



In September 2004, German composer **Dieter Mack** (above right) visited New Zealand supported by the Goethe Institute. The following conversation took place between Mack and **Martin Lodge** at the University of Waikato in Hamilton on 28 September 2004.

**MARTIN LODGE:** *How do you think your musical background and your musical training influenced your current musical thinking and attitudes?*

**DIETER MACK:** Do you mean my academic training and my non-academic experiences?

*Yes, how do you feel those two forces balance? Perhaps there's a tension between them?*

There really is a tension: during my training I worked mainly with two teachers, Klaus Huber and Brian Ferneyhough. Huber had a strong belief that contemporary composers had to start by studying the Second Viennese School and its subsequent developments, including a social-critical approach. This was different to my own background, which was largely experimental rock music and jazz in the late '60s and early '70s. These kinds of music had strong links to electronic music at that time. But the approach I was used to was more spontaneous. In a way I was closer to certain compositions of the '50s and '60s—such as Stockhausen's *Telemusik* or *Gesang der Jünglinge* because they were electronic—than I was to the instrumental compositions of the Second Viennese School. So at the start of my academic studies it was quite a heavy

burden to manage these differences, and it wasn't until I later went to work with Brian Ferneyhough that I found a balance.

*How was Ferneyhough able to help you achieve that?*

He was less interested in what you might call a strict academic approach. He was more open and interested in helping the student find the individuality of his or her own musical thinking. Nevertheless I don't want to dismiss my work with Klaus Huber. It was very important, and I'm very grateful for what I learned from him technically. So overall I consider my academic learning to be technical, the craft of composing, instrumentation, some structural aspects and so on, but also a responsible, critical approach to everything one is doing. But otherwise it did not have a big impact on my aesthetic outlook.

*What do you see as the main issues facing composers of Western art music at present? We do seem to have moved beyond the Modernist fixation with ideology and system.*

Ja! But I agree with the view of my colleague Claus-Stefen Mahnkopf, who says that Postmodernism is responsible for the crisis in music at the end of the 20th century.

*Exactly what is the crisis, do you think?*

Maybe crisis is too strong a word, but in Mahnkopf's view the authenticity of the individual artwork was destroyed by, for example, multimedia approaches or performance-orientated concepts. These, he says, are wrongly understood to be new developments of the artform, while purely musical developments are neglected. I would not go quite as far as Mahnkopf, but I agree that the notion of Postmodernism, where anything goes and you just have to choose how to put things together, can be a dangerous attitude for a young composer. Such an attitude is not conducive to what I would call an exegetical approach to composing, and approach in which you try to find your own personal culture and your own expression within that culture based on a knowledge of as much music and historical development as possible. There are people who say 'I want to keep my authenticity by ignoring other music'. But that's the wrong approach! The challenge today is to face this availability of musical material and to be strong enough to concentrate on personal ideas. The outcomes will be different in each case according to the composer, but I think one can feel whether a composition has been done in this exegetical way or if it has been made just through talented craft, like going through a supermarket and taking things from here and there. I believe you can feel the difference in the music.

*Do you think that Postmodernism as a theoretical framework is less significant in German-speaking culture than in the Anglophone world?*

That's my impression, but I must say the term carries a kind of pejorative notion which I would like to avoid. We have to be aware that the cultural condition in Germany is different to what it is in New Zealand or in America. I would consider the notion of historicism—a strong dependence on history—as typically middle European.

*And of course history is always written by the victor.*

That's another point!

*So what do you see as the role of the composer in society today? It certainly seems to be less publicly important than it was, for instance, in the nineteenth century.*

I would disagree. I think that from the beginning art production has been an elite activity. In the past we had composers who worked for the church, then we had composers who worked for the courts, and then with the beginning of bourgeois society we had art as representative of the culture of the bourgeoisie and upper class so-

ciety because they were the only ones who could finance it. Today it has moved to foundations and organisations who feel responsible for the arts, but essentially not much has changed. I don't expect a society to embrace all contemporary art forms, but I do expect that a society understands the necessity and importance of contemporary art production—as it has been through past centuries. Art reflects society but also contributes to the human sensibility which, especially in our industrial society, has diminished. In a time when we communicate more via electronic media than with human beings, I think an important role of art is to remind people that human existence is not just about making money or doing business but has to involve communication with one another.

*Communication is still mostly instinctive, isn't it? But many people find modern art and music difficult to comprehend, especially at an instinctive level when it's new and strange.*

One of the main tasks of modern art is to train people's sensibility. New art is something you don't know, and one of the functions of new art is make humans curious, to wake them up—or, as Helmut Lachenmann would say, to provoke. Any music that only follows pre-existing patterns is for me not interesting, even if it is made at a very high level of craft. That has nothing to do with art. For me, art must wake people up, must make them sensible to phenomena in the world.

*So, in your view, art should have a political role?*

I don't think art can be a political compass or guide. That is beyond its scope. If you look at the music of composers like Klaus Huber or Luigi Nono, I can never avoid the impression that as much as the political concept is clear, the strength of the music itself was diminished because it became too obvious. On the other hand, when the music was more substantial, the political impact decreased.

*Yes, the more you want to communicate, the lower the common denominator must be, to the point where you end up writing socialist realism, or to meet the demands of mass fashion, thus becoming self-defeating. But you posit a special role for the audience, one that was removed from the cultural equation by the post-war avant-garde. Some composers of that period became like a guild of craftsmen making extraordinarily complicated toys in a well-equipped workshop, but not sharing the toys outside the workshop, so that they were experienced only by other initiates.*

I have two thoughts on that. Firstly, I'm strongly critical of colleagues who say we exist in a special, separate world.

It's a Romantic attitude—very German I think! It's at the root of the Romantic idea that an artist has to suffer, an attitude I disagree with. So I'm not a Romantic German! But secondly, we have to find a way out of this dilemma, because the mass media are a kind of machine which no artist is able to fight. The unconscious patterning of musical materials and models is so big because we're exposed to pop music, or entertainment music, in many situations today. You can't escape being exposed to it. This means that any kind of new music will be regarded as something different from what we've been conditioned to.

My remedy to this dilemma is education. It doesn't mean that I should change my music, but rather to work as an educator to open people's ears—going to schools, preparing our future listeners. It's difficult to convince a 30-year-old that contemporary music has value and should be part of their life, but if you go to schools and work in an experimental way with young children they are not yet preconditioned. As a teacher you can give them a broader perceptual basis, so that at least when they hear music that doesn't conform to the usual patterns, they are prepared to deal with it. If you then let them make their own music—with everyday objects, sounds of nature, for instance—then, in my experience, they are much more open to any kind of music. It's not about banning pop and entertainment music—I have no problem with it—but we need to educate people to be receptive to new worlds of music. That means my function as a composer cannot be separated from my function as a teacher.

*You've worked significantly in cross-cultural music and have extensive experience of Asian music. What do you see as the main issues in working cross-culturally?*

I think discussion on problems of cross-culturalism is often exaggerated. If we are honest, can we find any culture without cross-cultural elements? I don't know one. Maybe there's a remote tribe in West Irian Jaya who has never met another tribe. They would be a pure musical biotope which ethnomusicologists dream of! But I think this is just a myth, as it's so obvious that people will meet, cultures will meet, and societies will meet.

*But it's a question of power, isn't it—the power of a highly industrialised culture can overwhelm a less powerful one.*

That's a matter of how it happens—and the question of power is a problem, I agree. But in discussing cross-culturalism, we need to define it first. I like what my colleague in America, Philip Corner, once said about this. He dismissed the question, saying that an American

person is by nature a cross-cultural person. He lives in Western classical culture, he has developed jazz, and in California has engaged with Asian culture, so what, now, does cross-cultural actually mean? That's what I mean by the problem being exaggerated. For me, in a way every human being has a multicultural background.

*Why has the issue been exaggerated then, would you say?*

Maybe it's a European problem. In my opinion, German society has a strong consciousness of a complete and separate cultural identity, separate from other cultural influences—which we all know is completely false. If you go back to the Middle Ages you find the influence of Arab music that came into Europe via Spain and Turkey, and in the Renaissance there was the influence of music from around central Europe. As you said before, history is written by the victors, and music history in Germany has been written by people with quite clear political ideas who want to avoid acknowledging that European culture is the result of various cultural influences. And in the twentieth century we have an especially strong historical consciousness and a desire not to be connected to any other cultural environment. In my opinion the other strong influence was the Nazi regime. Because of its racist approach to culture, in Germany any connection with another culture has become viewed as neo-colonialism and racist exploitation. So in Germany it's hard to discuss these issues. It has become a little easier in the last five or six years, perhaps. But I remember that in the '80s any discussion about the experience of other cultures was neglected because it was considered a neo-colonial attitude. This strong sense of responsibility was implanted by Adorno, referring back to the racism of the Nazis. The feeling was that Germany has such a burden of history that it has no right to connect with other cultures now.

*Yet Germans invented the discipline of ethnomusicology...*

Yes, but before the Nazi period, in the early twentieth century. Then all the ethnomusicologists went to America—it was completely extinguished in Germany and never started again because of the Nazi regime. Take musicology: in Germany we have two chairs of systematic musicology, all the others are in historical musicology.

*In New Zealand we are continuing with the process of cultural and political decolonisation, which can be painful due to the power imbalance between the two main cultures. In my experience such situations are usually solved by individuals through dialogue and goodwill. But in your case,*

*some people in Germany must have taken a dim view of your work with Indonesian music in the 1980s?*

I was completely isolated—that continued until the end of the '90s. Since then the climate has changed, and the hardliners who refused cross-cultural experience as a basis of art production grew older and their criticism weaker. The younger generation which has not experienced the Second World War does not have such strong attitudes. But the problem was that there were works which just had an impact of surface exoticism and created a negative impression of cross-culturalism—people like Eberhard Schoener. In Germany it was mainly in rock and jazz actually, less in contemporary music. People even referred back to Puccini and *Madame Butterfly*, that kind of exoticism. A lot of people who made this criticism never made a thorough study of the individuals who had been working in that field. The only composers they accepted in this context had been those in whose work you could find a kind of aesthetic rapture because of the biculturalism. Once again, this was Adornian thinking, that by a dialectical confrontation you achieved a rapture in your aesthetic approach, and that was acceptable. Typically German! It's better now, but still we have to be quite strong. Composers who have a background somewhat similar to mine—people like Manfred Stahnke and Peter-Michael Hamel—are still outsiders in a sense. We are more accepted via our 'scientific' work than through our compositions. For instance, I have just completed a book on contemporary Indonesian music that brought me more acceptance than my composition.

*This is an old tradition of the West, that real validation has to come via the scientific method...*

Yes, it still is!

*I'm interested in your view of contemporary New Zealand music, from what you've heard during your time here.*

I've noticed a significant change compared with what I experienced here in 1991. This time I've encountered student works that demand much higher technical skills from performers. Back in '91 I often felt that young composers took too much care of the poor players and avoided writing anything too challenging! This time I've seen quite a lot of scores which are complex and technically demanding. But what has surprised me is that when I asked the composers the reason for this style of writing, nobody answered. I was quite astonished at this. Well, they did answer, but in a way which indicated the complexity was not yet completely bound into thoroughly thought out

aesthetic concepts. It's still a kind of experimental attitude, and I wonder how this might develop in future.

I still get the feeling that New Zealand music is not yet sufficiently integrated into the international discourse on music. On the other hand, this is something I'm quite happy about in Germany, where we do have a strong discourse about what we are doing musically. Even if this can sometimes be an impediment to our composing, I think it's healthy. New Zealand's geographical situation perhaps makes it harder. When I look around your office I see CDs and books—almost the same as I have in my office—but in my experience one needs more than this, you need a lively discourse with other people. I think this is very important, and it makes me especially grateful for programmes such as this one which has brought me to New Zealand to meet people here and to compose in a new environment. Similarly, I would very much like more composers from here to get exposure in Europe.

*What directions are you following in your current work?*

I spent three years in Indonesia in the mid-90s, and that was such hard work I did no composing. On my return to Germany I found it hard to settle back into writing in the Western tradition for various reasons, so I did a lot of educational work, including writing music for amateurs and schools, which is very important work. Since 2000 I've recovered my orientation as a composer, and I've been interested in two main aspects of music. One I call a contemporary form of collective ritual via musical practice, the other I call symbolic sonority, quite a subjective concept—perhaps recalling the aesthetics of Messiaen.

I found that I could use elements of social relationships as the basis for structural elements in a piece—especially the piece I wrote here in New Zealand in 1991. Gradually I became more interested in how, in a collective situation, the individual voice may be more prominent than it was before. The first piece I wrote with this in mind was the Percussion Concerto, which raised the question of how to write a concerto today and not go back into the traditional pattern of concerto writing, but instead referred directly to a single voice in a collective environment. I found it was most important to react to the personality of the individual you're writing for, and since then all my pieces have been engaged with the personalities of the players I've been writing for. It means my music has become more complex, because I work with microtonal inflections to find the right personality. It still has to do with communication between people, which has been my obsession since starting to compose. ■