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Introduction

Nicholas Melia and James Saunders

What is *Wandelweiser*?

It is not a thing; rather, composer Michael Pisaro (2009) writes, *Wandelweiser* is, like Fluxus or Dada, “a word”. It is at once playful neologism, alliterative compound and charming portmanteau, a word invented by German composer Burkhard Schlothauer to describe the loose, international musical collective that, in the company of Dutch composer and flautist Antoine Beuger, he co-founded in Berlin in 1992.

If Schlothauer’s word “means” in any coherent sense, it means unconvincingly, awkwardly, and more so under the forced decompounding necessitated by translation: *Wandelweiser*, Pisaro says, means “‘change signpost’” [*Wegweiser des Wandels*]; or, “more literally”, it presents a cautionary injunction to “‘change wisely’” [*wandle weise*]. Yet beyond the limited return of this precursory cinder-raking, Pisaro intriguingly invites us to extend the implications of the word beyond its silhouette: might *Wandelweiser* also perhaps gesture towards a tentative, fleeting and paradoxical embodiment, a “weiser Mann des Wandels” or “wise man of change?” Such speculative archaeology neatly stages the awkward compounding actioned by name and collective alike, forcing the term to speak of the rich and varied character of the music and thought describing *Wandelweiser*, of its concern for the vicissitudes of temporality and understanding; of being and becoming; movement and stasis; of the appearance and evanescence of the unique sounding event, and of the complex idiom forged in the shifting relations between event, work, series and *oeuvre*. Furthermore, Pisaro’s multiple reading gives voice to a kaleidoscope of tensions, between designations of singularity and collectivity, between signifier and multiple referents, between constituent elements and the various autonomous practices they embody: *Wandelweiser*—like Schlothauer’s word—is multi-dimensional, operational, allusive and ultimately elusive: less a thing than a collection of shifting functions, assertions, contentions, ideas, concerns and practices.

Wandelweiser does not, however, exist entirely in the gossamer abstract of literary and etymological conceit. Under its rubric are situated a wholly tangible publishing and recording company, based in Haan, Germany, and a performance group, the *Wandelweiser Composers Ensemble*, whose repertoire prioritises but does not limit itself to work written by its member and affiliate composers. Ultimately, *Wandelweiser* designates a composers’ collective that shares friendship and working practice as formative and defining principles; it is, Pisaro tells us, “a word for a particular group of people who have been committed, over the long term, to sharing their work and working together”.

This volume attempts to provide an introduction to the *Wandelweiser* collective, its practices, and the sensibilities that have sustained it during the last twenty years. And while their enduring collectivity is, in itself, remarkable, *Wandelweiser* has, over the course of its first two decades, also developed one of the most idiosyncratic aesthetic economies in modern music. Schlothauer (2002) summarises the general characteristics of this distinctive and uncompromising work succinctly in his essay “Etwas über *Wandelweiser*”: the music describing *Wandelweiser*, he tells us, is generally very quiet: silence occupies a large share of its often extended performance durations. There is little conventional drama in this music, and the presentation of sound material is often very clear: harmony, rhythm and melody play either a subordinate role or none at all.

The distribution of these shared aesthetic concerns amongst its shifting cast of members is examined by G. Douglas Barrett, who introduces some of the problems of thinking collectivity as a point of departure for understanding the group in his article ‘The Silent Network: The Music of *Wandelweiser*’. Barrett traces the emergence of *Wandelweiser*’s decentred collectivity out of the embers and in reaction to the failures of Otto Mühl’s Aktionsanalytische Organisation in Vienna, of which both Beuger and Schlothauer were members during the 1980s, before contemplating the position of the *Wandelweiser* collective within a pantheon of other avant-gardes, such as the multifaceted Fluxus movement and the contemporary Californian activist-sound-art collective Ultra-Red. Barrett uses the multiple readings of Cage’s *4’33”* evidenced across the breadth of the collective in order to illustrate the role of the divergent and the different as a powerful collectivising force, insisting upon a shared yet multiplicitous engagement with the role of silence in the work of the collective.

Nicholas Melia’s “‘Stille Musik’: *Wandelweiser* and the Voices of Ontological Silence” further explores the dedicated and sustained investigation of silence in the music of the collective. Melia briefly traces the teleology of silence across the European musical landscape of the twentieth century to the convergence of Beuger and fellow *Wandelweiser* composers Jürg Frey, Chico Mello and Manfred Werder upon the dedicated silence-themed edition of the *International Composition*

Seminar in Boswil, Switzerland in 1991. The article subsequently examines the variety of understandings of silence evidenced by seminar prize-winners Beuger and Frey, their origin in Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* and the responses procured by the latter in European philosophy of the post-war period. Heidegger's "silence" is variously understood as reiterating or unsettling the notion of "voice" traditionally associated with God, Being and *logos* in the Western metaphysical tradition, and Melia attempts to show how these concerns are transposed and engendered by Beuger and Frey. The article interrogates the influence of Heidegger's silences on figures of recurring interest to the Wandelweiser composers, such as Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Edmond Jabès, before considering some of the implications of Beuger's later attempts to work beyond the post-Heideggerian metaphysical tradition.

While Melia's article is concerned primarily with the implications, for Beuger and Frey, of reckoning with a fundamental understanding of silence in and through music, the collective interest in silence is also evidenced in many more palpable and visceral forms. For instance, the use of extremely long timescales—often of multiple hours—in which there are very few (if any) intended sounds is exemplified in pieces such as Beuger's *ins ungebundene* (1998), in which any duration up to the final 80 minutes of this potentially 90-minute work may be silent, and Manfred Werder's *für eine(n) oder einige ausführende(n)* (2001) performed by the trio *incidental music* in Zurich in January 2002 over a period of eight hours, during which the performers are instructed to produce only "a few sounds". In their respective articles, M.J. Grant and James Saunders are concerned with the necessity of rethinking the specificity of the musical work in terms of duration, location and repetition in the light of such compositional and performance extremes.

Extended durations, for example, often embed musical works within specific performance spaces. This relationship between work and place is examined in Grant's article 'Series and Place'. Focusing on Carlo Inderhees' and Christoph Nicolaus's project *3 Jahre - 156 musikalische Ereignisse - 1 Skulptur*, which ran as a series of performances every Tuesday evening from January 1997 to December 1999, Grant proposes a notion of "place-specific music" in contrast to the more familiar "site-specific music": whereas the latter might draw on the particular characteristics of a space in its composition or realisation, place-specific music is concerned with the generic characteristics of the types of space that are conducive to particular kinds of work. Such an understanding illustrates powerfully the manner in which many Wandelweiser performances are conceived as part of a detailed examination of performance contexts and large-scale structure, often governing events exterior to the piece itself. Correspondingly, the article also considers the serial aspect of place-specific projects, in which multiple versions of a piece are made and presented over an extended period of time.

This seriality is central to much of the Wandelweiser composers' work, as James Saunders explains in his article 'Testing the Consequences: Multipart Series in the Work of the Wandelweiser Composers'. Saunders examines theories of seriality in 1960s conceptual art, drawing upon dialogue with the Wandelweiser composers in order to classify an understanding of series in relation to the conditions leading to its termination. Saunders shows that, while some series nominally remain open, others are closed by the composer or artist as a result of predetermined conditions established in advance of the making of the series, circumstantial conditions that emerge while making the series, or logical conditions that are integral to the materials and processes used in making the series. Saunders suggests that an experience of serial work remains mediated by the mode of its presentation: here, the difference in context realized across different performances is considered with reference to specific examples of activities performed by the Wandelweiser composers.

The extent of comparative study presented suggests, not without reason, that there is much commonality between members of the group and, indeed, between the concepts and features embodied and described in their work. Consequentially, it would be misleading to group together characteristics or individual composers and erode the very clear differences between them—a common problem in addressing many art collectives in which a generic understanding of the identity of the whole can overshadow the variety and irreducibility of its active components. Instead, such commonalities should, perhaps, be seen within the context of a shared exploration of related musical concerns; viewed as a whole, the Wandelweiser project is a cohesive dialogue about the nature of silence, duration, time and place, but the urgency and import of their work is to be found as much in the variegated nuances of their output, and in the music itself, as in the form of collectivity such work describes.

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