

### **Peter Ablinger's *Weiss/weisslich 36***

Mueller & Karau (2002:730) claim that in "transparent mode", i.e. when the sound from the microphones is merely amplified but not otherwise processed, the auditory impression of their system is "as if you are not wearing headphones at all". While this claim might hold conceptually for engineering purposes, it is certainly not correct from a phenomenological viewpoint. An aural experience mediated through even a 'neutral' microphone-headphone chain is very different from immediate everyday listening. This difference constitutes Peter Ablinger's piece *Weiss/weisslich 36* from 1999. Of all the works presented in this section, this is the conceptually simplest, but perhaps also the artistically most profound. Its setup consists again of a pair of headphones with a microphone attached to each of its two earcups.(10) In Ablinger's piece, however, no portable computer additionally transforms the recorded sound. As the listener explores the environment, the sound recorded by the microphones is immediately played back by the headphones. All 'processing' is limited to the amplification of the microphone signals, whose level the listener can adjust with a volume knob. Although in this piece we are just listening to what we would otherwise hear as well, there is an audible difference, which itself "is the piece" (Ablinger 2008c:71).

"Everything is wrong [when listening through the microphone-headphone chain of Ablinger's piece]: the scraping of one's own shoes, hitherto unnoticed, becomes unbearably loud; and what that interesting person over there is saying just now is utterly incomprehensible because dozens of voices suddenly have approximately the same volume." (Scheib 2008:110)

This blurred distinction between auditory foreground and background can even be observed when listening to sound recordings after the fact:

"I go to the auditorium, and, without apparent effort, I hear the speaker while I barely notice the scuffling of feet, the coughing, the scraping noises. My tape recorder, not having the same intentionality as I, records all these auditory stimuli without distinction, and so when I return to it to hear the speech re-presented I find I cannot even hear the words due to the presence of what for me had been fringe phenomena." (Ihde 1976:74)

When listening through a microphone-headphone chain, we are listening to technology itself and experience a feeling of being removed from our environment. Ablinger's piece represents an excellent environment for investigating these differences between immediate and mediated listening. As in

other of his works (cf. section 5.2.3), Ablinger turns our hearing into a listening by changing the conditions under which it operates.

(10) The latest version of the hardware for *Weiss/weisslich 36* was designed by Winfried Ritsch and built by Reinhold Schinwald at the Institute of Electronic Music and Acoustics in Graz, Austria.

*(from: Florian Hollerweger, "The Revolution is Hear! Sound Art, the Everyday and Aural Awareness", Sonic Arts Research Center, Queen's University Belfast 2011)*