



## TELEMATIC INTERVENTIONS GEORGE E. LEWIS

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My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was extraordinary in many senses of that term. My friends and colleagues who had been there were mostly philosophers: Arnold Davidson, Lydia

Goehr, Philip Kitcher, Pat Kitcher. They all raved about their time at the Wiko. So I was ready for a kind of Wonderland intellectual experience – but then, the pandemic came along.

This was the year that education, scholarship, and performance around the world became telematic. For us there were no concerts, no restaurants, no museums, no in-person Wiko lunches, dinners, or colloquia. Incredibly intricate national government restrictions on inside meetings meant that we and our friends held discussions as we walked around Grunewald, with its wonderful lakes and swans, in the dead of the Berlin winter.

But I had always wanted to live in Germany for an extended period, and living on the top floor of our beautiful Villa Walther apartment, with a balcony view of the Herthasee and sunlight streaming in all day, was a dream that was actually being fulfilled, even if interacting on a regular basis with Berlin friends and colleagues I'd known for many years became difficult. The incomparable support of the brilliant staff of the Wiko helped get us all through the worst of it. Dunia Najjar made sure we got lunch every day, even arranging for the meals to be brought to our apartments during the high tide of the pandemic. Otherwise, the people I connected with the most were Maike Schaper, Andrea Bergmann, Vera Pfeffer, Deniz Gündogdu, Pit Hertling, Leonard Westphal, Gesine Rodewald, Nina Kitsos, Ivonne David, and Dennis Grimm, all of who made sure that everything worked. You could really rely on them, and with steady leadership from Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger and Thorsten Wilhelm, I felt that everyone was helping us to make the very best of a super-difficult situation. I'd like to thank everyone named above and all their colleagues.

I came to Berlin from New York City in late September 2020 with my spouse Miya Masaoka, Professor of Sound Art at the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and our son Tadashi Lewis, then 15 years old. We were scheduled to arrive at the Wissenschaftskolleg in early August, in time for Tadashi to join his colleagues at the JFK High School in Berlin. However, his passport had expired in May, and we were not able to procure a new one for him because the US Passport Office was basically closed due to COVID-19. One day in late September, after a delay of several months during which we were despairing of actually getting to Berlin at all, Miya had a dream that we had received the passport. I had just called the agency earlier that day, and was told that the passport was still “processing.” So I called again, and somehow, the message was that the passport had been mailed to us! We ended up arriving two days before the deadline for enrollment at JFK, and even though Tadashi had missed six weeks of school, the wonderful thing was that unlike New York, Berlin still had *Präsenzunterricht*. That only lasted until late November, unfortunately, and did not resume until April.

So Tadashi was able to make some friends and even pass his *Mittelschulabschluss* examination (as well as studying German), but was deprived of much of the fellowship of meeting students, which we are still quite sad about. Tadashi's lifeline was the Internet. With a six-hour time difference, he was able to converse and play video games with his friends back in New York. For me, it was my work. I came to the Wiko with a plan to write an opera that was a combination of W.E.B. Du Bois's 1926 science fiction/dystopia short story, *The Comet*, and Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea*. By January 2021, it was clear that COVID was not going to allow the opera to be performed by June 2021, so it was postponed indefinitely. Meanwhile, Miya was continuing to teach remotely at Columbia, and in March 2021, she became a Guggenheim Fellow, which prompted many congratulations from people at the Wiko. For both me and Miya, there were also the incredible weekly colloquia and occasional presentations – so many people whose work I had read, or hope to read before I shuffle off this mortal coil.

For the entire fellowship year, starting in early August 2020, Miya and I took Wiko-organized group German lessons over Zoom. Mine were with Eva von Kügelgen, and the depth of her erudition, her patience, and her ardent love of teaching made an enormous, possibly life-changing difference for me. I first started studying German as a third-grader in Chicago at the age of nine, and I continued studying the language right through my second year of university. From around 1976 to 2010, when I was still a touring musician, I worked frequently in the BRD and the GDR with German musicians. However, I was always a bit embarrassed at my command of the spoken language, which still seemed unsure even after all that experience.

Eva encouraged me to throw off those shackles of self-doubt, and I found that many of my German friends and colleagues were relieved that they didn't have to write emails or talk to me on the phone in English anymore. I still made lots of mistakes, but it didn't matter now. Everyone I talked to was so encouraging – “dein hervorragendes Deutsch,” usw. I also used the television as an educational tool, a partial substitute for the relative lack of live contact with people in Berlin. I really didn't care what I watched – documentaries, breakfast shows with celebrity gossip, soap operas, *Schlagermusik*, the news, late-night political humor, game shows, home shopping, shows in Bavarian and other dialects. The subtitles were a big help, not least while we were watching live German-language commentary on the shocking January 6, 2021 invasion of the US Capitol, the bellwether of the current surge of criminal authoritarian behavior that I hope US democracy can beat back.

Eva also assigned readings from Uwe Pörksen's book about the Wiko, *Camelot in Grunewald: Szenen aus dem intellektuellen Leben der achtziger Jahre*. Pörksen's account of the very first year of the Wiko's existence, 1981/1982, portrayed the Wonderland that I was experiencing a 21st-century version of, with people like Michel Lallement, with whom I bonded through Erving Goffman (even if my grasp of Max Weber was embarrassingly slim), Christel Fricke, Ève Chiapello (and her husband Guy and daughter Claire), Yossi Yovel, Shamil Jeppie, Minou Arjomand (who I worked with at Columbia for a semester while she was a graduate student), Andreas Dorschel, Alexander Bevilacqua, Jan-Werner Müller, Erika Kiss (who provided a very useful reference for my 2020 Haus der Kulturen der Welt talk on "Telematic Afrofuturism"), Munem Wasif and his artist spouse, Reetu Sattar, Sonja Dümpelmann, Daniel Schönflug, and Anna Frebel, who inspired Tadashi with her book, *Searching for the Oldest Stars*. I even participated in an online Wiko reunion of the 2001/2002 cohort, invited by my former Columbia colleague in Psychology, Elke Weber, who along with her husband is hugely knowledgeable about new music.

This newly recovered German bore some very interesting implications. I had already been working on issues around music curation in Germany and Europe, and in September 2020 I gave a talk "at" (telematically) the Akademie der Künste as part of the symposium "Curating Diversity in Europe: Decolonizing Contemporary Music." I published this talk in the German online magazine *Van Outernational* as "New Music Decolonization in Eight Difficult Steps." The talk went semi-viral and I am always hearing from people who have read it or its translations into German and French. Around the same time, I curated a program of the music of Afrodiasporic classical composers, which was presented by the London Sinfonietta in October 2020. However, the day before the family and I were supposed to leave for London, the entire UK became a COVID-19 *Risikogebiet*. So the concert went on, but our trip was off, as well as my later invitations to give talks at Oxford and Cambridge, which ended up being done telematically.

In November 2020, I co-organized a similar program around the theme of "Vielfalt erleben," with the Ensemble Modern, one of the very best contemporary music groups in Germany, and really anywhere. We organized a five-hour telematic symposium in Frankfurt on issues in diversity and curation, and a livestreamed concert at the Philharmonie Essen. This was perhaps the first time in many years that I dared to do a pre-concert interview in German. After that, I started doing German-language radio interviews on this theme, i.e., "Black Lives Matter: Auch in der Musik?" fairly frequently, on rbbKultur, Deutschlandfunk, and

Austrian radio as well. In this way, I was able to mediatically further my modest intervention in the discussion of new music in Germany and Europe. I don't think any of this would have been possible without the encouragement of Eva von Kügelgen, so I imagine that she can be credited with helping to decolonize new music.

Of course I was aware that I was the first black person of Afrodiasporic descent to serve as composer in residence; I am also aware that my successor, Liza Lim, was just the second woman and second person of Asian descent ever in this position. From my informal research on the Wiko sites, I believe that there have been around eighteen black Afrodiasporic Fellows, out of a total of 1,870 Fellows since the first cohort in 1981. The very first black Fellow came in 1999/2000, eighteen years after the first cohort. From 2013 forward, there has been at least one black Fellow each year, although it seems that no black scholar has ever served as a Permanent Fellow.

On one view, this phenomenon was related to the near-absence of Afrodiasporic histories and composers on European stages and academic histories, which I had been critiquing in my own academic writing, using social scientist Patrick Simon's observation about Western Europe's "refusal to include ethnic categories in official statistics." While the pretext is given that this absence promotes national unity and avoids identity politics, Simon wonders whether "the negation of minority identities that prevails in France in the name of universalism is not often simply a tactic for consolidating the position of dominant groups." So, at the risk of appearing unseemly in a European context, I did count the number of black Wiko Fellows, as well as reading their Yearbook contributions. This counting and reading helped me realize that I had become part of the history of a singularly world-class scholarly institution, which deepened my appreciation.

Of the previous resident composers, I appeared to be one of the few with an equal footprint in academic writing – sometimes on contemporary music, but also on new technologies and visual art. At the beginning of my fellowship year, I felt the need to emphasize that aspect somewhat; at the opening introduction of the Fellows, this part of my work was not mentioned, whereas trombone playing, which I hadn't done since the last time I was in Berlin in 2018, was marked for exceptional emphasis. At that early moment in my fellowship year, with the foregoing history of black absence in mind, I could see right away that I would have a bit of extra work to do; thus, I've taken a documentarian rather than a speculative tack for my Yearbook contribution.

Of the 472 fellows from the US, just 3 were African Americans. The first came in the 2014/2015 cohort; I was the third. As with classical music's sensory deprivation issues

regarding the sonic absence of Afrodiasporic composers, that's a lot of widely influential scholarship to be deprived of. One could imagine people like the MacArthur Fellows Saidiya V. Hartman and Fred Moten, or perhaps Ruha Benjamin, Robert Gooding-Williams, Robin D.G. Kelley, Hortense Spillers, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cheryl I. Harris, and Alondra Nelson, as well as non-US people working on African American culture, such as Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby, Kodwo Eshun – so many people. Perhaps this explains why, when telling people about my opera project, I had never before encountered so many major scholars in one place who had never heard of W.E.B. Du Bois. Since “by their fruits ye shall know them,” this track record points to the need for a more diversely aware brain trust around the selection process for Fellows. I'm happy to sign onto that task if needed, but I could also think of a number of people who could help with that.

The Three Cultures Forum colloquia, brilliantly organized by Daniel Schönflug, were particular highlights of my fellowship year. I made presentations in two of these colloquia; the April 21 event, “Systematizing ‘Race’: Practices and Theories in an Emerging Modern World,” with Alexander Bevilacqua, Christel Fricke, and Ella Shohat, was particularly germane to what I was doing in classical music curation. While I was preparing my TCF presentation, Christel Fricke, who became a real friend, brought my attention to an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that had been published just the week before, by a Kant expert who presented a ringing attack on those who would dare raise any issue regarding the philosopher's obvious racism, while making such easily refutable statements as “Kant makes no statement of his own about blacks.” As with my own work on the inclusion of the Afrodiasporic in new classical music, I've found that pointing out these issues implicitly calls into question the standing of those experts who have somehow spent their careers ignoring and/or denying them, as well as being unaware of people who have already done this work, such as Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Robert Berlusconi, or 2015 Wiko Fellow El Hadji Ibrahima Diop.

However, I've also been critical of the too-easy loading of all issues of this kind, particularly in Germany, onto the heavily overworked sign of *Rassismus*. As I told a colleague in preparation for one of the many telematic talks I gave during my Wiko year, simply labeling the complex, intersectionally experienced dynamics of race as even institutional *Rassismus* cannot account for why so few Afrodiasporic composers have their works performed in Europe. Rather, one must unpack the discursive tactics, such as the construction of an identitarian consensus that such composers are somehow not “part of the tribe,” and therefore are to be ignored, clearly marked as exceptional outsiders, portrayed as

merely bringing coals to Newcastle, or framed as actually non-existing – the “Mythos der Abwesenheit,” a term I borrowed from my former student in musicology Dana Reason that was used as the headline of a 2019 *Neue Musikzeitung* article on my work. This is the real identity politics: “Woher kommst du eigentlich?”, the title of a 2021 3sat television show on being black in Germany. Of course it was not helpful that the term “Rasse” itself is fraught with contradictory meanings and is not easily translatable into the US/Anglophone notion of “race.” Daniel Schönplflug, organizer of the Fellow Forum, as well as Sonja Dümpelmann, provided me with an introduction to German-language scholarship that probed this conundrum. Based on this I was able to build a useful bibliography on the topic.

This TCF also influenced one of my Wiko composing projects, on the 18th-century Afro-German philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, who was already teaching philosophy at the University of Wittenberg when Kant was just ten years old. My piece *Amo* for five voices and electronics, with texts in Latin, German, Dutch, and Twi (Amo’s mother tongue) based on Amo’s 1734 “Philosophical Disputation Containing a Distinct Idea of Those Things That Pertain Either to the Mind or to Our Living and Organic Body,” was premiered by the Neue Vocalsolisten at the Venice Biennale in September 2021.

In March 2021, the Ensemble Modern “Afro-modernism” concert I curated in November 2020 was presented at the Philharmonie Berlin as part of the annual MaerzMusik Festival für Zeitfragen, sponsored by the Berliner Festspiele. During the festival period I moderated two panel discussions at the Wiko on the same evening: “Afrodiasporic Experimentalism,” held in English with sound artists Jessica Ekomane and Christina Wheeler, and “Identität, Diaspora und das Zeitgenössische: Eine Diskussion zu Identität und Zukunft der zeitgenössischen Musik,” held in German with Christel Fricke, musicologist Harald Kisiedu, and journalist and curator Arlette-Louise Ndakoze. In fact, this was the first public event at the Wiko since pandemic restrictions had begun in earnest; for example, there were no lecture-recitals in our year. Katharina Wiedemann, Petria Saleh, Sophia Pick, Dunia Najjar, and Frank Johannsen played key roles in bringing these two productions to fruition.

My Tuesday Colloquium, which took place about two weeks later, was initially meant to be a presentation of my recent musical works and a look at some of my recent scholarship. However, a rather curmudgeonly response to the MaerzMusik concert and discussions, published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, prompted me to revise my talk. I kept the first section, on the pleasures and pitfalls of composing for voices, discussing my

use of rhetorical figures as algorithmic procedures, as influenced by Sister Miriam Joseph's *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (1947). I then proceeded to examine issues in classical music that were brought up by the *FAZ* article, whose author used the concert to support his contention that discussions of race in classical music were nothing more than identity politics, an imported "amerikanische Problematik." *Par hasard*, Michel Lallement had just sent our German class another recent article from *Le Monde Diplomatique* by Stéphane Beaud and Gérard Noiriel, who claimed that the troubles in France around race were an artifact of "politiques identitaires," "l'Américanisation de la vie publique," and "un militantisme qui divise les classes populaires."

However, this seemed to be a classic case of projection. Despite decades of associations in Europe since 1976, and having lived on the continent for five years in the '80s, I had only seen one concert in all that time featuring the music of black classical contemporary composers. In fact, the Donaueschinger Musiktage, one of the most important contemporary music festivals in the world, had never programmed a black composer in its entire hundred-year history before October 2020, when a chamber work of mine, completed just before I arrived at the Wiko, was performed, along with works by two other black composers. At our November symposium, the former director of the Donaueschinger Musiktage publicly admitted this absence, a brave stance in my view. My Tuesday Colloquium used these recent events to reprise my view that to "present creative depth," as Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant declared in their 1993 book, *Éloge de la Créolité*, adopting a mental envelope of creolization would allow contemporary classical music to renounce its self-image as the celebration of a whiteness-based European sonic diaspora, an identity politics that, as with other addictions, operates with deadly effect. In this way, *Neue Musik* could become a true world music.

In addition to *Amo*, I wrote two other pieces, as well as four short articles. In October 2020, a 25-minute solo piano work, *Blombos Workshop*, premiered at the Skaņu Mežs festival in Riga, Latvia. The work took as its theme the backdating and de-Europeanization of the origin of the "human symbolic revolution" with the 1999 discovery in Blombos Cave in South Africa of an abstract drawing reliably dated at around 73,000 years old, as well as the vast, 100,000-year-old paint-making workshop from which it came. That same month, *Rainbow Family*, a recording of a work that premiered at IRCAM in Paris in 1984, was released, containing four pieces for interactive, improvising computers and human instrumentalists for which I wrote the software. These works were at least of historical interest, being among the earliest such works ever created. In February, *The Recombinant Trilogy*,

an album of works for solo instrumentalist and spatialized computer-based timbral transformations written between 2013 and 2017, was released.

Another article I wrote at the Wiko, “I Can’t Breathe: A Virtual Dialogue,” discusses Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas’s haunting work for solo trumpet, *I Can’t Breathe*, which is dedicated not to George Floyd, but to Eric Garner, who in 2014 was placed in a chokehold on the street by a New York City policeman. Garner can be heard on a bystander’s video urgently repeating the words “I can’t breathe” eleven times before passing out and then passing away. Haas’s work, written just after the birth of the Black Lives Matter organization, and well before the concept of Black Lives Matter came to international prominence, raises a number of important questions about the response of the international new music community to the increasingly multicultural and multiracial, i.e., creolized, societies in which its performances, curatorial directions, and critical, historical, and philosophical inquiries are being presented.

I also fulfilled a commission from the Guggenheim Museum for a short catalog essay, “Why Did Kandinsky Improvise?” The article asked why so little had been written by scholars about Kandinsky’s involvement with improvisation, despite his lasting influence on generations of writers, painters, musicians, and electronic media artists working with abstraction through improvisative methodologies. It turned out, for example, that his love of Cézanne and the Impressionists probably had more to do with his interest in improvisation than, say, his association with composers such as Schoenberg. My speculation is that Kandinsky’s interest in the spiritual aspect of his process of painting *Improvisations* could be traced to the eighteenth-century German aesthetic conceit of *Begeisterung*.<sup>1, 2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of *Begeisterung*, the sketch, and improvisation in Beethoven, see Richard Kramer, “The Sketch Itself,” in *Beethoven’s Compositional Process*, ed. William Kinderman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp. 3–5. For a discussion of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics of *Begeisterung*, see Edgar Landgraf, “Der Geist der Begeisterung: Kommunikationsparadoxien und ihre Entfaltung in Ästhetik und Poetik des späten 18. Jahrhunderts und bei Joseph von Eichendorff” (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> “Die Fantasien von großen Meistern, besonders die, welche aus seiner gewissen Fülle der Empfindung und in dem Feuer der Begeisterung gespielt werden, sind oft, wie die ersten Entwürfe der Zeichner, Werke von ausnehmender Kraft und Schönheit, die bey einer gelassenen Gemütslage nicht so könnten verfertigt werden.” Johann Georg Sulzer, “Fantasieren; Fantasie,” in *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste. Erster Theil* (Leipzig: M. G. Weidemanns Erben und Reich, 1771), p. 368, [https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/sulzer\\_theorie01\\_1771](https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/sulzer_theorie01_1771).

editors also accepted my translations of passages in Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*. I found that some previous translations were either not terribly faithful to the original German, or were slanted to support a disapprobation of improvisation typical of classical music commentary after 1850, which a closer reading of Kandinsky's writings does not support.

The very last composition I made at the Wiko was completed just days before the end of the fellowship. *Minds in Flux*, a thirty-minute work for symphonic orchestra and electronics, was premiered at BBC Proms 2021 at the Royal Albert Hall by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Ilan Volkov, whose mother, the historian Shulamit Volkov, was a Wiko Fellow in 2008/2009. I described the work as "a meditation on what decolonization might sound like." In these last days I also moderated a panel at the Akademie der Künste on Paul Robeson. This time I went to the Akademie in person, but the three panelists, artist Matana Roberts, curator and theorist Doreen Mende, and musicologist Kira Thurman, all appeared telematically, as did the entire panel, really. In January 2022 I was elected to membership in the Akademie.

I guess I'm running out of space, but despite the depredations of COVID, I would still count my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg as one of the extraordinary experiences of my life – although I'm sure that a number of Fellows in our cohort wouldn't mind a non-pandemic do-over. After all, just speaking of composers, Helmut Lachenmann, György Kurtág, and Toshio Hosokawa were Fellows three times, and Wolfgang Rihm and Jörg Widmann twice. But maybe we need more diversity now.