

**Kasper T. Toeplitz,
a micro-tonal magician**

Kasper T. Toeplitz is a free agent in the music field. Attached to no sphere in particular, he evolves freely from one to the other. He first explored the fields of traditional and instrumental contemporary music, as well as opera composition, before coming to direct his electric guitar orchestra Sleaze Art, and devoting himself more particularly to electronic music. Unlike numerous musicians who see nothing beyond BPMs and sampling, his musical approach remains rigorous and involves a writing process – a way to better think about music – as well as an emphasis on sound texture as it explores the entire spectrum, from infra-bass to ultra sounds. Being a nonconformist, he enjoys driving the instruments into a corner and puts forward an immersive experience through his music. The computer, which he fully incorporates within his creative process, allows him to shape a new language that is liberated from traditional forms and brings into being a sound adventure.

Composer, electric bass player and musician, Kasper T. Toeplitz has developed his work in the no man's land between academic, electronic and noise composition. He has won several prizes and distinctions: 1st prize at the Besançon Festival, 1st prize at the "Opéra autrement/Centre Acanthes" competition, Villa Médicis Hors les Murs (New York), DAAD in Berlin. He also got numerous commissions from the French Government, from various radio stations, and from electronic studios, such as IRCAM, GRM, GMEM, etc. The ensemble KERNEL has released 2 Cds : *Kernel#2* and *The Deep*, compositions by K.T. Toeplitz.

www.sleazeart.com

www.myspace.com/sleazeart

Vincent Delvaux: Your career as a composer has started in contemporary music and was particularly influenced by Giacinto Scelsi, Luigi Nono, Iannis Xenakis or György Ligeti before your turning to electronic experimentation. Could you recount the genealogy of your work and the reasons of that evolution?

Kasper T. Toeplitz: As you say, I started my career as a composer in contemporary music. At the time – in the middle of the eighties – it was very inventive, which is not exactly the case today. Back then free jazz was going around in circles and rock music, even industrial rock, was still

anchored in a pattern imposed by pop music. Contemporary music on the contrary had an exceptional liberty of tone and form. The fact it was written made it more interesting to me. Being a meta-language of music, writing makes work on sound beyond sound itself possible. For a decade, I created an important number of contemporary music pieces without recourse to electronics (though I did use an electric bass guitar from time to time). Several incidents triggered my career and my thinking about music: for instance in 1997, thanks to a scholarship from the Villa Kujoyama, I left for Japan where I discovered new aesthetics and a great liberty of tone. The Japanese are very well informed on contemporary music, which, unfortunately, is not always reciprocal. In collaboration with Zbigniew Karkowski, Merzbow and Tetsuo Furudate, I created a big *noise* orchestra and toured in Japan and in Europe. It was the time – around 1999 – when laptop computers became powerful enough to generate real-time sound. When I came back to Europe, I went on making *noise* music following a number of well-assumed instrumental choices and aesthetic positions.

V.D.: In what ways have digital technologies and computer-assisted music influenced your work as a composer and changed your perception of music?

K.T.T.: I see the computer as a real instrument and, even more, as a tool for thinking. It makes us reflect on music differently. It transforms our relationship to musical parameters: pitch data, temporality, rhythm, etc. It also alters the idea of virtuosity as associated to the instrumentalist, which, of course, has a totally different meaning in this context.

V.D: Unlike many electronic musicians, in your most recent pieces, you use real-time sound synthesis with no reproduction of prefixed sounds (samples). What does it mean to « play » the computer according to you?

K.T.T.: I have almost never worked with preexisting *samples* because I prefer real-time performance. On the face of it, the computer is not an instrument that can play everything; it is not even an instrument although it can become one. But then, you have to program it and write its score. So, this is work that has to be done from a musical point of view *and* from a sound point of view. In my opinion, music has to be reflected upon, written. Besides, music does not always involve sound. In my work, sound results from thought. This makes me different from other electro-acoustic composers whose starting point is sound research or sound manipulation. Another difference lies in the way of composing. If you privilege pitch, rhythm and musical notation, you lose the benefits the computer has to offer – for instance, massive management or “blurred” data.

V.D: You sometimes speak of « working within sound »...

K.T.T.: What interests me is working with sound blocks, working on sounds that are extremely dense. You then have greater finesse than that made possible by the division in semitones or even by the notation of timbre changes. I spend a lot of time creating sound masses where there

are no rhythmic events, but different textures spread out. The machine makes it possible to vary dozens of parameters at a time. This way, the sound can be infinitesimally granulated and acquire its own color and life. However, this work cannot be transcribed in musical writing. I have invented a more graphic, more "poetic" and, paradoxically, a more accurate writing: hertz or millisecond notation is absolute, therefore more demanding. That research is not yet completed: using hypertext techniques in score-writing is something I am currently exploring.

V. D: Could you tell us a few things about KERNEL? It is a project that you have been working on for years now...

K.T.T.: KERNEL is a project which keeps evolving, whose very nature has evolved. In the beginning, in 2002, *Kernel* was a composition, created in Marseille, in the GMEM festival, for three instrumentalists: Didier Casamitjana (drums), Laurent Dailleau (theremin) and myself (electric bass), all of us playing from the computer too. The beginning of the piece, which was intended to be a short introduction played exclusively on computers, became a 45-minute part. At the same time, I took an interest in the work of Peter Castine, the designer of *Litter*, an object library designed for the MAX/MSP software and focused on noise. Castine created numerous algorithms by questioning the notion of randomness in sound and by manipulating the energy found in different sound levels. He brought out several interesting ideas about noise « colors », with blue noise, which is higher and more granular, pink noise, brown noise, etc. His research gives a new perspective to the work on noise. To return to KERNEL, some time later on, in 2007, I founded a "live" electronic music ensemble and the name KERNEL naturally imposed itself (in computing, the term KERNEL designates the core of an operating system). A re-writing of the piece *Kernel* (entitled *Kernel#2* and comprising only the purely electronic part of the original) has been the first composition we worked on. Today, KERNEL is a permanent group formed by Eryck Abecassis, Wilfried Wendling and myself. It explores the double question of the computer as an instrument – a "real" instrument and not a machine that merely replays prerecorded sequences – and of writing for an electronic instrumentarium. In order to distance ourselves from the traditional model, the instrumental one, we have banned all interfaces that take up forms and functions of traditional instruments (keyboards, drum pads) so as to only use – if possible – those which regard the computer as a new instrument. Today, we have four pieces in our repertoire (mostly long ones, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes). They explore the acoustic field ranging from ultra sounds to sub-bass, but above all they pose the questions of polyphony, of multi-timbrality and of the instrumental function in a different way. In the future, we are going to commission various composers – one of the goals of research on language is to be able to reach a wider community, some kind of « universality » and not to stay without any contact with the outside world.

V. D.: What place does sound poetry occupy in your work? It seems that your work sometimes refers to literary texts, in particular to Sylvia Plath.

K.T.T.: Indeed, there has often been a textual dimension in my work. My first opera was composed with and about Sylvia Plath's poems. However, what we were doing was not sound poetry as defined by Henri Chopin, but rather text readings accompanied by music. At present, I create operas without text. I have also collaborated with contemporary dance choreographers, like Myriam Gourfink, Hervé Robbe or Olivia Grandville, playing my music live. For me it was a question of aesthetic position above all. Some years ago, dance offered some advanced reflection on the notion of spectacularity, on the relationship to the public, going sometimes as far as to question the necessity of the body as was the case with the work of Jérôme Bel or of Christian Rizzo.

V. D.: Your pieces quite often require a process of sound spatialisation. Would that imply an affirmation of the fact that your work varies not only according to time but also according to space?

K.T.T.: I have mixed feelings about the use of spatialisation. In *Kernel*, we had a six-point spatialisation. Today, this is no longer an essential element in my work. I still use that technique to make a piece more beautiful, if the acoustics and the equipment of the theatre allow for it. But I still haven't made up my mind about that issue. With *KERNEL*, in the beginning of the creative process, we always start by working in mono so as to share a common understanding of the piece and we add spatialisation afterwards. Whenever it is possible, I try to play in the middle of the theater so as to be within a single sound space and to avoid having a sound coming out from the stage and a different sound reaching the audience. On stage, in general, we try to be as untheatrical as possible. We try not to magnify our gestures, because more often than not musicians who use sensors tend to exaggerate the gesture even though it adds nothing musically. We have chosen to play standing, which adds some physicality – admittedly minimal, but yet present, in our performances.

Interviewed by Vincent Delvaux, December 2008