

**Sommerakademie Schloß Solitude** is first and foremost about learning through communication and dialogue. Perhaps one can say, and rightly so, that this is the purport of every summer course for young composers, but at Schloß, it is clear that Chaya Czernowin and Steven Kazuo Takasugi, the Sommerakademie's permanent faculty, have tailored the bi-yearly program around a pedagogy prioritising communicative interaction and peer-to-peer learning. In fact, one gets the sense that the young composers in attendance have been chosen not only for their craft, but also for their apparent ability or openness to learn from their other colleagues in attendance. The goal, I believe, is to foster a supportive but critical community based on shared experience rather than on location or musical style.

That the Sommerakademie is particularly invested in cultivating an environment of communication and dialogue becomes immediately apparent to any attendee, as the instructors waste no time in beginning their project. In the orientation meeting, Czernowin explains in no uncertain terms why we have been chosen to attend and that the instructors believe in us as composers. Going into Schloß, which was my first attendance at a summer course, I was not expecting the students to be welcomed with such open arms. In doing so, Czernowin immediately establishes a sense of community among the attendees and, considering the comparatively small number of composers who have attended the Sommerakademie over the years, orients us within a meaningful tradition.

This is important as it preemptively shifted the climate of the entire course. It's hard to deny that when a small congregation of composers is assembled, the tone of the dialogue all too easily slips into defensive one-upmanship or unnecessarily pedantic criticism. At Schloß, and largely thanks to Czernowin and the other instructors, defense of one's compositional choices could largely be bypassed in favour for a more productive and interesting critical discourse.

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On the Solitude grounds, there is a seventeenth-

century castle, the Rococo Castle Solitude, from the stairs of which one can see the city of Stuttgart in the distance. Behind the Academy buildings is a rather vast wooded area, which becomes pitch black though not entirely un-navigable at night. Inside the main building of the Academy, tucked away on the third floor, there is a small but excellent library, containing works of obscure German writers (stopping just short of Benno von Archimboldi) as well as even more obscure oddities of the literary cult canon, such as Serafini's oft-burgled *Codex Seraphinianus*<sup>1</sup>. In all of these places, one can feel truly alone. However, these are the places – the castle stairs, the woods at night, the library – where the group most became a community.

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The schedule kept by attendees of the Sommerakademie is rather demanding, with daily lectures, seminars, lessons, which are eventually replaced by rehearsals, and multiple meetings between students. These peer-on-peer meetings are considered to be the foundation upon which the particular brand of pedagogy employed by the Sommerakademie is based. Though the faculty has scheduled meetings between students such

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<sup>1</sup> Which of course has been burgled since my time at the Academy, reportedly.

that everyone is guaranteed to meet with at least half of the others attending, it is expected that the students take it upon themselves to meet with the remaining half. However, by the third week, it became not simply an ingrained, but a preferred way to spend one's free time, and I found myself meeting with larger groups or with people two or sometimes three times. These meetings allowed for the participating composers not only to understand each other's music more intimately, but they allowed opportunities for relationships to form among the larger group. The sense of community and shared purpose that these meetings fostered was so crucial to the success of the overall course; by understanding who we were as individuals, we were able to more immediately grasp who we were as a group. We became open to learning from one another.

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The year I attended, the visiting instructors were Mark André and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf<sup>2</sup>. In my lessons with the four teachers, the durations of which were often generously well beyond the allotted time, I shared only one piece, a string quartet called *The restoration of objects*. However, it was fascinating to see how each instructor was able to use it to discuss and explore totally different musical concepts. The word "explore" is particularly fitting, as the lessons with the instructors typically felt like we were investigating something together; there was very little sense of a perhaps more typical, hierarchical student-teacher dynamic whereby the teacher is there to impart wisdom upon the student.

With Mahnkopf I talked largely about notation, notational seduction and the responsibility a young composer has to himself; with André, the conversation was largely about the nature of sound itself (my favorite André quote: "What you are hearing right now..... is a sound-situation.") and its organisation in time; with Takasugi, the matters at hand were more abstract and, somehow, dire – the topics of violence and pain in music was discussed at length, as was fear (as in *fear of silence*), as well as the rela-

<sup>2</sup> This was the 2009 course. Past instructors include Richard Barrett, Ole Lützo-Holm and Machael Reudenbach. The 2011 visiting instructor is Amnon Wolman.

tionships between Space and Time together with Sound and Music (said relationships seeming to become only more problematic the more they are explored); with Czernowin, topics were somehow simultaneously very grounded as well as highly abstract and aesthetic: we talked about polyphony as materialised energy within space, counterpoint as a self-destructive force, amalgamating itself into oblivion, development and form existing in a musical fractal, etc... Although the experience of having undeniably *heavy* daily lessons with a rotating cast of teachers should be overwhelming, there was a dynamic set up between them that was downright invigorating.

After an important lesson in a university context, a student typically has at least a week to digest everything that was discussed and to understand how, why and if it is significant. At the Sommerakademie, there is no time for such digestion. The daily lessons pile up on each other, and provide material to sift through for the months and, in my experience, years to follow. This may be the nature of the summer composition course beast, but it also follows the Schloß Solitude design: a residency at the Solitude should be "understood as an investment in the future; an investment that, for both the participating artists and the institutions, may bear fruit much later"<sup>3</sup>.

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No discussion of the Sommerakademie Schloß Solitude would be complete without mention of the ensemble in residence, Freiburg's Ensemble SurPlus. Having been a part of the Sommerakademie since its inception, and having had individual relationships with each of the faculty composers since before that, the flexible, adventurous ensemble fully immersed itself in the spirit and pedagogy of the composition course. Schloß Solitude's preoccupation with peer-to-peer learning informs and is strengthened by SurPlus's unique pedagogical relationships with the composers of the Sommerakademie. The musicians of SurPlus are not interested in simply telling the composers what works and what does not, and the composers who tend to come to Schloß Solitude are not interested in easy answers. The goal is aimed more

<sup>3</sup> [www.akademie-solitude.de/110\\_institution\\_principles.php](http://www.akademie-solitude.de/110_institution_principles.php), accessed 26 May 2011.

towards discovery and exploration, which again leads to a sense of community.

Based on what I've gleaned regarding the relationship between musicians and student composers at many other summer courses, I highly doubt that I would have had the positive and productively challenging experience that I had with SurPlus at Schloß. The ensemble<sup>4</sup> performed my aforementioned string quartet, *The restoration of objects*, the extreme challenges presented in which become apparent with a cursory glance at any measure of the piece (see **Example 1**, on page 4). My rehearsals with SurPlus were extremely collaborative and largely discussion-based, sometimes even meeting without instruments. Much time was spent simply trying to understand who we each were as musicians, what my thoughts were on the piece and what their goal was in learning it. I went into the rehearsal process anticipating that the goal would be to prepare the piece simply to the point that it can be realised at a basic level, though I was met with a much more ambitious group of musicians who were more interested in shaping and understanding the piece such that they could yield a personal and unique performance.

The SurPlus quartet gave one of the most stunning performances of any piece of mine that I have witnessed, to say nothing of their two concerts of the fifteen composers' works, – the corporeal and aural energy they were exerting was intensely visceral and palpable – while also having given me a particularly meaningful, memorable and singular pedagogical experience. Like my aforementioned 'heavy' lessons with the four instructors, I was able to confront profoundly significant compositional questions and issues through working with SurPlus: the difference between interpretation and execution, the relationship and occasional disconnect between mental processing and bodily/muscular memory, the possibilities of fusing both prescriptive and descriptive notational paradigms in an effort to speak more directly to the performer's experience, etc... One thing that is more or less afforded at summer composition courses that isn't as common outside of them is a larger, more appropriate amount of time to interface and work

<sup>4</sup> The performing musicians were Thomas Avery (violin), Beverly Ellis (violoncello), Stefan Häussler (violin) and Jessica Rona (viola).

with the performers of your music. However, I feel that my 'extended' time with Ensemble SurPlus was used in a way unlike that of other summer courses. We were not simply rehearsing the piece to get a good recording; we were trying to make music and forge a relationship, which strikes me as being rather extraordinary.

It also strikes me as being what the Sommerakademie Schloß Solitude is all about: forging meaningful relationships and cultivating an interesting, supportive and critical community. The knowledge and experiences that I gained at the course were profoundly significant to me, but the relationships with other composers, colleagues and musicians as a result of it is what has effected me most. I find the relationships made by a composer are often too mediated by the nature of the professional music world: interactions tend to be brief, frantic and professional (for example, at a festival, where no one really has any time to truly interact). These reflections on the Sommerakademie Schloß Solitude may seem somehow rather sentimental, but if so, the possibility and space it affords for the very *human* response of sentimentality is a vital part of what makes it special.

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The musical score is organized into eight systems, each consisting of two staves. The upper staff in each system displays pitch contours, represented by lines that rise and fall across the staff. The lower staff displays rhythmic notation, including notes and rests. Brackets below the lower staves indicate rhythmic groupings with labels such as 7:4, 5:4, 3:2, and 11:8. Some notes in the lower staves are marked with a circled 'r'. Vertical dashed lines connect corresponding points in the pitch contours and rhythmic notation across the systems.

**Example 1:** *The restoration of objects*, m.157