

# contact

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## FEEDBACK PAPERS 5-9

Feedback Studio Verlag, 1973-75 (DM8 each or DM25 for a year's subscription)

Obtainable from Feedback Studio Verlag, 5 Köln-1 Geneterstrasse 23, West Germany

TIM SOUSTER

During 1969, at exactly the same time as some of their contemporaries in this country, a number of young composer/performers living in and around Cologne decided to take the promotion of their music and ideas into their own hands. In 1970 the Feedback group was duly founded by Johannes Fritsch, Rolf Gehlhaar, Peter Eötvös, David Johnson and Messias Maiguaschca. The group soon established itself as a significant force in new music in West Germany. It has since toured widely on the Continent performing the, largely, live-electronic compositions of its members. The group holds regular musical 'at homes' ('Hinterhausmusik') in their studio in the Genterstrasse in Cologne and summer concerts in the barn at Oeldorf outside the city. As well as bringing out the *Feedback Papers* (FBP), they publish most of the music of the main participants in the group, plus pieces by Klarenz Barloh, John McGuire, Werner Klüppelholz, Michael von Biel and Joachim Krist, all of whom are residents in the Cologne area.

Recently things have changed in that Rolf Gehlhaar has come to this country to direct the studio at Dartington and David Johnson has taken up a similar post in Basle. This leaves Fritsch in a leading role at Feedback, but he intends to carry on the group's activities and the publication of the *Papers*, all in close collaboration with Maiguaschca, Eötvös and Barloh.

The force which originally attracted this diverse assortment of people to Cologne emanated from, of course, Stockhausen, with whom all of them have either studied or collaborated (Eotvos still does) as performer or assistant. Most people fall out with Stockhausen in the end — indeed Stockhausen starts to wonder about those who hang on over the normal two-year limit — and most of the Feedback group now keep him at arm's length both practically and aesthetically. But the *FBP* are mercifully free of any rankling, although occasional barbed comments are made, for example with regard to the scandalous dismissal of his assistant, Richard Toop.

Before summarising the main areas dealt with in *FBP 5-9* (issued between January 1973 and Summer 1975), I should say that the pages of news flashes contained in each issue were some of the most illuminating things that I read, not because I was closely involved in just this area of German musical life during this period, but because they give glimpses of the functioning of that musical life in a way which invites comparison and contrast with our own. (Same problems, but more going on and more money.) I feel this is something that *Contact* itself might emulate: short factual reports on concerts, conferences, appointments, commissions, criticism of criticism etc.<sup>1</sup> The principal strength of the Feedback group is revealed through this medium: their self-awareness. They have illusions neither about the true nature of the music industry in West Germany nor about the infinitesimal degree of influence a group like Feedback can wield in the face of such a juggernaut.

*FBP 7* contains a depressing but informative list of reports on badly attended lectures and concerts, lack of interest in ordering new scores and a threatening rise in the rent of the Feedback studio premises. Significant snippets of information are culled from the media. The details of the German Gramophone Record Prize for 1972 reveal that whereas 44% of record buyers go for operetta, new music does not even constitute a category and is lumped together with Others — at 2%! It is cold comfort for the Feedback-Leute that their works are not available on commercial records anyway.

But they soldier on. Fritsch lectures at Darmstadt and at the Cologne Music Hochschule and has formulated a comprehensive new-music plan for that well-endowed but surprisingly chaotic institution. Gehlhaar organises courses at Darmstadt. Johnson works with children and turns out invaluable circuits for do-it-yourself electronics engineers. (He generously publishes circuits for various kinds of mixers, quad pan-pots, an amplitude modulator and a dynamic compressor.)

Fritsch contributes the most substantial theoretical articles, most of which stem from his preoccupation with what he calls 'general harmony': all kinds of systems of proportions — Platonic, Chinese, planetary. This is a sure indication of the influence of The Master, but Fritsch's application of these ideas in his own music is individual. His tape piece *Musica Mundana* is based on the principle of deducing all musical parameters from the characteristics of the various planets: distance from the sun, volume, density, mass, rotation, orbit time and brightness. The overall duration of the piece compresses the events of a Saturn-year into 49 minutes and 6 seconds. As Fritsch comments: 'In many subsequent Saturn-years ever new harmonic constellations arise which unfortunately cannot be presented, as they would entail a duration which would exceed the limitations of even the most well-disposed listener.' This wry, slightly self-deprecating irony informs much of the editorial writing in *FBP* as well, and thereby the very agreeable tone of the whole is set.

A good balance is struck. It's not *over-technical*; it's not *over-speculative*, and it's certainly not evangelical (though at times a little bit parochial). The problem of new music in its social context is dealt with, though not in any great depth, in a stimulating article by Klüppelholz on 'Information-Theory Aesthetics' (Something which was due for a working-over in the Rhineland), in Fritsch's lecture called 'Material, Form, Content, Meaning, Effect' and in Rudolf Frisius's excellent account of the events of Darmstadt 1974. Party lines are rejected, and excesses, in either political direction, are presented without comment so that the reader may draw his own conclusions. Two prime examples: an extraordinarily silly 'Lenin Symphony' by Christian Bachmann, consisting of 3,000 copies of a sheet of paper with a crotchet (der Urton) printed on one side and the words 'Lenin Symphony' in Russian on the other. These were distributed in various corners of the Soviet Union in 1973, mostly by means of throwing bundles of them into rivers. The *FBP* editor cannot resist the jaundiced comment: 'Forwards, forwards, art belongs to the people, anyway art as stupid as this'. Those taking the capitalist road too gleefully are represented by Günther Becker (not West Germany's most convincing composer), whose *Ferrophonie* was promoted by an amazing PR handout (entitled 'The Song of the New Steel') financed, like the composition, by the huge steel combine, Klöckner Stahl. This is full of gems like: 'A sunny day. Get the bike out. Give a cheeky, jolly ring on the shining steel bell... The tick-tock of the stop-watch and the quiet sound as the chest-expander is drawn out. Klöckner steel is everywhere becoming the incidental music to the experience of success in sport'. The puff for Becker then ends: 'he has created something new in new music. But at the same time he has in this remained true to himself'.

I would recommend *FBP*, despite their now rather high price, to anyone in this country who can read German and who is interested in new music. If awareness of the significance of these musicians were to grow, we might finally be able to *hear* their works. Eventually the BBC might finally be persuaded to broadcast some of the tapes they must receive from the German radio stations of works such as Eötvös's *Moro Lasso*, Fritsch's Concerto for trumpet and orchestra, Maiguaschca's *A Mouth Piece* and Gehlhaar's numerous recent pieces. Until that time *FBP* at least enables us to *read* about them and their creators who, in adverse circumstances, really have remained true to themselves.

NOTE:

<sup>1</sup>We're attempting to! (Ed.)