

Brett Dean



Brett Dean Photo © Cordula Groth

Music as Protest and Remembrance. On Brett Dean's Work as a Composer
The fact that art does not arise from a cultural vacuum but is inspired by its environment as well as the social and cultural reality around it is a crucial aspect of Brett Dean's work as a composer. His musical language, which, though highly sophisticated, always remains intelligible, exploits the possibilities of musical style to create intellectual references to the past or the present, while Dean often alludes to these references in the titles of his works – sometimes as a mere association, sometimes in the form of a comment. It is only the composer's profound knowledge of the possibilities of instrumentation that allow him to achieve such effects of musical language. Born in 1961 in Brisbane, the principal concern of the Australian composer has been to explore melodic lines in all their different forms, varying their characters, placing them in different contexts – from sketchy melodic courses to expanding them into a broad band of sound – or dissolving them into progressions of microintervallic tones. An example of this is the first of the Winter Songs for tenor and brass quintet based on poems by E.E. Cummings (2000), a piece which evolves from single melodic threads from the individual instruments which become intertwined to form a dynamic fabric to which the tenor is added as an independent tonal colour. As in other works, harmony is primarily generated by the interaction of melodic elements that are superimposed onto each other, developing instrumental textures of varying tonal colours and sometimes – as in the orchestral piece Dispersal (2001) – growing into aggressive agglomerations, dynamic masses of sound and layers offset against one another. The graphic moulding of Dean's melodic lines is most prominent in works featuring the human voice or solo instruments. While the latter may be a reflection of Dean's intimate knowledge of the demands of solo performance (attributable to his experience as a violinist), it also shows a certain proclivity towards traditional concerto writing. The way in which the solo parts are given the leading voice of the musical discourse in works such as the clarinet concerto Ariel's Music (1995), his Viola Concerto (2005) or the violin concerto The Lost Art of Letter Writing (2006), lends the music its storytelling character. The titles of Dean's compositions suggest a particular focus on musical discourse, often including references to sources of inspiration or impulses beyond the music itself. While Ariel's Music, for example, owes its title to the first name of a young woman who died of AIDS, the Pastoral Symphony for ensemble and tape (2000) focusses on the contrast between unspoiled nature and pollution. The orchestral work Ceremonial (2003) represents a personal protest against the violence of terrorism and war; the string quartet Eclipse (2003) is Dean's response to the dramatic incidents concerning the refugees known as the 'Boat people' in the Indian Ocean; Vexations and

Devotions for chorus, children's chorus and orchestra (2005) throws a critical glance on the empty phrases used in the world of financial capitalism to conceal the pursuit of profit; and, finally, The Lost Art of Letter Writing is a work about the culture of letter writing which is about to die out as a result of increasing digitalisation.

Owing to the highly associative way in which he treats the tonal settings unfolding in his music, Dean manages to make these ambitious themes audible on the content level of the music. In the Pastoral Symphony, for instance, he creates a frightening, oppressing effect by using complex sound effects such as clusters charged with noise, before letting the music fade away into dry, wooden colours – symbolic of natural beauty which has been destroyed but which is then resurrected for a brief moment in the form of bird calls added from a tape. Overlaying these wooden colours of sound, a trumpet cantilena is heard that expresses a sense of mourning. Ariel's Music is another work which can be seen as a piece of funeral music. This is achieved by the declamatory motif of a major ninth when the solo clarinet is introduced; the motif, played in various guises, is affectively associated with the expression of mourning. Apart from these instances, the jazz elements in Moments of Bliss for orchestra and electronics (2004) – an instrumental anticipation of the opera Bliss, which, based on Peter Carey's novel, is currently being written – or the tonal layers taken from Carlo Gesualdo's madrigal Moro, lasso in Carlo for 15 strings, sampler and tape (1997) demonstrate that Dean is not only able to draw upon other stylistic elements, those that differ strongly from his own musical idiom, but is also capable of integrating them into his music in a seamless manner by exploiting their tonal logic for his writing. Vexations and Devotions, which features fragments of language that are electronically fed into the music, is a good example of this approach. One basic idea underlying these processes is an attempt to shape musical works as vital forms of cultural memory, as vehicles for protest and recollection. This is apparent, for example, in the way in which different stylistic techniques are referred to in The Lost Art of Letter Writing or in the quotation from Clara Schumann which pervades the ensemble work Recollections (2006) as a fragment of memory. If this attempt is successful, the form of recollection itself becomes part of the cultural memory bank, thereby inspiring future art.
Stefan Drees, 2009 (translation: Andreas Goebel)