

"COMPOSITION IS A COOPERATIVE PROCESS" – AIRBORNE EXTENDED

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airborne extended by Kyraki Drakoti
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airborne extended, an ensemble consisting of Tina Zerdin, Sonja Leitold, Elena Gabbriellini, and Caroline Mayrhofer, explores the unusual acoustic possibilities of their "double duo" instrumentation – harp, harpsichord, flute and recorder – in an ever-growing repertoire of new compositions, preferentially by female composers. Michael Franz Woels recently spoke to Elena Gabbriellini and Caroline Mayrhofer about the difference between 'current' and 'contemporary', concerts in the post-pandemic era, and playing underground.

I'd like to start with the question "what is contemporary?" Elena Gabbriellini, I found it on your Instagram account...

Elena Gabbriellini: It's an open question. We deal with contemporary music – actually, I prefer the term 'current' music: current music is not always contemporary, and contemporary music is not necessarily current. As a musician, I try to live this contradiction. "What is contemporary?" also contains the admonition to question everything, to not automatically assimilate everything that society produces. As musicians, we have to be alert – including in terms of the pieces and content we present.

Elena Gabbriellini: I think Andrew Maxbauer was trying to make a specific kind of American music culture his own, in a contemporary classical context – like John Cage, Morton Feldman, or Alvin Lucier. He's trying to get us to face directly what we're really hearing when we're listening. It was an experiment in Reaktor, and the audience at our last concert reacted astonishingly well. We particularly want to thank the two curators of the space – Anna Resch and Sebastian Jobst – they gave us complete *carte blanche* for these experiments.



Video: airborne extended – "Skeleton Dance"

Caroline Mayrhofer: There's also categorization, not just in Vienna: put bluntly, classical-oriented scenes rarely mix with adventurous audiences, which tend to gravitate toward electronic music.

Elena Gabbriellini: There's a large market for classical music, or for Baroque, for instance. And contemporary music is edging in on the market...

Caroline Mayrhofer: We often try to combine different directions in concert programs. For the last one (PRISM #10: "Anamorphosis"), the American composer Andrew Maxbauer presented a piece with field recordings. I played a silent dog whistle, and we had a space with open windows. We played very little and very quietly, and the field recordings were also played quietly. The other pieces in the program were more 'conventional', though, and notated.

Caroline Mayrhofer: ...Or with the last piece, where we had 12 electric fans on stage. That generated a really interesting sound aesthetic; it gives a notated piece – like something by Salvatore Sciarrino, for example – a completely different effect. I like that mixture.

"PEOPLE WERE STARVED FOR LIVE LISTENING EXPERIENCES"

airborne extended has been around for ten years now, with slight alterations in the personnel; you also survived the pandemic as a group. How do you see the post-pandemic era as musicians?

Caroline Mayrhofer: After the pandemic, people were starved for live listening experiences. Before the pandemic we were traveling a lot, thanks to NASOM.

Elena Gabbriellini: Often, we perform for a very specialized audience, mostly consisting of musicians and composers. But I'm always happy [after a concert] when curious people who had never heard us before tell us that they found it unusual, but that they're taking new ideas away with them. We musicians were starved for the stage, for live experiences too.

Caroline Mayrhofer: And when we travel as a NASOM act, we're always on the lookout for young musicians in other countries. Then, at our Vienna concerts, we can present a lot of works by foreign composers. Established composers are often occupied for years with major projects, like operas or orchestral works. And due to our unique instrumentation, composition has to be a cooperative process. For instance, Sonja [Leitold] has extended harpsichord techniques that only one other player in the Netherlands has mastered. She's developed special practices and is looking for ways to realize them – that's true of Tina Zerdin as well.

airborne extended (c) Fabian Schöber

Elena Gabbriellini: This coaching process with the composers is very important to us. The Crossroads Festival in Salzburg was a wonderful experience: four composers were chosen and we worked together for months. It's a special experience to pay composers to travel to Vienna and work intensively with each of us, but it's also a bit uneconomical. Still, we want to take that time.

"WE CAN'T PERFORM ON JUST ANY INSTRUMENT."

The name of your ensemble can also be interpreted as referring to the fact that each of you plays your instrument in an 'extended' manner – experimentally and/or prepared. How does that actually work when you're on the road with large, hard-to-find instruments like harp and harpsichord?

Caroline Mayrhofer: We've had a lot of funny things happen. Tina likes to drive, so she takes her instrument with her when she can. But as soon as we have to fly, Sonja and Tina have to work with harp and harpsichord "networks" wherever we are. Like how we found a harp in Tunisia. Or Turkey, where we borrowed a harpsichord – with no legs – out of someone's living room. The special techniques mean that we can't perform on just any borrowed instrument, and we have to plan our programs accordingly. There are a lot of parameters to consider when we travel.

We touched on the subject of concert formats before, like your PRISM series in Reaktor. Do you have further ideas on different formats for concerts?

Caroline Mayrhofer: I studied in Holland; there, concerts have a staging concept. Here, though, people don't devote much energy to it. It's not always necessary to consider it, but it's good to. Originally, we tried to organize concerts in various [Vienna] districts, in nontraditional spaces. For instance, there's a little-known underground room in the Salmgasse; another time, we played in the basement of the Stock art gallery. Of course, the humidity was difficult for the instruments, and getting the stringed instruments down there. These different, unknown spaces [also] seem to hinder the generation of an audience. We've got a number of places that we'd still like to play – but at the expense of listeners. Reaktor is already known for contemporary music performances.

Michael Franz Woels, translated from the German original by Philip Yaegeer

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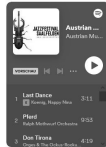
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