Review of *Helmut Lachenmann: Streichquartette* (Arditti Quartet), Kairos CD 0012662KAI (2007)

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Since its inception in 1974, the Arditti Quartet has brought hundreds of new works to light. In 2007, the ensemble—newly reconfigured with musicians Irvine Arditti, Ashot Sarkissjan, Ralf Ehlers, and Lucas Fels—recorded the three remarkable string quartets of Helmut Lachenmann. Each work had been previously recorded, but this is the first time all the three quartets can be found on one disc. Although the first presentations of each piece (*Gran Torso*, *Reigen seliger Geister* and *Grido*) were groundbreaking, this collection on the Kairos label[1] boldly displays Lachenmann's stature as a composer who dramatically expanded the rich historical tradition of the string quartet.

Lachenmann's quartets span thirty years of compositional production: with each quartet, the composer addressed the genre's formidable past with his own innovations.[2] *Gran Torso*, his first quartet, forced him to "confront for the first time such a traditionally comprised sound apparatus…which has become almost forbidden by its very familiarity."[3] That work set a standard from which, seventeen years later, *Reigen seliger Geister* (Roundelay of blessed souls) would attempt to "go deeper and…to see into the already-developed landscape more keenly."[4] His most recent statement, String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*, attempts to deny the notion of progress in the name of authenticity. "I lose myself, and in so doing truly find myself again."[5]

The roots of all three quartets can be traced to a 1969 work, *Pression,* for solo cello: this composition already contains much of the musical resources that will be refined, extended and transformed in the course of the string quartets. In this work musical materials exist as extensions (in some cases hyper-extensions) or amplifications of traditional gestures and playing techniques. For example, the technique of bowing *sul ponticello* is extended, in that the cellist is asked to bow at times on or past the bridge of the instrument. In addition, bow pressure becomes modified by employing both hands, a simple (but stunning) increase in weight and power. While such technical innovations are certainly important, *Pression* is far from a mere display of clever tricks. Every sound

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[1] This is their first disc with Kairos.

[2] Lachenmann is a composer deeply familiar with the canon of the Classical period. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in *Accanto*, *Musik für einen Klarinettisten mit Orchester.* This work is discussed at length in Ian Pace's 1998 article "Positive and Negative I" published in *The Musical Times* (Vol. 139, No. 1859 [Jan., 1998', pp. 9-17). In *Accanto,* a recording of the Mozart clarinet concerto is played over speakers at the same time as the performers perform notated music (the Mozart appears also in the score). The tension between the two temporal planes culminates with a shout from the tuba player, "*Bitt brazu das Zitat!*" (Please play the extract!). The volume increases on the recording and Mozart is clearly perceptible for the longest moment in the piece (a few seconds) before a percussionist merges with the pulse and a new section begins. In this work the "past" is overtly simultaneous: sometimes barely heard or overpowered by the ensemble. Regardless, Mozart is *always* there, consciously perceived or not.

[3] Helmut Lachenmann, "On My Second String Quartet '*Reigen seliger Geister*'," *Contemporary Music Review* 23, nos. 3-4 (2004), pp. 59-79.

[4] Ibid., p 60.

[5] Helmut Lachenmann, Program Note for String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*.

functions to elaborate the hidden realms of music history, as Lachenmann evolves his language by looking closely to the gestures of music one often takes for granted.

In *Pression,* Lachenmann also attempted to create a new formal sensibility. Each section of the work is determined by its content rather than by an external notion of formal principle, and the music unfolds as a dynamic interplay between sound events interrupted by pitch or disappearing in shadows.[6] This rejection of traditional forms is vaguely familiar; Stockhausen took a similar stance when he defined *Momentform* as a work "in which a 'moment' does not have to be a segment of linear time flow, or a portion of an exact duration, but in which the concentration is on the Now—on each Now…"[7] The difference in Lachenmann's music is that although there may be a poetic evocation of the "eternal present" (especially in the longer sound structures), the composer gravitates toward dialectical forms. His sound blocks interact and their varying contexts create a unique sense of interplay and synthesis.[8] The graph below is an example of how these structures can be heard in *Pression.*

A	B	Development	C (x) C (x')
pp LH gestures	*fff* Heavy pressure	*subito "pp"* body, *col legno* variants, bridge variants	*pp—ff—n* Pitches emerge and combine with noise-based sounds.
74"[9]	94"	124"	213"
Noise		Noise, pitches via *pizz.*	Sound + Noise

Two years after *Pression,* Lachenmann began work on his first string quartet, *Gran Torso* (revised in 1978). The Kairos compact disc marks the first studio recording of *Gran Torso* from the Arditti Quartet.[10] It was a work without "backdoors," meaning he was testing his new ideas against a genre with an extensive history: the string quartet.[11] In the earlier orchestral works *Air* and *Kontrakadenz*, the standard instrumental paradigm was distorted in terms of sonic realism through the backdoor of expanded percussion and additional ad hoc instruments: switches whipped through the air, snapped branches, rattling electronic alarm bells in *Air*—radio broadcasts, water sloshing in resonant basins, noisily rubbed polystryrene in *Kontrakadenz* ultimately simplified the necessary

[6] Lachenmann discusses form at length in his article on *Reigen,* "Structure: polyphony of arrangement: my old definition—always at hand since the typology of sound I established in the 1960s, in which sound and form, sensory and spiritual experience meet and interpenetrate in the double concept of sound-structure/structure-sound" For a more in-depth discussion of form, see his article "On structuralism," *Contemporary Music Review 12,* no. 1 (1995), pp. 93-102.

[7] Translated by Robert P. Morgan in his article "Stockhausen"s Writings on Music," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 4, Anniversary Issue: Highlights from the First 75 Years (Winter, 1991), pp. 194-206.

[8] Later he will provide a "structural melody" as part of the score in *Reigen*. Though not always audible, the foundation on which the work is based is apparent.

[9] Approximate duration in seconds.

[10] The world premiere recording was made in 1998 by the Berner Quartet on the Col Legno label.

[11] Lachenman's term for his work from this period is *musique concrète instrumentale.* This is an approach that rejects "usual parameters"[11] in favor of "bodily energetic aspects of their foregrounding of sound or noise."

examination of hearing itself; they did not reach the summit, admittedly, but they show the way, they helped 'aim the antennae' and made a number of things more plausible.[12]

In terms of materials and structure, *Gran Torso* is an investigation of possibilities contained within *Pression*. One result is vast formal sections and a greater interplay between the noise and pitch-based elements. A clear example of this new breadth and dichotomy is the expansive viola solo. Here the violist begins in bar 25 with a technique Lachenmann calls flautando "schreiben," or "writing" *flautando*, which requires the performer to play on the surface of the string between the bridge and stopping finger, varying the amount of bow between one eighth and one forth of its length. Down-bow *saltando* phrases are sprinkled throughout the passage, as are other variants, until pitch remerges in bar 81. Here the composer is careful not to allow the pitch-based viola to cover the other three instruments, which have remained in a noise-based sound world. In addition to the use of dynamics for this purpose, Lachenmann makes an explicit note in the viola part, "do not cover the violins."[13] As the sound-based violins become less audible, the violist adds a "*tonlos*" element by expanding outwards to each rib of the instrument as if they were additional strings without pitch. Thus the pitched sounds disappear into a white noise of the bow hair rubbing against the side of the instrument. The violins continue to "write" flautando above the strings with no sound at all. From this point of silence the "real" viola solo emerges, which is also *tonlos*, but this time via bowing the tailpiece. The ensuing noise forms a point of concentration lasting nearly three minutes. Below is a graph that puts the viola solo in formal context with the entire work.[14]

Quarter-note=56		Emergence of Viola Solo			
1 Sound-based (vertical bowing, bowing on the back of the instruments, "whisked" *col legno*, pressure-accents)	(19) [Tempo libero-a tempo] Grinding, *pizz.* Variants, loose circular "f" on back of instrument *col legno*	25 Viola: "writing" *flautando* which evolves into the full-fledged viola solo by bar 104	+ tension pegs pizz + semi-pitched *flautando* + cello Eb "quasi echo" +"rattling "and faltering" pressure	heavily pressed, machine-like	81 Viola becomes pitched, incorporates *tonlos* element via the ribs of the instrument

Viola Solo: Tempo Rubato (40-96 alternando)			Piu Mosso (=72)		Piu Lento (Tempo I)
104 *tonlos* (on the tailpiece)	133 Viola begins to be consumed by other three instruments. The cellist moves the bow under the strings	145 Approximate end of viola solo. *Saltando perpetuo* is introduced in the first violin.	155 *Col legno* variants, variants on playing the bridge.	The muting position is combined to a greater degree and the cellist moves the bow to normal playing position.	188 Heavy pressure returns in the viola part, which triggers a textural and crescendo in dynamics

[12] "On My Second String Quartet," p. 59.
[13] *Gran Torso*, measure 81.
[14] This graph is not intended to be a complete catalogue of all playing techniques that appear in the score.

Piu Mosso (=60)					
196 "quasi solo" (cello), *furioso*	206 [fermata] Harmonics (*punta d'arco*)	208 Breakdown of pressured bowing ("faltering," "hesitant," "nearly trembling").	224 Cellist uses the same two-handed position on bow as in *Pression* and leads the passage.	"Faltering" gives way to "almost 'singing', rattling." The muting grip is added. Bow speed is slowed, bowing at the wrapping is explored.	273 *Pizz.* variants begin as a unison in upper three strings (*ffff*) and eventually the muting grip is applied. The cello is the only instrument to resonate on the last pitch.

The surfacing and eventual disappearance of the viola as the principle voice is skillfully executed by the Arditti Quartet in the Kairos recording. The beginning of this transformative process occurs in bar 25, where the "writing" *flautando* passage emerges from the crescendo in the previous bar as if all were part of the same event. In bar 26, the cellist plays with the string between two fingers (reminiscent of *Pression*), which blends with the viola part is if coming from one bow. Throughout this passage (bars 25-40) the shadows, growing and fading in prominence, are inexorably linked to the body of the sound-world. This is particularly true in bar 28, where the cello's "*sempre lontano, ma espressivo*" over a *tonlos* passage is deepened by the continued presence of the viola. This becomes a stream of sound of its own as the violins play passages that are more articulated. The violins cease in bar 38 and the hairpin crescendo along with invigorated bow pattern makes the listener suddenly aware that the "shadow" can move independently of its body. Ralf Elders makes astonishingly detailed distinctions between the seamless bow passages and those marked *saltando leggiero* with a dotted line in the score.

There are three sound worlds that become evident by bar 40. The violins play highly energetic and rhythmically spastic *pizzicato* variants, the viola is continuing the "writing" *flautando*, and the cello plays a more active version of the two-fingered *glissandi*. The quieter voices (viola and cello) are never left out of focus and the quartet opens the texture with great precision, marking each *saltando* passage in the viola as the cellist asserts greater presence in bars 50-51, where small crescendos propel the newly-charged rhythms.

The low written Eb in bar 57 sounds revelatory in the hands of cellist Lucas Fels. It comes across like a dimension added to the persistent *flautando* in the viola and the first violin, as they disappear into the texture. Soon this landscape is overtaken by heavy pressure in all four bows that culminates in a passage marked "*wie eine Machine*" in bar 64. This gives way to a return to the "writing" *flautando* in the viola, which picks up in bar 72 as if nothing had happened. Even the very slow motion of the bow on the fingerboard in the viola part is audible on this recording. What could have been easily obscured by the pitched passages in the violins remains an equal voice.

In bar 81, the roles of the violins and viola are reversed: the viola is now playing pitched *flautando nervosa* and the viola's "writing" *flautando* texture is passed to the violins. The transference is played seamlessly by the quartet and yet the change in color is perceptible. There is a beautiful moment in bar 82 when Elders captures the subtle changes of color on the written pitch A. The entire phrase encompassing bars 81-96 is expressed with great sensitivity and reminded the reviewer of an aria with only its bare

bones remaining. There is an extended moment of stasis that begins in bar 97 during which time the violinists are asked to mime the *flautando* gestures ad libitum until they cease to move in bar 101. It was difficult for this reviewer to hear the exact moment when this change occurred, though it is marked clearly in the score. This level of seamlessness is another example of the quartet's ability to move smoothly through transformative textures.

In bar 104, the "real" viola solo begins. This moment is striking when performed live as the player is asked to convey *espressivo* within a *tempo rubato* that should range from quarter-note equals forty to ninety-six. Crescendos and decrescendos add another layer of plasticity. Audience members can see the player change the bow often and vary speeds throughout the passage, and the noise that emanates from the tailpiece is reinforced by the movements of the human body. On a recording this is obviously not possible, but the engineering by Stephan Schmidt captures and perhaps even surpasses the live experience. In the Arditti recording, one hears not only the bow against the tailpiece with all its range of speed and pressure, but also the sympathetic resonance of the instrument itself. This was accomplished by carefully placing microphones at the point of origin of the sound as well as on the instrument body. Through multi-tracking, these different perspectives could be foregrounded when dictated by the music.[15]

Reflecting on the creative impetus for his second string quartet, *Reigen seliger Geister* (1989),[16] Lachenmann commented, "It was clear to me that every innovative push that *Gran Torso* represented (at least for me) had set a standard against which the new engagement with this ensemble (*Besetzung*) must measure itself. I could, in composing, neither simply make use of the earlier, already-developed means, nor could I abandon the terrain that I had conquered."[17] In this way, Lachenmann's ultimate solution was to "go deeper"[18] within the medium.

By evoking Gluck in the title, specifically the "Dance of the blessed spirits" from *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Lachenmann, is clearly responding to musical tradition. "Reigen" can mean "dance" or, more specifically, "round dance," which is a song form common in the fourteenth century, in which the first verse is repeated.[19] Perhaps the association with Gluck is part of Lachenmann's desire to address "the recollection of things previously excluded, the 'reconciliation' with the temporary obsolete: with melodically, rhythmically and harmonically defined, even consonant elements—a reconciliation that could not be called a retreat into a pre-critical state, but had to rather signify forward-looking integration on a somehow resulting path."[20]

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[15] From email correspondence with Stephan Schmidt.
[16] Commissioned by the Arditti Quartet.
[17] "On My Second String Quartet," p. 60.
[18] This phrase "go deeper" would be later used by Lachenmann to describe his process for String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*.
[19] In *Orfeo*, this dance is performed by spirits in the Elysian Fields during the second act and is clearly centered in F major. Orfeo arrives as the dance concludes and marvels ("*che puro cielo*") at his surroundings, but finds no comfort in their splendor. He can only think of Eurydice and beg for her return ("Your attractive glances and gentle smile are the only blessings that I want"). The spirits answer his pleas with "*vieni a' regni del riposo*" ("come into the land of peace") and eventually grant his wish after he becomes impatient. The act ends as Orfeo leads Eurydice out of the underworld without looking at her.
[20] "On My Second String Quartet," p. 60.

The "sonic" center of the work (with which Lachenmann replaces the traditional term "tonal center," as the former applies sound production techniques)[21] is "air seized from tone."[22] The pitch-oriented areas are exposed via another technique, the "ethereal glissando." Many more developments come under his term "trill variants," which are "disappearances and returns" of many types. Another concept codified within *Reigen* (but certainly present in *Gran Torso*) is the creation of a meta-quartet—a 16-string sonic mechanism. Lachenmann describes moments in the work as being "[an] almost homophonically treated, 'unison' synchronous multiplication or simplification of sound or noise" (that can also be subjected to a subtraction process) and "parallel deployment of tones greatly separated in sonic space." Perhaps he is most direct when he calls this approach the "imaginary super-instrument."[23]

In a Mahlerian sense, pitch, noise, and all variants in between create "the whole world" in *Reigen.* A striking aspect of the quartet's approach in this new recording is the timing and perceived ease with which all these diverse elements are conveyed. The overall sound is warmer, the phrases and sections more connected and the mixtures and "switchings off" of sound elements much more clearly conveyed. The pitched worlds have a greater presence, and the *flautando* variants (especially the opening section) have much greater depth and resonance. The first "ethereal *glissando*" is introduced as a moment of pitch that "opens up" the texture. The diatonic arpeggios that seem to blow past in two asymmetrical flourishes at the end of the first section are strikingly beautiful. The hocketing phrases throughout the middle and last half of the piece are carried off with great intensity and fluidity.

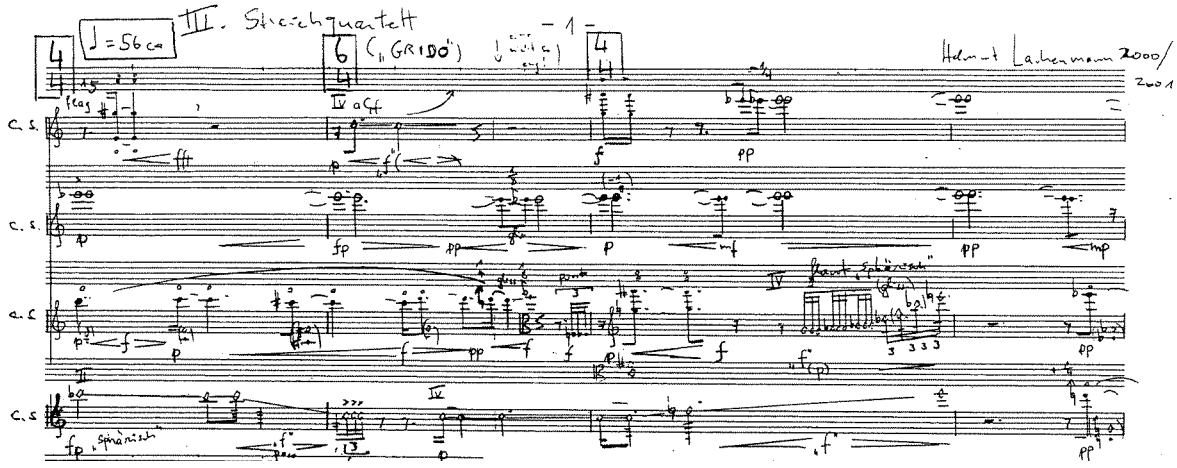
The smoothness with which the quartet plays does not undermine the structural principles of the work and we still feel the form becoming "unwieldy" as the "internal structures rip out their stitches as if from within." The plastic, hocketing lines merge into a quasi-waltz that in turn leads the bows (so central to the flautando variants) being set aside and for a landscape reminiscent to *Salut für Caudwell* to emerge. *Reigen* is on the whole less compromising than the guitar duo; the instruments do not converge into a pulse as they do in *Salut*, but instead erode into silences that open the door for the last "'regression' toward the close." This "regression" is a turning back to the opening and is perhaps where the Gluck reference becomes quasi-concrete. Lachenmann calls this last section his "expansive six-note song," which "originates at the beginning…"[24] This diatonic reference (albeit through extreme *scordatura* and other variants) is perhaps Lachenmann's *Roundelay.*

In the case of Lachenmann's Third String Quartet, *Grido*, one remembers clearly when the Arditti Quartet's first live recording was released. This sonic landscape appeared as something completely new; it was as if Lachenmann had worked through these new techniques in order to reach a point of formal transcendence. It is difficult to imagine what could come next, but the Quartet's new casting of *Grido* in particular reflects a more concise and balanced interpretation of this new sonic terrain. The first

[21] Ibid., p. 61. "It is, at first, a sonic center—in other words, a central depot and hub for a characteristic wealth of variations of noise and sound."
[22] It is an extension of the "muting grip" technique in *Gran Torso*. The difference is now there is an added crescendo and the muting is applied suddenly, as if an interruption. In "On My Second String Quartet," he writes that the muting grip, when applied suddenly, "closes the mouth."
[23] All of this is discussed at length in "On My Second String Quartet."
[24] "On My Second String Quartet," pp. 69-70.

large section of the work displays a greater sense of rhythmic intensity, clarity and direction of phrase, as well as a new sensitivity toward the foreground lines and "switchings off" that first occurred in *Reigen*.

The opening phrase is made up of a hocketing web of crescendos that emerge and disappear into a high, stabilized E-flat (see Example 1).

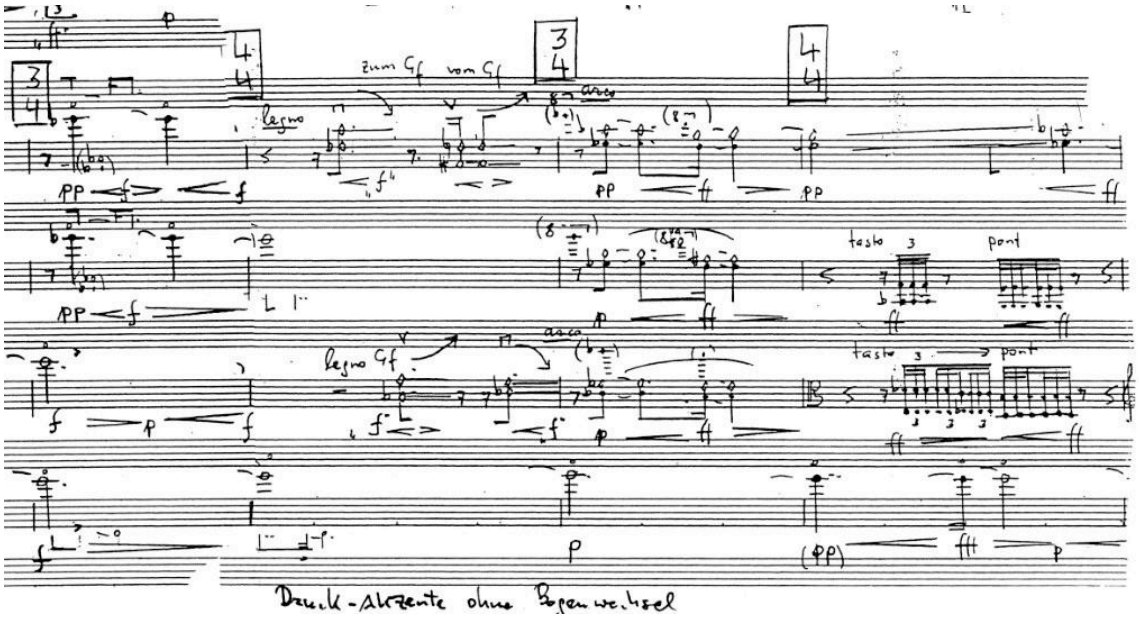


Example 1: Helmut Lachenmann's String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*, measures 1-4

In this new recording, the Arditti Quartet emphasizes the initial accent in the second violin; this seems to trigger the fortissimo crescendo gestures that pass through each instrument until the *flautando*, *sphärisch* (spherical) gesture in the viola takes the phrase "back home" to the E-flat. It is a bolder performance than the older version and lives up to the piece's reputation as Lachenmann's "loud" quartet.[25]

The Quartet's ability to foreground material becomes even more perceptible in the next section where voices congeal for moments of rhythmic unison resembling an orchestral response to the figurations of the opening (see Example 2). The recent recording presents such moments with exceptional clarity.

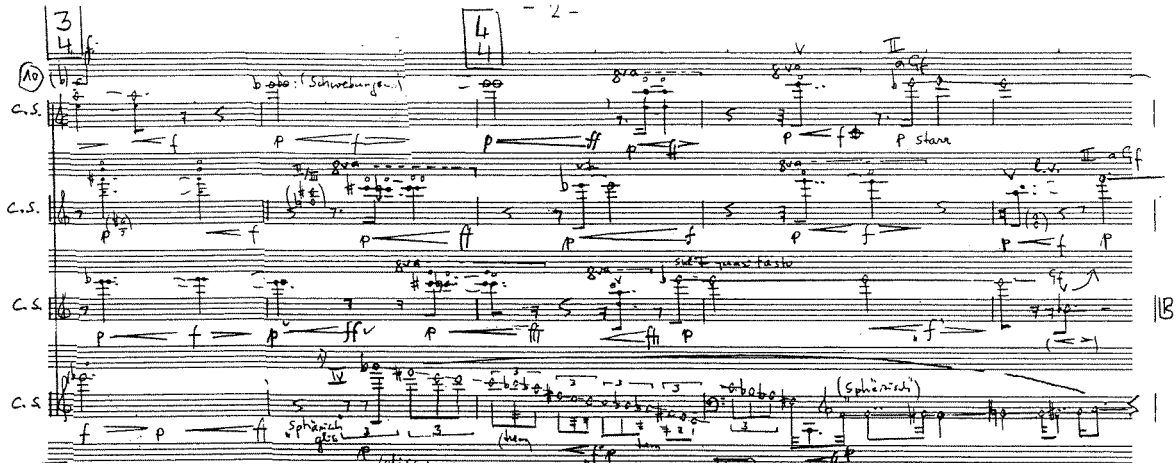
[25] Helmut Lachenmann, program notes for *Grido*, Melbourne (2001).



Example 2: Helmut Lachenmann's String Quartet No. 3 *Grido*, measures 6-9

In the current recording, the unison in bar 8 comes through as a crystallized moment of repose and the crescendo in the cello drives toward the *ponticello* articulations in bar 9. The depth and variety within this small phrase is skillfully expressed.

Sphärisch bowing takes on a central role within these opening measures. It is first heard in the viola in bar 3 and returns with the open C string of the cello (previously it was played on the lowest string of the viola). This descending figure in the cello is heard against the backdrop of a cluster that seems to descend from the ether. This haunting, shadowy quality is not lost on the Arditti Quartet, who manages to bring these lines out to great effect (see Example 3).



Example 3: Helmut Lachenmann's String Quartet No. 3 *Grido*, measures 10-14

Lucas Fels invigorates this line with rhythmic intensity by keeping the integrity of the triplet and tremolo accent within the circular bowing. The other members of the quartet display great sensitivity to the importance of the cello line while presenting their simultaneous fortissimo mini-crescendos scattered in the upper registers with immaculate clarity.

Overall, the first section of *Grido* hovers in a very high tessitura. There are two very prominent moments when the cello plays lower notes. The first instance has the effect of a low-toned siren slowly transforming into noise and ultimately returning to higher octaves. In this case, the actions of the cello seem to leave the other three instruments unaffected. The second low-tessitura moment has a more transforming effect on the ensemble. With the exception of a few fleeting moments (for example, the eighth-note *pianissimo* tremolo on a low E), the cello returns to its lower range with a microtonally inflected C octave.[26] After eight beats, the top note drops out and we are left with a *ponticello* to *tasto* shift that becomes *forte* and ultimately returns to its octave form (with the upper tone an eighth-tone sharp). Now the quartet is unified, not only in creation of a color, but also in its pitch material. A few measures later, all four voices combine to form a unison C major chord with microtones that give the moment a mystical quality that defies simple harmonic resolution.

Is this a confrontation with the most famous of all C major string quartets? The mere presence of a C major chord in this context reminds the listener of Mozart's K. 465 "Dissonance," where the tonality enters to cleanse the chromaticism of the introduction. In *Grido,* the past does not arise like a dream of the imagination, but rather resurfaces as a subconscious presence. This process is a non-linear, non-narrative dialectical struggle that results in a new type of beauty. Lachenmann finds this by looking more closely at his own terrain, a landscape that consciously includes the past. As the composer stated:

> There is a big difference between to look back—which is sometimes necessary—and to go back—which I never did. Only very superficially-thinking people could be disappointed by my development. They want to see me in a certain corner and now they cannot find me there again. I smile about it. And I hope.[27]

This recording marks a culmination of decades of compositional and interpretative effort as well as, one imagines, a new creative point of departure for the composer. "Pathways in art don't lead anywhere and most certainly not to a 'destination.'"[28] In the meantime, we have a disc that does great justice to these works created by one of the most important composers of our time.

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[26] The upper pitch is an eighth-tone flat.

[27] Helmut Lachenmann, "Interview with James Weeks," *New Notes* [Website], http://www.spnm.org.uk/?page=members/newNotes/access/Cover/november2006.html (accessed 1 December 2008).

[28] Program note to String Quartet No. 3, *Grido*.