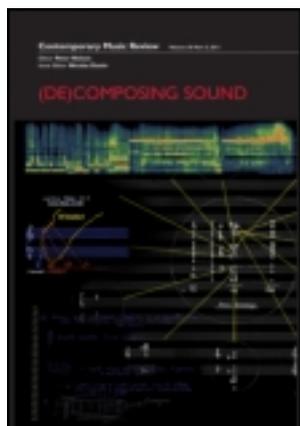


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# Building an Instrument, Building an Instrumentalist: Helmut Lachenmann's *Serynade*<sup>†</sup>

Samuel Wilson

*In Helmut Lachenmann's Serynade (1998, revised 2000), the solo piano is explored as a pianistic resource from which to build a new instrument and new experiential relationships to it. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, I show that implicit to building instruments are encounters with wider aesthetic and historical questions—particularly of the relationships between the body and technology as they mutually mediate one another. As such, Lachenmann's exploration of pianistic technologies inherently engages with the handed-down embodied relationships that exist between player and instrument—pedagogy—both finding themselves modified and reconfigured in the moment of performance. Instrument and instrumentalist are rebuilt in relation to one another.*

*Keywords:* Lachenmann; Merleau-Ponty; Technology; Pedagogy; Phenomenology

'Building an instrument' is no neutral thing—in the creation of the new is an inherent confrontation with tradition and the 'natural' way of things. Philosophical and experiential issues are inherently explored in building instruments; how building instruments concerns an implicit connection, development, or break from established instrumental practices. Furthermore, as the body is always involved in playing instruments, building instruments encompasses wider concerns about what we understand the body to be, how we use our bodies, and how bodies are performed. Helmut Lachenmann's music is acutely pertinent in this regard, of which a reoccurring motif is the problematisation and reappraisal of pedagogy—of the established

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relationships between instrument and instrumentalist. This is foregrounded in his *Serynade* for solo piano (1998, revised 2000),<sup>1</sup> something allowing him not only to build an instrument, but an instrumentalist also, reconfiguring the handed-down embodied relationships that exist between player and instrument.

This sense of the *relationship* between player and instrument as paramount here—the entanglement of pedagogy with technology—is highlighted in trying to answer a seemingly simple question: what is the piano? The answer to this question has an obvious physical component—it is an object that can be felt, touched, and played. However, ‘physicality’ in this answer does not stop purely at delineating the piano’s physical boundaries. The piano is not simply a physical entity—88 keys and a lid—but everything that comes with and around this. These are the dimensions which shape our relationship to it; the way it is ‘meant’ to be played, the canonic tradition that stands behind it as repertoire, and the normative expressive gestures that are ‘input’ by the player and ‘output’ sonically by the instrument. Hence, the piano does not exist merely as a lifeless piece of technology (although this is a dimension of it), it also exists in habit, in the fingers’ of pianists whose bodily relationships with their instruments are mediated historically and inscribed into the instrument.

Lachenmann’s *Serynade* brings this idea to the fore through reshaping these relations, consequently altering embodied relationships with the piano. In *Serynade*, the place of the piano and the way in which it is played become central to expression in the work. Put another way, the piano is itself approached as a point of contention. Unlike in a classical piano sonata, for example, where the piano is a *medium* for the expression of meaning, in *Serynade* the medium itself becomes an object of focus. In doing this, Lachenmann pushes and pulls between the inherited idea of the piano as a medium for expression and a present in which the medium of expression is itself rendered visible. The piano is explored as an inherited instrumental technology, though one now open to new experiential possibilities through the inherent openness of performance—i.e. that space in which one locates the relationships between players and instruments. This incorporates questions of pedagogy, with pedagogy representing the institutionalisation of the skills and capacities of operating the instrument. This means that one’s bodily relation to the instrument’s operation in the past—as historically habitualised—becomes something to be explored in the present. Through modifications within this space of pedagogical technique, of established ways of playing and hearing the piano, the relation of the body to music is itself modified.

An important dimension of much of Lachenmann’s music is a dialogue with instrumental traditions; how instruments are played, how audiences are ‘supposed’ to listen out for the expression they communicate, and so on (Williams, 2010). This comes through in various solo piano works: in *Guero* of 1970 (revised 1988), the pianist’s hands are audibly slipped across the key surface; sympathetic harmonic resonances are of importance in the 1981 cycle *Ein Kinderspiel*.

In *Serynade*, an instrument is built from the resources of playing techniques and tangential details that are found in the pianistic tradition, and from a reconfiguration of the relationships found between instrument and instrumentalist. Following a

‘relational’ concept of the piano, this can be thought of as a rebuilding of the instrument not along the lines of its physical dimensions, but out of the relationships that make it what it is; how it is used, thought about, and heard. This conception of musical technology also is advantageous in marking out that ‘technology’ is not just what is new and, as such, visibly technological; there is technology in what is taken for granted, a dimension that is naturalised, and hidden.

Indeed, this hidden aspect also facilitates the experience of the present as mediated by inherited significances of the past. The past is present in the historically established relationships that are found between players and instruments; in pedagogy, ‘bodies of knowledge’ inscribed into our actual bodies of physicality, habitualisations of playing, listening, and experiencing instruments and instrumental musics. ‘Performance techniques, musical instruments, and performing spaces are also shrines to memory, as much and often more so than musical works in themselves’, as Luciano Berio put it (2006, p. 62), another composer acutely aware of dialectical relationships between past and present as these regard inherited instrumental practices.

In *Serynade*, the relationships between instrument and instrumentalist are always transitory and in flux; the status of each in the eye of the other, never being taken for granted, but undergoing constant change throughout the work’s seven sections. Each section takes an idea, or a set of interrelated figures, as provisional centres around which various musical possibilities and combinations are explored. Section (A) sets out some of these ideas, and from the very opening of *Serynade* one hears a series of bold statements that seem to attempt a feeling of their way around the instrument, getting to know it afresh—as if the established relationships between player and instrument, whilst not having been abandoned, are not taken for granted.

As may be observed from Figure 1, from the opening well-defined musical elements are brought into relation with one another—‘the chord’, ‘the hemidemisemiquaver flourish’, and ‘the pedalling figure’, for example. Each element seems also to suggest certain gestural actions or embodied musical movements. The sections that follow this explore material that is, in the most part, introduced in the first section. Each reflects on what has come before: section (B), calmly investigates low, pianissimo chords; (C), repeated hemidemisemiquaver notes and flourishes; (D), chords, resonances, and pedalling figures; (E), a focus on sustained resonances; (F), repeated notes, arching flourishes, and chordal figures; and finally (G), the most ‘synthetic section’, in which elements are worked together, like developmental transformations between fully sounded chordal material and sympathetic harmonic resonances. The work’s sectional construction allows Lachenmann to engage with different aspects of the musical material and conventionalised playing techniques, to build his instrument from the pedagogical resources of history.

Before I go on to examine the building of an instrument as the musical content of *Serynade*, it is important that it is first outlined how instruments, instrumentalists, and the relation between the two are established in the traditions of Western Art Music. *Serynade* may then become better regarded as drawing upon, and modifying, these.

Figure 1 *Serynade*, mm. 57–63. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

The interconnected concepts of instrumental technology and instrumentalists' pedagogy are both central to this.

I have argued above that technology—what the instrument *is*—is inherently entangled with pedagogy, the historically established relationships found between instrument and instrumentalist. This means that a change in the relationships between instrument and instrumentalist modifies both technology and pedagogy; each changes as a relation to its other. Here, a turn as is made towards the phenomenology of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). Merleau-Ponty's work is particularly useful in thinking about these issues as he places the body centre stage in processes of perception and living in the world; the body, something crucial in positing relationships between player and instruments.

Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment has been influential recently in cultural studies (notably on the work of Judith Butler (see, for discussion, Stoller, 2010)) and on work on the influence of technology on experience (in that of Don Ihde, for example (Selinger, 2006)). Musicology has given little attention to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology directly, generally being influenced second hand via another discipline or method.<sup>2</sup> This could be in part due to Merleau-Ponty's own characterisation of music as, as he put it, 'too beyond the world', too 'pure' to have worldly meaning

(quoted in Goehr, 2005, p. 337) —a transcendentalism which does not chime with current musicological thinking. However, as I hope to show, this notion does not fit with his work on embodiment if we are to take embodiment as something ‘worldly’, enacted in practices like musical performance and reception, as something mediated historically and, in the case of musical performance, pedagogically.<sup>3</sup>

For Merleau-Ponty, technology—be this musical-instrumental technology or any other kind—was always entangled with the ways it was used, and in the ways in which certain types of use became naturalised, habitualised, and automatic for the user (in music: pedagogy). Merleau-Ponty’s most famous example of this process of habitualisation was that of a blind person’s cane. In his *The phenomenology of perception*, he writes that,

the blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.165)

This habitualisation as such goes beyond the automatic, going so far as to make that piece of technology—momentarily at least—fade out of view.

This process of the habitualisation of a relationship between user and the object of use, Merleau-Ponty calls a *body-schema*. Or rather, the body becomes used to certain pieces of technology around it, and this organises it—schematises it—in a way that accommodates these technologies. As Taylor Carman puts it (1999, p. 220), body-schema are ‘the bundle of skills and capacities that constitute the body’s precognitive familiarity with itself and the world it inhabits’. It seems clear that this idea of body-schema could mean something for musical instruments and instrumentalists. Before I go on to outline this in detail—in particular, what this means for the building of an instrument from historical resources of pianistic technology, style, and pedagogy, as does Lachenmann—there is one further exceptional example that must be cited from Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty makes clear in practical terms what he meant by body-schema when he said that,

[t]he subject knows where the letters are on the typewriter as we know where one of our limbs is, through a knowledge bred of familiarity which does not give us a position in objective space. The movement of her fingers is not presented to the typist as a path through space which can be described, but merely as a certain adjustment of motility, physiognomically distinguishable from any other. (2002, p. 166)

This example works equally well for the piano. The instrumentalist knows where the piano keys are as they know where their limbs are, something ‘bred of familiarity’. They enter into a performative relationship with the piano, through a bodily dimension, one of a fluid immediacy that transgresses the boundary between instrument and instrumentalist as this would appear in objective space. ‘The distinction between subject and object is blurred in my body’, says Merleau-Ponty (quoted in

Carman, 1999, p. 206); like in using the typewriter, the boundaries between the instrumentalist and instrument begin to blur in the bodily experience of playing.

To some degree, what has been said about what the instrument *is*—or rather *what it does naturally, as habitualised*—goes not just for how the performer experiences it; it also goes for the audience. For the audience, because of naturalised processes of playing the piano, the player's inputs appear as *becoming*, rather than causing, sonic outcomes. Technology goes hand-in-hand with pedagogy—the piano is not only a physical 'thing' but is also mediated by the history of its operation. The piano, like the blind man's stick, becomes an invisible medium through which experience, sensitivity, and expression are mediated.

Lachenmann engages with this tradition. Both the audience's experience of the instrument as invisible medium of expression,<sup>4</sup> and the body-schema of the instrumentalist, are brought into focus—*made visible*—when previously habitualised relationships between the player and instrument are reorganised; when the instrument, *as a set of relationships between technology and pedagogy, is rebuilt*. Perception of the instrument—perception of sonic events—is constructed in a way that draws on a tradition of instrumental playing whilst simultaneously distancing it. This seems in keeping with Lachenmann's own thoughts on the new and old, when he says that, 'the problem is not to search for new sounds, but for a new way of listening, of perception' (Lachenmann in interview in Steenhausen, 2004, p. 9).

But what does this mean in practical terms in the context of *Serynade*? It means that relationships between musical content, instrumental techniques, and so on are modified from their normative roles, and that this affects both instrument and instrumentalist.

This process can be well summarised through a recording studio-based analogy: inputs are reassigned in terms of their outputs. For example, the use of the pedal no longer functions only as a sustaining device, but comes into focus as an audible element in itself. The use of the pedal takes on its own place and significance in the context of the work's structure. With this 'rerouting' of resources, the established directness of gestural inputs and sonic outputs is severed. Circuits of relationships between player and instrument, between physical actions and musical expression, are rewritten. Handed-down playing techniques—*physical and expressive actions historically inscribed with symbolic significance*—are subject to a transforming perception, through a rerouting of the relationships found between player and instrument.

The use of the pedal becomes an important component of the musical structure itself (Figure 2). This contrasts, of course, with the conventionalised use of the pedal as a sustaining or colouring device. What is of conventional focus is modified: this pedagogical and technological techniques no longer merely facilitate the playing of musical content. Instead, pedagogy and technology become musical content themselves. The music is not seen to be something transmitted via the *medium* of the piano. Instead, the piano itself—as a series of relationships between elements of pedagogy and technology—becomes foregrounded as a central aspect of this aesthetic experience.

296 „Flag-Reservoir” 3/4 4/4 „Flag-Reservoir”

Saiten

Flageolet-Berührung mp mp f

Flag-Berührung

Sost. Ped.

301 „Flag-Reservoir”

Saiten

Flag-Berührung

(Sost. Ped.)

Figure 2 *Serynade*, mm. 296–304. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

Technological conventions, in so being highlighted, may themselves become explored as crucial aspects of musical experience. Put another way, the processes of artistic production may be explored critically as the material embodiments of the artistic products (musical works, expression) of which they are mediative. Howard Becker touches on this issue in his classic *Art worlds*.

When the equipment [of artistic production] embodies the conventions, the way a conventional thirty-five-millimetre camera embodies the conventions of contemporary photography, you learn the conventions as you learn to work the machinery ... The same is true of many of the understandings associated with conventional music; you learn them as you learn to manipulate the instrument. (2008, p. 57)

This is made explicit in *Serynade* where the technology of musical expression (as related to pedagogy) is subject to modification. This is evidenced by a simple example: that a huge amount of the ‘content’ of the music seems to be absent from the score (Figure 2, bars 296–301), with the work being indebted to the exploration

of musical dimensions that are not notable in a traditional sense, yet *require traditional and conventional resources* in their production (for example, resonances that require a grand piano<sup>5</sup>). Instead of the score being the documentation of the content of ‘the work’, of the exploration of musical-formal conventions—a message to be sent to the audience through the medium of the piano—the piano is engaged with as convention itself; as an object of the established musical past which nonetheless holds the potential for eliciting new and exciting musical experiences. The score itself becomes instructive of the manner of sound production—of the mode of engaging with the equipment which embodies the musical tradition (the piano). Due to the importance placed on engaging with the mode of sound production, the score lacks formal presence, as something to be expressed through the medium of the piano—an idea that may be understood in light of Mine Doğantan-Dack’s (2011, p. 248) comment that, ‘In the Western classical tradition, music needs to be understood as constituted both by abstract structures and performance movements, both by the score and by its performances ... the abstract and the concrete are in continual interaction.’<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the piano is itself presented as a physical presence, as the content of the work to which the body bears relation; both literally and symbolically the piano is placed ‘centre stage’.

Musical conventions and enculturation allow for the development of styles and the establishment of modes of musical expression. Howard Becker again:

Conventions known to all well-socialized members of a society make possible some of the most basic characteristic of an art world. Most important, they allow people who have little or no formal acquaintance with or training in the art to participate as audience members—to listen to music, read books, attend films or plays, and get something from them. (2008, p. 46)

Conventions, once established, recede into the background, operating as a *medium* for meaning, as a frame or space within which new configurations of meaning are made possible. This reaches its apex under the so-called ‘relative autonomy’ of the artwork, where convention becomes naturalised as ‘second nature’,<sup>7</sup> being no longer seen as explicitly social; where, due to the regulatory frame of convention, expression—and embodied experience<sup>8</sup>—seems inscribed as something interior to the music (rather than as exterior historical-material fact). The naturalisation of convention works as a kind of ‘frame’ within which musical material may be experienced and interpreted; it gives rise to a space of musical immanence, what William Echard has characterised as ‘an apparently unmediated presence ... [where] the necessary backgrounds of competence and context, although operative, recede from awareness [so that] it is *as if we hear a property directly in the music*’ (2006, p. 81, emphasis mine). This apparent immediacy is explored critically in the (re)building of the instrument(alist), as heard in Lachenmann’s *Serynade*.

Lachenmann has spoken of a similar process in another one of his works for solo piano, *Ein Kinderspiel* a cycle of seven short pieces, written in 1981 (Figure 3). In



Figure 3 *Ein Kinderspiel*, mm. 1–4. © 1982, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

this work, like in *Serynade*, the use and modification of pianistic (technological and pedagogical) resources elicit the experience of new phenomenological significances, actualised from the potentialities of inherited history. This process is less extreme than in *Serynade*—the piano is not built anew—but what this earlier work does underline is Lachenmann’s interest in historical resources, and transformations of the old rather than a disavowal of them.

In a recent talk, Lachenmann described this as an expression of the idea not of ‘playing the melody on the piano’ but rather of ‘playing the piano on the melody’.<sup>9</sup> The instrument’s identity is here taken as more than only its physical and technological dimensions - as also shaped by other features, in this case melody. This echoes my argument that instruments’ identities encompass how they are approached pedagogically, how they relate to the body, and how they are embedded within particular repertoires and histories. In both *Ein Kinderspiel* and *Serynade* can be seen a rerouting of relationships between these elements. And, in their changing reference to one another, musical experience is transformed. This means that building an instrument is not just a concern with the new, it is a concern with the old. Building an instrument, at least in Lachenmann’s context, is not a break from tradition but rather a transgression of the relationships inherited from it, inherent within present experience.

Such a transgression can be seen in *Serynade*. In particular, one hears moments when the new and old interpenetrate and shape the experience of one another. The use of so-called ‘extended techniques’ is an excellent case in point. They are not used as exotic devices, but rather to bring out qualities from, and to relate to, more standardised musical elements. (Ross Feller (2002, p. 252) notes something similar about Lachenmann’s music—that extended techniques are not used as something special but as central to works’ materials.) For example, sympathetic harmonic resonances—which are important elements of the work’s content—are heard as *emerging* from clusters of pitches that surround them. They are not presented as some extraneous device of ‘otherness’, but instead emerge as inner qualities of the musical material. Indeed, this becomes all the more clear in bars 316–319 (Figure 4), where ‘sounded resonances’ mediate between fully sounded pitches and the attenuated harmonics of silently depressed keys which occur throughout much of the rest of the work.

Figure 4 *Serynade*, mm. 316–319. © 2002, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden.

The *piano* chord in the uppermost staff blends into and colours the natural harmonics of the low *fortississimo* E-flat. The upper voice then gains strength, until it emerges from ‘within’ these harmonics to become a fully sounded chord. In doing so, it draws explicit connection between resonances and sounded pitches as connected entities—as points on a spectrum or ‘scale’ rather than as distinct entities.

What this example illustrates is that sympathetic resonance, an ‘extended technique’, is shown not to be something ‘outside’ of and alien to the main content of the work but as arising from it. In being synthesised as part of the work’s structure, technique becomes ‘extended’ in *extending outwards the inner qualities of the material*, rather than as an extension of technique as an abstract category in-itself. This characterisation itself seems to fit into Lachenmann’s own aesthetics; he himself has suggested that ‘defamiliarisation of sound for its own sake represents no more than a sort of surreal, exotic, expressionistic affectation’ (Lachenmann in interview in Ryan, 1999, p. 22).

*Serynade* is a script for building both an instrument and an instrumentalist, as these are bound up together. This is a moment-to-moment thing—a constant shifting of dimensions in perpetual interrelationships—but something nonetheless founded on, located through, history and habit. Technology and the habitualisation of ourselves to technologies are key to this, with the body as a point of contact between the two, and one in which the distinctness of each, as apart from the other, is brought into question. Given the right performative script, like *Serynade*, the schematised body is transformed. Equally, the instrument extends both body and instrument as these are bound

up together, stimulating new experiences and moments of aesthetic significance. One builds not only instruments, but instrumentalists also, as there are always inherent mediative relationships between the one and the other. To give Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 169, emphasis mine), the final word on this:

The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; *it must then build itself an instrument*, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world.

## Notes

- [1] A note on the title of the work: The alteration of the word 'serenade' to include a 'y' is for the dedicatee of the work, the composer's wife, the pianist Yukiko Sugawara. See, for a discussion of the concept of the serenade and its pertinence to this work, Hodges & Service, 2005.
- [2] For example, as influenced by musicology after Judith Butler's 'performativity', or in empirical qualitative work like musicological applications of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.
- [3] Whilst I draw on Merleau-Ponty's ideas, it should be noted that my philosophical and theoretical emphases differ subtly from his. The embodied phenomenology explored here is influenced by Merleau-Ponty's work as retrospectively inflected by later developments—particularly, ideas of 'performativity' (e.g. as prominently argued for by Butler, 1988), that embodied experience is grounded in repeated, conventionalised (and conventionalising) practices.
- [4] Whilst it is often the case that technologies, in conventional usage, recede from view as objects of focus in their own right, it should be noted that this is not always the case (e.g. as in displays of virtuosity in which the physicalities of the players and instruments are underlined). However, Lachenmann's treatment of the instrument–instrumentalist relation is particular in its 'critical' emphasis. It modifies, rebuilds, these relationships and hence their impact upon the mediation of experience, rather than simply—as in the case of the virtuoso—making visible physicality as a category mediative of experience.
- [5] Lachenmann goes so far as to specify the use of a Steinway C or D.
- [6] Also see Mine Doğantan-Dack's chapter in *New perspectives on music and gesture* (2011, pp. 244–248) for a discussion of the duality of 'a work-/score-based and a performance-based understanding of music', and relevant tendencies as exhibited throughout musicology.
- [7] This idea of conventionalisation moving towards 'second nature' is expressed incisively in the writings of Adorno. Perhaps the most important example of historically habitualised practices seeming to be natural (and, as such, ahistorical) is tonality; 'The second nature of the tonal system is an illusion originating in history', Adorno argues in his *Philosophy of new music* (2006, p. 13).
- [8] Patrick McCreless explores this with regard to the conventional *gestures* of pianists as these relate to gestures within the music. He argues that prototypical gestures (developed in the Romantic piano repertoire) still play out affectively in much modernist piano music. One example McCreless gives is the ascent to a peak followed by a quick descent to the lowest notes of the piano before 'bouncing' upwards to a chord above them. This same gestural scheme forms the basis of the second of Pierre Boulez's *douze notations* (1985) (McCreless, 2006, pp. 34–39).

- [9] Lachenmann spoke about this in a pre-concert talk (an interview with Ivan Hewett) as part of the 'Helmut Lachenmann Weekend' at the London Southbank Centre on 23 October 2010.

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