



NO. 94
MARCO STROPPA

A composer, researcher, and teacher, Marco Stroppa (born in 1959 in Verona) studied music in Italy (piano, composition, electronic music) and computer science, cognitive psychology, and AI at MIT's Media Laboratory (1984–86). In 1980, he composed *Traiettorie*, which immediately met with great success. In 1982, Pierre Boulez invited him to Ircam (Paris). His uninterrupted association with it has been crucial to his musical growth. A highly respected educator, Stroppa founded the composition course at the Bartók Festival in Szombathely, Hungary, where he taught for 13 years. In 1999, he became Professor of Composition at the State University of Music and the Performing Arts in Stuttgart, the successor of Helmut Lachenmann. Often assembled in the form of thematic cycles, his works draw inspiration from a wide range of experiences: reading poetic and mythological texts, a deep engagement in ecological and socio-political issues, the study of ethnomusicology, and his personal contact with the performers, including Pierre-Laurent Aimard. He invented the term “acoustic totem” for *The Enormous Room*, a cycle of works for solo instruments and “chamber electronics” based on poems by E. E. Cummings. Stroppa has written more than 50 essays about his music research. His first opera (*Re Orso, King Bear*), on a text by Arrigo Boito, premiered with great success in May 2012 at the Opéra Comique in Paris. – Address: Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Urbanstraße 25, 70182 Stuttgart, Germany. E-mail: marco.stroppa@hmdk-stuttgart.de.

In Haydn's most famous musical joke, the quiet, gentle slow movement of Symphony No. 94 is suddenly interrupted by a loud, jarring chord. The unexpected interruption comes to the listener as a “surprise,” which is why it is known as the “Surprise” symphony in English.

In German, it is known as the symphony “mit dem Paukenschlag,” or symphony with the kettledrum stroke. If I had to come up with a single word that captures the gist of my stay at Wiko, I would say “surprise” in a sense akin to Haydn’s use of the term and in the same spirit with which the unexpectedly loud sound makes you smile.

My first “surprise,” after a quiet Sunday in Berlin, was to discover that my stay at the *Remise*, that wonderfully isolated studio reserved for composers at Wiko, would be accompanied by a panoply of unexpected noises: the construction of two large multi-storey houses had just begun, one in front of the Weiße Villa, a few meters away from my studio, the other behind the Villa Jaffé.

From 7:30 in the morning until the early evening, six days a week, I was the powerless and unintentional target of construction noise: depending on the noises I heard, I could tell exactly what the workers were doing, even when I closed all the windows and doors or when I put my earplugs in. The small but heavy sand-crushing machine produced a humming sound between D and C#, just above the lowest note of the cello, reverberating through my body directly from the ground. The circular saw, with its unforgettable piercing glissandi, counterpointed the hand-held pneumatic hammer (middle G), sometimes interspersed with a passing ambulance and its characteristic fourth (A–D, A–D, A–D...), and each of the innumerable trucks charging and discharging equipment and material had its peculiar acoustic personality.

If these acoustic experiences were not enough, the street corner between Koenigsallee and Wallotstraße underwent important work for several months, with noises of digging, drilling, and pipe laying, not to mention the specialized vehicles that came and went.

Needless to say, I had to make adjustments to cope with these unusual and unpredictable circumstances.

Another, more edifying “surprise” was meeting the Fellows, attending their Tuesday Colloquia, engaging in the lively discussions at lunch, at dinner, or in the afternoons for which Wiko has become famous. Among other surprisingly captivating subjects, I learned that birds can be trained by watching TV, that there is only one vegetarian spider in the world, that bees might dream, and that a piece of jewellery can conceal layers of history and aesthetic complexity.

I particularly enjoyed talking with Johanna Mappes about how to teach creativity (a task that is just as important in composing as it is in the design of biological experiments), with Achille Varzi about the ontology of melting ice cubes, with Nicolas Dodier about sociology and music, with Giovanni Galizia about the neurology of bees, with

Elena Esposito and David Stark about urgent sociological questions, and with the writer Georgi Gospodinov about his observations on the comparative significance of flies in German and Bulgarian restrooms!

I had the privilege to chair the seminar of Bryan Daniels, whose training in theoretical physics was parlayed into modelling behaviour in living systems, and that of Andreas Mayer, whose broad knowledge spans from musicology to Freud across the sociology of gestures and the subtleties of old black-and-white films inspired by psychoanalysis.

Particularly important for me were the interchanges with musicologist Benedict Taylor and his wife Pamela Recinella, a young stage director of several classical operas. Finally, I am extremely indebted to Efraín Kristal, an immense humanist and scholar, who chaired my seminar, and to his wife, Romy Sutherland, for so many inspiring discussions about music, theatre, film, and his specialty, comparative literature. Thanks to our interactions, I acquired a totally different and deeper understanding of Jorge Luis Borges; I discovered the sublime, musical poems of Rubén Darío and the work of the German philosopher Heiner Mühlmann, whose writings on maximal stress situations resonated with conversations we had about the corona crisis. I will also treasure the conversations we had about the plays we attended together at the Schaubühne.

In May, when Geoffroy Jourdain (the conductor of the choir “Les Cris de Paris,” with whom I had already cooperated and whom I’ve greatly admired for many years), asked me to write a short “Corona piece” for an Internet performance with physical distancing (a compositional challenge I had never tackled in the past), it came very naturally to use a title inspired by Borges and to dedicate this piece to Efraín; in a couple of weeks, in spite of the surrounding environment, *A 8 voix/es qui bifurquent* came to fruition. The title (*With 8 forking voice[s]/paths*) plays with the pun “voix” (voice/voices) and “voie” (path), which have the same pronunciation in French. The piece was finally performed and video recorded on the stage of an empty theatre (<https://youtu.be/VK38wmC1Nr8>).

Among other unexpected side projects, I wrote a long essay on the concept of multiple musical forms, where I posit that a musical composition does not consist of “a” single form, but of multiple, interconnected forms. This essay was inspired by Antonio Damasio’s work on neurology. Finally, for my *Dienstagskolloquium*, I began to develop the notion of music as “sensory thought” based on my reflections on the notion of “piano d’amore,” which is related to my main Wiko project, the second book of *Miniature Estrose*, which I’m composing for the former Fellow and great pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard.

A huit vois/es qui biffurent

Marco Stroppa

To 8 French sisters, fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg
 who unveiled to me some of the intricate beauties of J. K. Borges

Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin
 2014.20 - 24

A 60 string Jandouze et aux 713 continents, mais hier.

(A)

The musical score consists of eight staves, V.1 through V.8, each with a treble clef. The notation is sparse, with notes and rests enclosed in rectangular boxes. Above the staves are three diagrams: a diamond with '1' and an arrow pointing right labeled '(10")', a diamond with '2' and an arrow pointing right labeled '(5")', and a diamond with '3' and an arrow pointing right labeled '(5")'. Annotations include '2" ca.' and 'p' (piano) above various boxes. The boxes contain musical notation such as 'HUBANTE', 'JERENO', and 'HUBANTE JERENO'. The staves are numbered V.1 to V.8 at the bottom.

Last, but not least, during the first two months I set up a system to digitize my stored memory (a very Borgesian theme!), all my old analogue cassettes and DATs archives, before these technologies are forever lost (how many people under 40 have worked with DATs cassettes?). Thanks to an old but sturdy and still functioning DAT machine borrowed from our Studio for Electronic Music¹ at the State University of Music and the Performing Arts in Stuttgart and to the excellent remarkable technicians at Wiko, we were able to transfer some 500 hours of recordings, samples, tryouts, materials, and experiments onto a hard disk, thereby rescuing them from inevitable oblivion and securing them for at least as long as I'll be alive!

Shortly before Christmas, an ominous rumour started to circulate among us about a possible disturbance of our life at Wiko by an unknown virus. The virus finally came. Some of the Fellows left as quickly as they could, lest they could no longer fly back to their country; meetings turned to faces in rectangles on our computer screens; and my scheduled *Gesprächskonzert*, the planned performance with guest artists, and other presentations of my music I had informally planned for the interested Fellows had to be cancelled.

Our life as an intellectual community took on a darker colour, one that none of us had anticipated on arrival. Although some of us committed Fellows tried to do what we could to keep some modicum of cultural life going during the crisis, and notwithstanding Zoom and other technologies, the cultural benefits of being a resident of Berlin came to an end for all practical purposes.

Unfortunately, my work, already affected by the environmental noises, suffered from this instable, unpredictable situation.

From an outside perspective, one might think that I had entered an ideal moment: without concerts, courses, teaching, travelling, and social interaction, one can at last spend all one's time composing! But the crisis we went through was not only a health crisis with very serious consequences for the people and the economy. It was also an environmental crisis, predictable and foreseen by many scientific reports published in recent decades. These warnings were ignored by a political class that proved incapable of imagining a model of life outside of a neoliberal economic system, a lethal financial ideology, and an

1 For further information, see <https://www.hmdk-stuttgart.de/studios-und-ensembles/studios/studio-fuer-elektronische-musik-stem/>.

8/4 (1 = 50-60 ca.)

Handwritten musical score for 8 voices (v.1-v.8) in 8/4 time. The score is written on eight staves. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature, with a '4' written above it. The music consists of rhythmic patterns and notes with dynamic markings such as ppp, pp, mf, and sim. Some notes are marked with 'b.c.' (basso continuo) or 'Ob.c.' (oboe). There are also some asterisks and 'd.' markings. The score is a study or rehearsal piece, showing various articulations and dynamics.

* on the short note... open the mouth
vowel and lib.

obsolete, perverse, production-oriented organisation, rather than one that attends to the quality of human life.

Among many possible names who informed my understanding of the situation, I'd like to mention the French biologist and biodiversity specialist, Gilles Bœuf, and the American lawyer and politician, Kate Brown, whose New Yorker article was sent to our mailing list at Wiko by Natasha Wheatley (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-pandemic-is-not-a-natural-disaster>).

My observations on how this crisis extended to most human activities led me to think about the model of society in which we live and the consequences of this model for our activity as artists. It is as if the world had resonated in me: what music will come out of this critical phase, which Heiner Mühlmann calls “Maximum Stress Cooperation”? It would be too cynical to think that, under these circumstances, nothing can be done or that the music we write is dead, because I have always thought of the musical experience – from composition to concert performance – as both an instrument of revolt and a source of hope.

I had imagined I would have composed wonders during this very special year of my life, but I had to adjust to unpredictable circumstances: the second book of my *Miniature Estrose* will have to wait a little more for its completion. I had not reckoned with the “kettledrum strokes,” (the “Paukenschläge”) that inform the surprise in the slow movement of Haydn's Symphony and that metaphorically underscored my Berliner Jahr. That being said, many other paths opened up for me, and I am deeply grateful to Wiko, which created the conditions to let them emerge in my life.