

2025 Darmstädter Ferienkurse

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CONDITIONS FOR A POSSIBLE FUTURE

Everybody said that it was a good year this year for Darmstadt. It's hard to disagree – just about everything in the typical wall-to-wall-programming and the self-curated Open Spaces was not just enjoyable but creatively galvanizing. The level of musicianship, as always, was extremely high, and the tutors seemed particularly adept at inspiring their students. It's probably precisely because there wasn't some big totalizing effort to make a statement on The Future of Music that questions on the future of music were raised with such urgency and eloquence. As always, there was about sixteen days' worth of music happening, so what follows is a very selective cross-section. I will start with the workshops.

WORKSHOPS

There were a lot of these, and, as I said at the start, almost all were very good and a rather surprising number were soul-affirmingly good. There seemed to be a general consensus among the tutors that, in view of the extremely limited time available, conceptual ambition took precedence over virtuosic polish, a decision which absolutely paid off. These are scattered observations, all of them positive, although, sure, there were a couple things that weren't great. In all cases, it'd be best to do a quick Google search of anything that sounds interesting here.

Simon Steen-Anderson, Jennifer Torrence and Håkon Stene led an incredible workshop with the eyebrow-arching title 'To be defined' (not to be confused with a different workshop showcase on the same day and time, titled 'Untitled'). Taking place in the Edith-Stein-Schule, the most school-y feeling of the many school-based Darmstadt venues, these performances benefitted enormously from the methodological openness of the workshop, adapting the Saved-By-The-Bell-style performance premises to their own designs.

The most exciting and, really overwhelmingly beautiful of these performances was a piece called *Jwith hands Persuasion* by Inga Margrete Aas. Using some of those overhead classroom projectors from the 1990s (which I assume were in situ), a deeply affecting narrative that is very difficult to describe was set into motion by transparencies printed with engravings and Baroque landscapes that were only partially visible through holes in black construction

paper filters. The overall impression was that you had fallen asleep during an algebra class and were receiving some sort of divine transmission – which, it goes without saying, is a very special experience indeed. The performers – Rita Soares, Zoi Argyriou, Barbara Ribeiro and Beatriz Santos – were completely absorbed in the piece as they slowly and silently moved thin sheets across laminated surfaces, acting with a lithe aloofness that brilliantly underscored the otherworldly diegesis.



Rita Soares, Zoi Argyriou, Barbara Ribeiro and Beatriz Santos manipulate overhead transparencies in Inga Margrete Aas's work *Jwith hands Persuasion*.

In an upstairs room with a somewhat more modern digital projector, performers Aditya Bhat, Jeonghyun Hwang and Jonas Evenstad gave a rendition of Laila Arafah's *Sibelius Studies 3*. You're not going to believe this, but *Sibelius Studies* works so much better live. Seen with tangentially distracted attention in a browser tab – which is how I'd seen it before and how I assume you'll see it, if you're curious to – it's creative, amusing and diverting; you might give it a quick smile. But seeing and hearing living performers interact with the score suddenly makes the experience much richer, becoming at once an exploration of digital *Augenmusik*, aural translation, the limits of notational language, and, at its most engrossing, a commentary on sight-reading. This was largely owing to the performers, who, for lack of a better phrase, really *went for it*, gleefully playing off the increasingly ridiculous clumps of digital artefacts displayed on the screen.

The more straightforward instrumental workshops were likewise uniformly excellent. The composing for clarinet workshop, led by Hans Thomalla and Heather Roche, paired young composers with young performers in a creative exchange. I was particularly impressed by Juan Posada's *Epigrafe XI*, one of the few pieces that really earns the extra music stands required for its oversized score: Vittoria Ecclesia gave a brilliantly extroverted rendition of its vertiginous leaps and bounds. What struck me was that the assumptions of this creative exchange went beyond the strictures of 'composer writes notes, performer plays them' into a more nuanced collaboration. Nearly all of the pieces seemed like they were co-authored by the clarinetists – Yukun Zhang's *Kujia 1*, for example, began as a fairly straightforward study at the start of the workshop but was given a completely original and dynamic form by clarinetist Ghazal Faghihi.

Claire Chase's flute studio likewise departed from a standard recital format, with participants credited with 'Voice', 'Special Guest' or 'Performance'. The latter credit was given to Marianne Sihvonen and Bridge Bourne, who fantastically rendered Jessie Marino's *Rot Blau*. Sihvonen and Bourne's performance was effortlessly masterful and above all natural, with a seamless, improvised feel – it really seemed like they had just walked in with these wigs and decided to move their hands and bodies around that way for a while, as if there was no audience and no performance. The studio concluded with a Terry Riley jam, with a large number of non-flute performers whose names I really should have written down when Claire said them at the beginning, bearing the overarching title of *The Holy Liftoff*. With the latest Riley stuff you're thrown so deep into amorphous kitsch (one of the movements is called 'The Tragedy of What We Lost') that you can't help but come out the other end and just bliss out. Very fun.

Really, I could (and maybe should) spend the whole review on these: the engrossing simultaneity of the Guitar Corridor (Yaron Deutsch's workshop; highlights included a really great performance of Jagoda Szmytka's *f* for music* by Márk Seres and Laurence Gaudreau, alternately toe-tapping and head-banging, and two wildly different renditions of Kelley Sheehan's *hot guts*, a work which, having been consecrated by a vinyl double-album launch during the courses, is a certified Kranichstein Klassik), the established brilliance of the harp composition workshop, the sprawling joy of Sarah Saviet's violin studio, among many others. But now I'd like to spend some time on one particular workshop, the output of which extended beyond (indeed, largely in absence of) a final showcase concert.

CONDITIONS FOR A POSSIBLE FUTURE, CONTINUED

One of the workshops was titled 'The Enby [as in nonbinary] Future Manifesto'. Ever since Arnold Schoenberg made reference to 'the angels of our higher nature, which are neither male nor female' to justify dodecaphony, queerness has been an integral part of the New Music project, especially at the Ferienkurse (cf. Paul Attinello and David Osmond-Smith on 'Gay Darmstadt: Flamboyance and Rigour at the Summer Courses for New Music').¹

There was a very, very enjoyable concert by the workshop leader, Luxa M. Schüttler, alongside percussionist-performer Håkon Stene and percussion-

1 David Osmond-Smith and Paul Attinello, 'Gay Darmstadt: Flamboyance and Rigour at the Summer Courses for New Music', *Contemporary Music Review*, 26, No. 1 (2007), pp. 105-14.

ist-emcee Jennifer Torrence, titled *Noise is a Queer Space*. But a presentation of the workshop participants' creations did not occur in the main programme as initially promised. A truncated version appeared, somewhere, on the last day of the courses, while a satellite performance by one workshop participant occurred before another scheduled concert; both changes were unannounced. The Enby Future had been thrown into uncertainty when representatives of the Schader Stiftung, a partner organisation and sponsor of the Ferienkurse which owns and operates the Neubau-style building where the workshop was being held, noticed phrases written on a large tapestry-like map such as 'Free Palestine' and 'Stop Genocide', part of the preparatory sketches for an installation by Ada Gomiz. Seeing the direction the installation was taking, the management of the Schader Stiftung announced their ultimatum: remove the materials bearing the slogans, or a civil authority will be summoned to do so. Under this obvious duress, the materials were removed.

Why was the creative process of this particular artistic workshop, which until the moment of its dismantling had occurred within a private workspace, deemed beyond the pale? The crimes against humanity currently occurring in Gaza are a defining issue of the times we are living in, and, not surprisingly, there were a huge number of musicians who addressed this in Darmstadt, either through their work or through demonstrations, in both cases very publicly. Ana Dueri presented a piece for percussion and sewing machine alongside a workshop on traditional Palestinian embroidery; a large number of participants organised a public protest against the ongoing atrocities; no less-established a figure than Chaya Czernowin made a public statement denouncing the violence in Gaza onstage after the high-profile world première of her *The Divine Thawing of the Core*. Keffiyehs, watermelon tricolours, and slogans were as ubiquitous here as elsewhere. But institutional oversight held slack, or even seemed encouraging, until the preliminary brainstorming phase of a closed workshop generated precisely the same slogans and symbols that one sees in every concert, installation, event or luncheon and on every corner of every major city. Then the leash was suddenly tightened. Why?

One reason might be that queerness in creative practice is read as immediately disturbing and confrontational in a way that even straightforward (or just straight) aggression isn't. To a large extent, this is baked into the concept of queerness itself: although recent thought has reframed it as a gradual and continual process, the act of coming out is still a major, perhaps even foundational, part of queer life. As depicted in the recent film *I Saw the TV Glow*, this is an experience beset by the gnawing fear of giving up the world that you grew up with and know for an as yet hazily-defined new existence outside of these familiar structures in the hope of finding an accepting future community. But there is also a second, more properly elemental fear: what if the promised world of acceptance is a lie? What if, by coming out, you trade a surface-level, poker-face, don't-ask-don't-tell form of repression for something far more totalizing and stifling, now permanently trapped in whatever subject-positions liberal society sees fit to make available for you? These questions, I feel, are more or less at play in any instance where queerness is being used in a public and aestheticised sense, as it was in this workshop. Artists working with and through queerness have already been forced to confront both the reactionary pressure of heteronormative society and the looming goldfish-bowl sterility of liberal 'acceptance', so their position is necessarily an uneasy one in relation to the normative act of curation. Queer space, safer space, yes, but then the inevitable rejoinder: on whose terms?

In this case, it was the terms of the Schader Stiftung that dictated the conditions of The Enby Future Manifesto, as they, through their partnership with the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt (IMD), materially provided the 'safer space' for it. Attendant on this is both the normal landlord-style contractual relationship – our house, our rules – and also a more pernicious one that frames the support of artistic creation as an act of institutional charity and expects simplistic joy and gratitude in return.

This too, then, might be part of why the opprobrium was suddenly so pronounced and immediate while other straightforward protests were tolerated: the expectations were different. Often marginalised groups are allotted cultural funds under the guise of some sort of celebration of life (you are no doubt familiar with Black Joy, Queer Joy, etc), the ideal subject, of course, being a happy consumer. Perhaps this helps to explain the bewildered and furious reaction when the Schader Stiftung discovered that their patronage was supporting critique instead of affirmation. Naturally enough, this infuriated the participants, who refused to continue with the workshop unless Gomiz's work was restored. All patronage is conditional I suppose, but the conditions in such a situation, seemingly predicated on an imposed divergence between who the participants *are* (queer/enby) and what they must *do* (smile and don't remark on geopolitically sensitive issues) must have felt especially restrictive and risible.

The IMD was thus left to devise a possible solution in the remaining three days of the Ferienkurse. It should be noted that Thomas Schäfer is an immensely thoughtful and broad-minded curator and organiser, one of the more far-sighted and conscientious working in a major music institution as judged by the IMD's immediate and radical responses to postcolonial and gender-based critiques during his tenure. The work done by the IMD team is largely invisible, and normally manifests only in the smooth running of a half-month festival; any attention drawn to them is largely unwanted and distracting, as this certainly was.

And, indeed, if the Stiftung washed its hands of the Enby Future basically immediately, the IMD scrambled to create some kind of open dialogue. This was, of course, a race against the clock, as all this happened over about 48 hours at the tail end of the courses. After a series of false starts, Thomas Schäfer and Sylvia Freidank, as representatives of the IMD, met with participants of the workshop to discuss what could be done. This meeting was held on the flat wooden benches outside the Lichtenbergschule, where everyone who has a spare minute hangs out or comes to buy a Johannisbeerschorle. Naturally this meant that a crowd soon gathered for the discussion and gradually increased in size. Despite the best intentions of both sides, not much progress was made. But more on this below. I'll write about music again for a bit now.

SOFT MUSIC PLAYED LOUD: KARI WATSON AND KELLEY SHEEHAN

Kari Watson, the composition Kranichstein Prize winner from the previous courses, had two new pieces in a concert on the main programme called 'Twinings', after their piece *twinning* for two violins and LED lights. Watson seems primarily concerned with explosive interiority, describing their work as 'portals' and 'biomes'. In terms of performance, what results from this is an unstable equilibrium, where the performers are doing quite big actions but with a feeling of strained intimacy: their music has the affect of an old friend telling you a secret at two in the morning (whether it's a fun or scary secret depends on the piece). *twinning* involves two violinists, here Sarah Saviet and

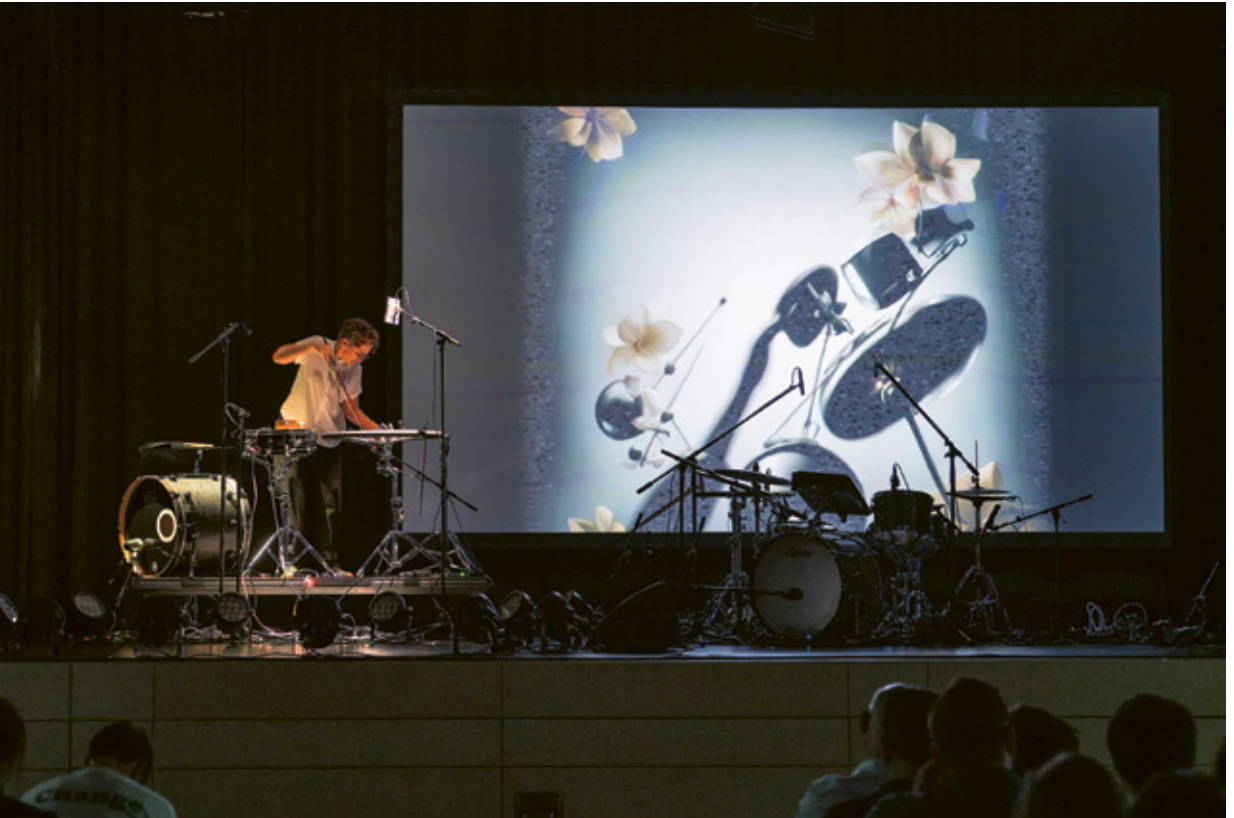
Maya Bennardo, playing very, very long glissandi while slowly spinning around back-to-back. The effect is hypnotic, of course, but also strangely unnerving, seeing and hearing performers so close together but unable to make eye contact (I was so busy watching/listening to them that I didn't even notice the LED lights – weirdly, nobody I asked could tell me what the lights were doing either). This was complemented by *For Jen Torrence*, a gleefully expansive and ecstatic work whose namesake does what she does best – hitting drums in a way that makes one feel power more than hear sound – in front of a video largely comprising those film-stock flickers that you'd see in skateboarding videos in the mid-aughts. This was certainly one of the pieces that elicited the strongest audience approval – it's heartwarming to see everyone get their phones out to take video when the music gets really jagged.



Violinists Maya Bennardo (left) and Sarah Saviet perform Kari Watson's *twinning*.

Watson's work was preceded by *feed*, an ongoing work-in-progress developed between Kelley Sheehan and Jennifer Torrence. Sheehan calls what she does with music 'building machines', and I think that's meant to be understood in more of a Rube Goldberg-y rather than Deleuze-y way, in that the musical work is a situation where she brings together a bunch of people and things to make sounds that they all enjoy but couldn't make otherwise if they were in a different place with other people/things. What distinguishes Sheehan's music is its paratactic logic (one thing always leads to another, and another) as well as the personally-curated dimension, an intimacy that fits well beside the universe of Watson's work. The percussion setup here looks like the landscape

of a Samuel Beckett play, with upright bicycle wheels and small junk-type objects (although the score only specifies 'a collection of high-pitched objects'). While Torrence calmly navigates this menagerie, the video feed behind her is constantly throwing up new, impossible possibilities of drum-type objects: sponge-drum, moondrum, pepperoni-drum, sponge-satellite-conga, lilac-bassoon-tambour, etc. It's a mesmerising exploration of new and unpredictable worlds.



Percussionist Jennifer Torrence bows a bicycle wheel in Kelley Sheehan's *feed*.

AUTOSCHEDIASMS: TAKE 1

The event on the main programme that elicited the most complex response was, for me, the collaborative workshop led by Tyshawn Sorey with the William Greaves-style title *Autoschediasms*. Its ethos draws from a lineage of Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris and (more distantly) John Zorn; the practical result, in short, is a volatile hybrid of 'composed' and 'improvised' music. That's all I'll say before shifting to a very subjective delivery, which I think is necessary when talking about this one. At no point in my life have so many people told me to come to a concert as often and as passionately as during the first week of the courses, when musicians from Sorey's workshop insisted, again and again, that this was the greatest thing they'd even been a part of and I had to come and to tell everyone I knew about it.



Composer Tyshawn Sorey (centre) leads a performance of his work *Autoschediasms*.

When I did, in fact, go to hear *Autoschediasms* in the gym of the Lichtenbergschule on that late afternoon of the second Sunday of the Ferienkurse, my first impression was quite certain: this was a disaster. The sounds that came out when Sorey pointed or showed a whiteboard to parts of the large mixed ensemble onstage seemed unmoored from aural coherence or identifiable nuance, and, when added together, only became more bewildering, inscrutable and fundamentally opaque. On top of this, there were more than a few occasions of things unambiguously going wrong, from the minor (a percussionist noisily dropping mallets) to the seemingly catastrophic (an on-stage microphone falling over next to a speaker, the result of which produced involuntary yelps from the audience). My shock quickly turned to incredulity. They wanted me to hear *this*? This is a train wreck!

If this was a shorter festival, I probably would have continued to think as much, and judiciously avoided talking or writing about what I was sure was an unmitigated disaster. But more than Sorey's Pulitzer and McArthur, it was the musicians, giddily describing the most creatively adventurous endeavour they had ever been a part of, which made me interrogate my initial reaction more thoughtfully. After the performance, Sorey's numerous collaborators had a sense of serene accomplishment, not pride necessarily but a sort of calm, happy assurance, a thrill of newly revealed autonomy like one sees in teenagers who have just passed their driving test. These were not the reactions of musicians who had endured a train wreck performance. So were the most catastrophic moments then actually somehow 'intentional'? Not in the usual sense, no: the musicians were just as shocked as the audience when the mic got

knocked over; if anything, they were even more on edge. But these performers got something from Sorey that they didn't get from anywhere else, something that made them feel more like living musicians than their other gigs.

What I learned, then, is that I'd been thinking about *Autoschediasms* the way I'd think about a string quartet, where it's definitely not good if the violist kicks over a mic stand – unless the composer had written in a little X notehead in the viola part with 'kick over mic stand into speaker' in italics next to it (I think there's actually a Matthias Spahlinger piece where this more or less happens). But what Sorey is doing is something more metaphysically radical. The concert hall – even when it's a secondary-school gymnasium – is a rarefied place, and what happens on the stage is conceptually isolated from what happens beyond it. New Music composers like Spahlinger or Nicholas A. Huber – who similarly has a piano piece that calls for the doors and windows of the performance area to be opened – historically have used the means at their disposal to desperately gesture beyond that inviolable sanctum, often to striking effect. Yet Sorey, like Butch Morris operating with a baton-led instrumental formation that can only be accommodated in large 'concert hall'-coded venues, is not pointing to an 'outside' world where something unknowable might happen, but instead bringing the world and all its chaotic richness *in*. By refusing to adhere to this *de facto* interiority, *Autoschediasms* was, to a listener primed for a 'concert experience', hardly legible as 'music' at all. This is why the discourse coming from critics reacting to Afrodiasporic music has often nervously cordoned its performers off away from Experimental/New Music as free spirits or uncritical noisemakers.² As a result, New Music is inoculated from an experience that might actually challenge its social, material and aesthetic foundations beyond the *de rigueur épater la bourgeoisie* type of surface provocation. When I realised this, I retroactively felt exhilarated: the rare, special feeling you get from having experienced some music that opens up possibilities that you didn't even recognise as possibilities at first. That's nice.

KRANICHSTEIN LAUREATES

The big Kranichsteiner Musikpreis went to Pietro Elia Barcellona and Kalun Leung. Good. Both are excellent at making music happen. The bigger take on this, I think, based on Leung's deferred acceptance statement on social media, is that it is an especially good thing that no mention was made of dividing the acts of composition and performance: both laureates are primarily known as performers – of double bass and trombone respectively. This is especially good, so the discourse goes, because Darmstadt has historically fetishised the score (and its producer, the hermetic composer-genius) as a privileged site of musical meaning, thereby reinforcing the repressive strictures of imperial whiteness. You know what, I'll go along with it: of all the various sweeping ideological pronouncements I've heard made about New Music over the past decade or so, the move towards un-fixing the score and its performance has been by far the most fruitful, resulting in more open and exciting collaborations between musicians who seem genuinely liberated at not having to prove themselves as a genius composer or virtuosic performer.

It would be good, nevertheless, for this assurance to be tempered with an acknowledgement of musicians who helped to pave the way for such

2 See, for example, George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 353–388.

recognition – not only Anthony Braxton, George E. Lewis and Sorey, but younger Darmstadt or Darmstadt-adjacent artists like Viola Yip, Marcela Lucatelli, David Pocknee and Celeste Oram who have worked with co-creation and non-notated music-making back when the institutional discourse still struggled to keep up. So, absolutely, the move away from seeing the roles of the composer and performer as exclusive specialisations (or, even worse, combined in a single incandescent ego) is hugely promising for our music and I hope that it continues. I also hope that those who attempted to move away from that paradigm before the discourse was ready receive the recognition they are owed.

CONDITIONS FOR A POSSIBLE FUTURE, CONCLUDED

I keep thinking about the fallout from The Enby Future Manifesto, because the fallout is still happening more than a month later as I'm writing this. First some press releases were made from the mayor of Darmstadt standing behind both the IMD and Schader Stiftung, arguing that there was no place for 'art' which targeted a specific group and that nothing was actually censored (a local newspaper report ran the plainly defensive subheading 'No Censorship – Artworks Not Damaged').³ While criticism of a particular government (e.g. that of Netanyahu) was the prerogative of creative and engaged artists, the argument continued, criticism of an entire state or people was discrimination and unacceptable.

That's certainly a reasonable position, but it's nevertheless worth taking a moment to scrutinise these reports. The written messages in Gomiz's preparatory installation did contain the phrases 'Stop Genocide' and 'Free Palestine'. But other, more incendiary phrases that were reported, such as 'from the river to the sea' or the risibly awkward 'Israel conqueror', were, according to my conversations with those involved in the workshop, not actually present at the time of the work's removal from the Schader Stiftung. In that case, there was no direct criticism, either of the Netanyahu government or the state of Israel (in fact, despite its natural adoption into discussions of the Gaza war and its fallout, the work's conceptual focus was on postcolonial South America). The issue was that, had the installation continued in the same direction, there *might possibly have been* unacceptable criticism. The anti-Israel criticism, then, existed only in the minds of those cultural guardians who anticipated it and thus, in deference to the long German tradition of emulating American policy, launched a preemptive strike.

Shortly afterwards, Marco Momi, a previous Kranichstein laureate, returned his prize money to the IMD and wrote an open letter in support of the participants whose work had been removed; an online petition followed, penned by the participants and calling for further dialogue with the IMD aimed at preventing future censorship. This petition reiterates the points made by the Enby Future participants at the open air meeting with the IMD team:

- 1) The censorship of Ada Gomiz's work, and, inter alia, the workshop, must be acknowledged.

3 'Vorfall bei Darmstädter Ferienkursen: OB [Oberbürgermeister] Benz unterstützt Entscheidung der Schader-Stiftung', *da.news*, 1 August 2025, <https://da.news/darmstaedter-ferienkurse-vorfall-schader-stiftung/> (accessed 11 September 2025). Oddly, this article is erroneously tagged with 'Eberstadt', one of the few Darmstadt localities entirely unaffected by the Ferienkurse, safely situated in the deep south of Hesse.

- 2) The materials from Gomiz's work that were removed from the workshop space must be returned to her.
- 3) Steps must be taken to ensure that censorship of artistic work at the Darmstadt Courses does not recur.

My impression was that most of the discussion never got past point 1). The IMD representatives tactfully, diplomatically – but consistently – refused to describe the actions taken by the Schader Stiftung as censorship. Somewhat counter-intuitively, that didn't mean that they refused to take responsibility; in fact they seemed more than willing to admit fault, at one point even volunteering 'maybe we failed' as a response. But they maintained that every action was taken with the best of intentions, a position that was foundationally challenged by the participants' demands.

Without a doubt, this was an impasse and, as far as I know, it remains so. Something similar happened about a decade ago when the historic exclusion of women and ethnic minorities from centres of New Music prompted by the group Gender Relations in Darmstadt (GRiD, later adopting the more expansive but less appealing acronym GRiNM, Gender Relations in New Music). At first, cultural administrators were confused by GRiD's demands for greater inclusion, insisting that decisions were made on quality alone. Later, this initial stalemate was overcome with the involvement of practically the entire German cultural sector with the 'Defragmentation' workshop spaces of the 2018 courses, and now the whole intervention is looked upon as one of the most triumphant all-around success stories of institutional New Music. Hopefully the Enby Future will also result in productive dialogue, and the initial accusations of censorship will be similarly retconned into an 'intervention'.

Still, the central confusion – why a work of creative art created in a closed workshop set off frantic institutional backpedalling while outright public protests and demonstrations were treated with openness and tolerance – seems insoluble. I tried to give a reason above about the nature of queerness in relation to neoliberal subject-positions afforded to artists, but it wasn't really satisfactory. It's very weird that it happened the way it did, and what matters now is to see how things stand going forward.

I think the point about censorship is the paradigmatically crucial one – what the participants called censorship was framed by administrators as harm reduction, invoking the Code of Conduct of the courses. If the pieces of paper in Gomiz's work really said what the local newspapers say that they did, it's arguable that they did in fact run afoul of these guidelines, which prohibit 'discrimination based on nationality, religion or worldview, [and] political opinion'. As it was, however, the more incendiary attributions seem to have been mere Hirngespinnsten, in which case the Stiftung's worry was that, in its eventual public presentation, the work might possibly contain further messages that *were* somehow discriminatory. Regardless, such codes of conduct are the discursive price one must pay for public life in a liberal democracy today. They are a kind of shorthand cultural currency: note how even the most rage-filled invectives against progressive goals are invariably articulated as redressing harms to a set of more deserving victims (gender-critical feminists, blue-collar white men, socially maladjusted entrepreneurs, etc.). At any rate, they certainly put a decisive limit on the kind of artworks that can be publicly exhibited; whether they apply also to art while still in a private process of development is one of the issues with which the participants took umbrage.

So maybe the big meeting didn't accomplish much in the short term. That's disappointing, of course, but not fatal. It's tempting, in this as in everything else, to subscribe to a grim inevitability, to think that these institutions are fundamentally morally bankrupt and best avoided (I'm paraphrasing this because I've seen it written), that the world is in a death spiral of depleting resources and escalating war (you've definitely seen this written). But that's neither helpful nor true.

One of the most powerful moments of the courses for me was when a clearly distressed participant spoke up in a workshop about how it felt wrong to even discuss issues like environmental degradation and injustice in the abstract when there was an ongoing genocide. Others asked them what a more productive way of thinking might be, how one could remain hopeful. Their response was extremely articulate: always believe that another world is possible.

If it seems like the future is fixed with bleak ineluctability, the conditions that led to that impression need to be unlearned. And in fact that's what all the best music of this year's courses did: whether Sheehan's techno-Méliès percussive dreamscapes, Watson's volatile interiority, Inga Margrete Aas and Laila Arafah's hypnotically situational performances, Sorey's confrontationally deep composed-improvisation or the vitally creative Open Spaces of Ana Dueri, James McIlwrath and Kyle Hutchins and Shannon Wettstein. They all affirmed that another world, a world that you didn't know could exist before encountering it, was possible.

That comes perilously close to an 'art can save the world' bromide, so one final word. A very senior and established figure at the courses said offhandedly 'Institutions live and die on ideas. When the ideas run out, the institution dies, and usually it goes away.' More than any other festival of New Music, the Darmstädter Ferienkurse depends on a critical mass of young musicians for its existence. It's a symbiotic relationship, and one that only really functions if it's allowed a great deal of flexibility, dialogue and confrontation. That last part is crucial: building on Chantal Mouffe's idea of agonistic creativity, Travis A. Jackson identifies the state of 'productive adversariality' that ideally arises in improvised music.⁴

If the IMD's renewed interest in Afrodiasporic music is sincere (and there's no reason to think it's not), it should take Jackson's ideas on board. Conflict in the cultural world is a positive; much of the horrific sleepwalk into polycrisis of the past decade and a half has been exacerbated, if not indeed caused, by a prescriptivist attitude that sees conflict as a harm to be suppressed rather than an engine of creativity and effective collaboration. The IMD has not only adapted to cultural changes but, in dialogue with its participants, actively led the most positive of them, and, I think, it's justifiably proud of that fact. I hope that whatever comes of this latest intervention, its conflict will be read not as an embarrassment or trauma, but proof of the productively agonistic community that arises in a mid-sized Hessian city every two years.

4 Travis A. Jackson, 'You've Got to Be Agonistic: The (Un-)Democratic and (Anti-)Utopian in Jazz Improvisation', quoted in Jordan Musser, 'Squabbling for Freedom: Improvisation, Democracy, and Subjectivity at the London Musicians Collective', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 150, No. 1 (2025), p. 34.



Participants of The Enby Future Manifesto workshop (seated left to centre) in discussion with representatives from the IMD (seated right) outside the Lichtenburgschule around 11:30 am, 2 August 2025. Credit: Max Erwin.