. This doesn't mean to say that the audible impression yields an insufficient picture. On the contrary, the "late" Kupsch writes a much more open and far less hermetic music than the earlier, a music which has gained in clarity and — how rare — in complexity too. Kupsch has worked his way from a material avant-gardism to a new expressivity, which also means an essential step towards the listener. There is no longer any cryptic contrivance to be deciphered; one can concentrate on listening to the structured plane, doesn't have to take the circuitous route via theoretical considerations.

The most decisive principle in Kupsch's work seems to me to be its care. Even there, where the music sounds with full power, one never registers empty pathos. And more — even in those moments there is an extreme vulnerability apparent in Kupsch's music, which does not fail to affect those who are willing to listen.

¹ Peter Zacher, Übersetzung von Christopher Simpson