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‘Alles ist hin!’: Images and Commemoration in Thomas Larcher’s *Symphonie Nr. 2:*

Kenotaph (2015-16)

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‘I didn’t even have any images in mind.’

Thomas Larcher (in discussion with Michael Haas)

Austrian composer and pianist Thomas Larcher (1963-) wrote his *Symphonie Nr. 2: Kenotaph* [Symphony No. 2: Cenotaph] on commission to mark the 200th anniversary of the Österreichische Nationalbank [OeNB, Austrian National Bank]. It was premiered in Vienna by the Vienna Philharmonic under Semyon Bychkov on 3 June 2016 and received its UK premiere under the same conductor, but with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, at the Royal Albert Hall in Prom 57 on 28 August 2016. The symphony was originally conceived as a concerto for orchestra, and whilst taking the form of a classical symphony lasting around thirty-five minutes and divided into four movements (fast; adagio; fast, alert; ♩ = 59), it retains some elements of the original concept, ‘reaching from the intimacy of chamber music to the immense diversity of a full orchestra’.¹ Larcher’s musical idiom has been described as ‘tonale Zugänglichkeit’ [tonal accessibility],² and his *Second Symphony* frequently harks

¹ See < <https://en.schott-music.com/shop/symphony-no-2-no333086.html> > [accessed 29 September 2018].

² Wolf-Dieter Peters, ‘Von Einsamkeit in der Liebe – Uraufführung von Thomas Larchers “Das Jagdgewehr” in Bregenz’, *nmz online*, 16 August 2018. See

back to Mahler whilst being distinctly postmodern in its stylistic pluralism, a technique the English composer and musicologist Peter Dickinson has termed ‘style-modulation’.³ On his own webpage Larcher describes the piece in the following terms:

I want to explore the forms of our musical past under the light of the (musical and human) developments we have been part of during our lifetime. How can we find tonality that speaks in our time? And how can the old forms speak to us? These are questions I often ask myself. This piece is very much about different forms of energy: bundled, scattered, smooth, kinetic or furious.⁴

The symphony’s subtitle, ‘Cenotaph’ [Greek κενός, ‘empty’ and τάφος, ‘tomb’], signifies that it is intended as a monument for people missing or presumed dead, and refers to the victims of what in 2015 became known as the ‘European migrant crisis’.⁵ The description of the piece in the 2016 Proms programme, for example, included a full-page detail from a famous Reuters press photograph by Yannis Bahrakis of Syrian refugees calling for help and

<<https://www.nmz.de/online/von-einsamkeit-in-der-liebe-urauffuehrung-von-thomas-larchers-das-jagdgewehr-in-bregenz>> [accessed 29 September 2018].

³ Peter Dickinson, ‘Style-Modulation: An Approach to Stylistic Pluralism’, *Musical Times*, 1754 (1989), 208-11.

⁴ <<http://www.thomaslarcher.com/en/2016/05/15/symphony-no-2-kenotaph-2015-2016/>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

⁵ The Wikipedia entry ‘European Migrant Crisis’ is a helpful for gauging the use of the contested term ‘crisis’. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis> [accessed 4 August 2018].

emptying water from their flooding raft as they approached the Greek island of Lesbos on 20 October 2015.

In this introduction to the interview between Larcher and musicologist Michael Haas, I will examine *Kenotaph* both as a response to the migrant crisis, that is to say as programme music, and as a symphonic composition engaging explicitly and self-reflexively with music history. The focus in both cases will be on the limits and boundaries of musical representation.

In May 2005, to coincide with the opening of his *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* [Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe], architect Peter Eisenman was interviewed by the *Spiegel* and asked if there was anything he didn't like about the monument now that it was finally populated by visitors:

Ich glaube, es ist ein bisschen zu ästhetisch. Es sieht ein wenig zu gut aus. Nicht, dass ich etwas Hässliches wollte, aber ich wollte nichts, das nach Design aussieht. Ich wollte das Gewöhnliche, das Banale. Wenn man ein Bild zeigen will, dann sollte man es einfach zeigen und nicht zu viel Zeit aufwenden, um es zu gestalten. Und leider sieht es etwas zu gestaltet aus. [...] Ich habe immer gesagt, dass ich in den Menschen ein Gefühl erzeugen wollte, in der heutigen Zeit zu sein und dass sie eine Erfahrung machen sollen, die sie noch nie vorher gemacht haben. Eine, die sich unterscheidet und ein wenig beunruhigend ist. Die Welt ist von Information überfüllt, und hier gibt es einen Ort ohne Information. Das ist, was ich wollte.⁶

⁶ “‘Es ist kein heiliger Ort’: Interview mit Mahnmal-Architekt Peter Eisenman”, 10 May 2005, <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/interview-mit-mahnmal-architekt-peter-eisenman-es-ist-kein-heiliger-ort-a-355383.html>>. For the translation (here amended), see

[I think it is a little too aesthetic. It's a little too good looking. It's not that I wanted something ugly, but I didn't want it to seem designed. I wanted the ordinary, the banal. If you want to show a picture, just show it – don't spend too much time arranging it. And unfortunately it looks a bit too arranged. [...] I said all along that I wanted people to have a feeling of being in the present and an experience that they had never had before. And one that was different and slightly unsettling. The world is too full of information and here is a place without information. That is what I wanted.]

Eisenman's disinclination to circumscribe his Berlin monument iconographically – although interestingly he is prepared to use the theologically contested term 'Bild' [picture or image], with its connotations of an Old Testament *Bilderverbot* [prohibition of images] – is echoed in the remarks made by composer Thomas Larcher about his *Second Symphony* in the interview with Haas. As a Holocaust memorial, Eisenman's work gives architectural form to issues that are historically, politically and theologically remote from those surrounding the European migrant crisis. However, both artists acknowledge that their intention was to give shape, architectural form – be it sculptural or musical – to memory, to the idea of not forgetting. In terms of signification, what Eisenman's *Holocaust Memorial* and Larcher's *Second Symphony* have in common might be termed a construction of concealment: neither work straightforwardly represents the catastrophe it memorializes. In terms of the relationship between architectural and musical form, it is worth noting that Daniel Libeskind repeatedly pointed to intertextual references to Arnold Schönberg's opera *Moses und Aron* [*Moses and*

<<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel-interview-with-holocaust-monument-architect-peter-eisenman-how-long-does-one-feel-guilty-a-355252.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

Aaron, 1932] in his Jewish Museum in Berlin, not least in relation to the concept of necessary incompleteness: ‘I took my cue from Schönberg’s unfinished opera entitled *Moses and Aron* [...]. I realized that fundamentally the opera really does have something to do with the Berlin museum.’⁷ I shall return to Schönberg, the Second Commandment and necessary incompleteness in what follows.

Within musical discourse the paradox I am addressing here, the aporia of representation, manifests itself most obviously in the age-old tension between so-called ‘absolute music’ and ‘programme music’. In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Roger Scruton defines the former as follows:

The term ‘absolute music’ denotes not so much an agreed idea as an aesthetic problem. [...] It names an ideal of musical purity, an ideal from which music has been held to depart in a variety of ways; for example, by being subordinated to words (as in song), to drama (as in opera), to some representational meaning (as in programme music), or even to the vague requirements of emotional expression.⁸

Polemically, but not unreasonably, Scruton concludes – with reference to Bach’s fugal writing in the *St Matthew Passion* (BWV 244) – ‘however “absolute” a piece of music may be, it can retain our interest only if there is something more to understanding it than an appreciation of mere patterns of sound.’⁹

⁷ See <<https://www.Schönberg.at/index.php/en/1995-daniel-libeskind-kein-ort-an-seiner-stelle-2>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

⁸ Roger Scruton, ‘Absolute Music’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley Sadie, 20 vols, (London, 1980), I, 26-7 (p. 26).

⁹ Scruton, ‘Absolute Music’, p. 27.

In his related article in *Groves*, Scruton defines ‘programme music’ as music ‘of a narrative or descriptive kind; the term is often extended to all music that attempts to represent extra-musical concepts without resort to sung words.’¹⁰ Quoting Beethoven’s famous description of his own *Pastoral Symphony* as ‘mehr Empfindung als Malerey’ [more the expression of feeling than painting], Scruton concludes that the broadening of the notion *ad absurdum* to include any extra-musical reference, be it to objective events or subjective feelings, rests on overlooking ‘the vital aesthetic distinction between representation and expression’.¹¹ Scruton goes on to list canonical examples from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* concertos to Debussy’s *La mer* via Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Liszt’s tone poems and Strauss’s *Don Juan* and *Don Quixote*: ‘What is common to all these is the attempt to “represent objects” in music [...]. [P]rogramme music is music that seeks to be understood in terms of its programme; it derives its movement and its logic from the subject it attempts to describe.’¹²

Scruton distinguishes between musical representation and imitation – the clarinet cuckoos in Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* and Mahler’s *First Symphony* are the most obvious examples of the latter. When it comes to representation he notes: ‘The question arises whether music can actually describe the world or whether it is merely evocative [...] in its strictest sense programme music does not include music that is merely expressive, imitative or evocative.’¹³ Berlioz’s *idée fixe* and Wagner’s leitmotif are significant insofar as

¹⁰ Roger Scruton, ‘Programme Music’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, XV, pp. 283-87 (p. 283).

¹¹ Scruton, ‘Programme Music’, p. 284.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

they ‘permitted representation in music without a hint of imitation’.¹⁴ This nineteenth-century expansion of the concept is, as we shall see, particularly pertinent to Larcher’s *Second Symphony*.

Schönberg is a key figure in the context of programme music and musical representation, and his lasting significance to debates around Austrian music is highlighted by Haas a number of times in discussion with Larcher. In *Moses und Aron* Schönberg engages explicitly and programmatically with the complex implications – musical and theological – of representation and the Second Commandment’s *Bilderverbot*. In many other works he experimented further with explicit and implicit programmes, for example in the *Begleitmusik für eine Lichtspielszene* op. 34 [*Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene*], the 1929/30 accompaniment to a non-existent, thus imageless film subtitled ‘Drohende Gefahr, Angst, Katastrophe’ [Threatening Danger, Fear, Catastrophe], a title, incidentally, that would also be appropriate for Larcher’s *Kenotaph*. Gertrud Koch cites *Moses und Aron* as proof of a ‘Fixierung [...] auf eine Idee vom Bild, die Musik ist und nicht Abbild, und auf eine Idee von Musik, die als Negation des Bildes dessen Idee perpetuiert’ [life-long fixation [...] on an idea of image which is music and not representation, and on an idea of music which in the negation of image perpetuates its very idea].¹⁵ As we shall see in what follows, Larcher is also profoundly concerned with the ways in which music can become image and images can be rendered musically whilst eschewing literalism.

So how does Larcher’s *Symphonie Nr. 2: Kenotaph* function as programme music, as musical image-making? As can be seen in the remarks quoted above on his intention to

¹⁴ Roger Scruton, ‘Programme Music’, p. 286. See also Frederick Niecks, *Programme music in the Last Four Centuries* (London, 1906).

¹⁵ Gertrud Koch, *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 32.

examine musical history in the light of current events, the composer is equivocal on this matter, and his comments suggest both absolute and programmatic concerns. On the webpage of his publisher Schott, however, we find an emphatically programmatic explanation:

The symphony's subtitle 'Kenotaph' (cenotaph) refers to monuments erected to commemorate those killed in war, or in the composer's own words, 'graves for lost and forgotten souls'. Feeling anguish over the continuing European immigrant crisis in particular, Larcher poured his feeling into this work.

Thousands upon thousands of people drowned in the Mediterranean while all of Europe stood on the sidelines idly observing this tragedy or even looking away. [The symphony] is a symbol for what has been going on and is still going on in the middle of Europe. – Thomas Larcher¹⁶

The equivocation between descriptive programmes and recourse to the language of absolute music is not unique to this piece, but symptomatic of Larcher's approach to describing and explaining his own music in general; even a cursory read of the programme notes for his compositions on his own website reveals this tension as well as attempts to resolve it. To cite just a few representative examples that throw light on the compositional philosophy underpinning *Kenotaph*: the title of *Red and Green* for big orchestra of 2010 'refers to the two colours which cannot be distinguished when you suffer from colour blindness... something I do' and also 'represents traffic lights and so the order of our whole urban

¹⁶ This passage is taken from an article celebrating *Kenotaph* as the Schott 'Work of the Week' on 22 August 2016 <<https://en.schott-music.com/work-of-the-week-thomas-larcher-symphony-no-2/>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

world’;¹⁷ the title *Böse Zellen* [*Free Radicals*] for piano and orchestra (2006, 2007) is taken from the film of the same name by Barbara Albert: ‘although this film was on my mind while composing the piece, “Böse Zellen” is not program music. Perhaps there are analogies in the construction, in the structure, in the treatment of form, in the openness of the construction, in the juxtaposition of people, impressions, feelings, structures.’ *Still* for viola and chamber orchestra had a visual trigger, being inspired by ‘the concept of the “video still”, a “frozen” image from a video film, which is altered, processed, or perhaps left as it is’; *Smart Dust* for piano (2005) was apparently inspired by technological innovation: ““Smart Dust” devices are tiny wireless microelectromechanical sensors (MEMS) that can detect everything from light to vibration [...] potential commercial applications are varied, ranging from catching manufacturing defects by sensing out-of-range vibrations in industrial equipment to tracking patient movement in a hospital room.’

Finally, *Hier, heute* [*Here, today*] for cello, orchestra and CD is based on quotations from interviews with the American photographer Jean-Marc Bouju, famous for his images of the Second Iraq War: ‘It actually captures our entire contemporary world, as seen through the eye and camera of a sensitive and empathic human being. He takes a stance and shows the (albeit minimal) possibilities of the individual within the machinery of war.’ Larcher then reflects, meta-critically, on his own compositional programme: ‘I have been told that the piece is a futile attack against an insoluble situation. This is probably right. And it is most likely true of the majority of my compositions (and thus also of my life and of the majority of our lives).’ At which point his description shifts seamlessly to matters more explicitly related to questions of absolute music and architectural, compositional problems: ‘I wanted to

¹⁷ This, and all subsequent examples, are taken from the bi-lingual worklist at <www.thomaslarcher.com> [accessed 4 August 2018].

explore and fathom the rhythmic-motor possibilities of the orchestral apparatus. [...] My personal challenge was to shape these in such a way that they were at the same time interesting.’ Characteristic of Larcher’s compositional approach in this context – and it is a dialectic addressed in the interview with Haas – is the encounter of global, political questions and personal, inner-musical, compositional matters.

Michael Church’s review of *Kenotaph* in *The Independent*, unequivocally subtitled ‘A new symphony commemorates those drowned in the refugee crisis’, quotes the composer saying that his piece expresses ‘grief over those who have died, and outrage at the misanthropy at home in Austria and elsewhere’ before adding: ‘But it’s not programme-music, he insists; it reflects his ongoing search for “a tonality which speaks for our time”, and for a way to make the old symphonic forms newly relevant.’¹⁸

Reviewers in Austria and England have been largely in agreement that the resulting tonality is unmistakably Mahlerian – indeed the composer himself refers to Mahler as a ‘crucial name’ in the interview with Haas. Larcher’s stylistic pluralism has led reviewers to name-check a range of other influences or intertexts: Richard Strauss, Arvo Pärt and Alfred Schnittke in particular crop up again and again, others mention Giya Kancheli, Tōru Takemitsu, George Crumb, even John Adams. In the *Guardian* Tim Ashley addressed the programme music paradox head-on:

[I]t’s difficult not to hear the heaving of a treacherous sea beneath the formal crisis of the opening movement, or the intimation of dangerously becalmed waters in the grieving adagio. The sonorities are by turns lucid and brutal, and the climax comes

¹⁸ See <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/prom-57-elisabeth-kulmanbbc-symphony-orchestrasemyon-bychkov-review-a7219816.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018]. The review gave Prom 57 a maximum five stars.

with a battering scherzo that furiously demands answers, only to be greeted with a banal *ländler* that reeks of indifference and contempt. It's a moment of tremendous irony and power.¹⁹

Ashley identifies the Austrian *Ländler* at the end of the scherzo as a political attack on Larcher's compatriots. Anna Piccard in *The Times* is more equivocal, describing the dance motif as 'a wistful Mahlerian *Ländler* placed like a question mark at the close of the scherzo'.²⁰ In *Die Presse*, reviewer Wilhelm Sinkovicz doesn't identify anything particularly Austrian about the allusion, hearing instead a very different man-made maritime catastrophe and, rather unexpectedly, a specifically British one:

Auch in seinem 'Kenotaph' gibt es drastische Metaphern. So schließt das Scherzo nicht einfach ein stilleres Trio ein, sondern entartet in eine Folge von immer intensiver, immer rascher aufeinander folgenden Schlägen, unter denen die musikalische Struktur völlig zusammenbricht. Aus den Trümmern dringen dann die Klänge eines Ländlers hervor; ob die Assoziation mit der angesichts der Katastrophe noch weiter musizierenden 'Titanic'-Kapelle ganz falsch ist?

¹⁹ Quoted on the composer's website:

<<http://www.thomaslarcher.com/en/2016/05/15/symphony-no-2-kenotaph-2015-2016/>>

[accessed 4 August 2018].

²⁰ Also quoted on the composer's website:

<<http://www.thomaslarcher.com/en/2016/05/15/symphony-no-2-kenotaph-2015-2016/>>

[accessed 4 August 2018].

[In his “Cenotaph” there are also drastic metaphors. Thus the scherzo does not simply incorporate a quieter trio, but degenerates into a sequence of ever more intense hammer blows, following on from one another with increasing speed and under the weight of which the musical structure completely disintegrates. The sounds of a *Ländler* then emerge from the ruins; would it be entirely wrong to be reminded of the band on the Titanic continuing to play in the face of imminent catastrophe?] ²¹

One is reminded of the notorious interpolation into Schönberg’s *Second String Quartet* op. 10 of the folk song ‘O du lieber Augustin’, which some scholars have read as a coded autobiographical reference to the composer’s marital crisis (‘Alles ist hin!’ [All is lost!]); others have identified it as a symbol for the abandonment of functional tonality.²² As Schönberg himself put it ‘Das Kunstwerk vermag das zu spiegeln, was man hineinsieht’ [a work of art can reflect what you read into it].²³ In the interview with Haas, Larcher explains that he simply included a *Ländler* on realising the scherzo lacked a trio, adding that he had no images in mind and it is not a direct Mahler quotation: ‘I must admit, I didn’t have any images in mind when writing.’ In his overall assessment of *Kenotaph*, Sinkovicz settles on ‘post-Mahlerian’ (‘im nach-mahlerschen Verständnis’) to characterize Larcher’s compositional approach. Jens F. Laurson writing on Forbes.com is more specific, identifying

²¹ <http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/klassik/5003638/Kenotaph_Eine-neue-Symphonie-als-Mahnmal> [accessed 4 August 2018].

²² See also: Frank Schneider, ‘Autobiographische Aspekte in Schönbergs Musik: Das 2. Streichquartett op. 10’ in Schneider, *Von gestern auf heute: Schriften zur neuen Musik*, ed. by Jurgen Otten, Stefan Fricke (Saarbrücken, 2012), pp. 128-139 (pp. 135-36).

²³ Quoted in Schneider, ‘Autobiographische Aspekte in Schönbergs Musik’, p. 138.

a recurring motif from Mahler's 9th *Symphony*.²⁴ Certainly there is a striking similarity between the closing minutes of both pieces, although others might find it hard to dissociate the melody from an echo of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*.

Influences and echoes aside, the issue remains the way in which this piece, a public commission from the OeNB, is framed as an empty tomb for those drowned in the Mediterranean. In the English-language version of their 2016 annual report, the bank lists Larcher's piece, together with a photo of the composer, alongside its other music and art-related activities in a section entitled 'Committed to Austria's cultural heritage'.²⁵

The productive tensions provoked by Larcher's piece raise a number of questions which take us back to the issues raised at the outset in the context of Eisenman and Libeskind. First and foremost: what constitutes an appropriate musical, more broadly artistic, response to mass destruction or genocide? This question has been asked of Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* op. 46, of Dmitri Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 13: Babi Yar*, of Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* and of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* (which Stravinsky famously dismissed as 'rather a soft bomb' with 'a

²⁴ See <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jenslaurson/2016/06/06/the-rebirth-of-contemporary-classical-music-the-vienna-philharmonic-plays-larcher>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

²⁵ See *OeNB Annual Report 2016* <<https://www.oenb.at/en/Publications/Oesterreichische-Nationalbank/Annual-Report.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018]. See pp. 73-74. In the German-language version the section is merely titled '... und Kunst und Kultur'. See <<https://www.oenb.at/Publikationen/Oesterreichische-Nationalbank/Geschaeftsbericht/2016/geschaeftsbericht-2016.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

bounteous presence of literalisms'²⁶). Wikipedia lists more than 150 musical responses to the 9/11 attacks alone.²⁷ Second, and more specifically: how useful, politically or otherwise, is instrumental music as a tool for commemoration? Of the above-mentioned composers, only Penderecki avoids setting text, but as he readily acknowledged, he hadn't even originally composed his *Threnody* with Hiroshima in mind at all. It was initially entitled 8' 37"; on hearing it performed, and only then, did he decide 'to dedicate it to the Hiroshima victims'.²⁸

In his article on *Kenotaph*, Robert Stein concludes that Larcher ultimately falls short of fulfilling his two stated aims – to commemorate the drowned migrants and reinvent or reinvigorate symphonic form. Stein argues that whilst earlier chamber works, including *My Illness is the Medicine I Need* for soprano and ensemble (2002, revised 2013) based on texts about psychiatric disorders, managed to evoke individual pain and suffering, this grander, public monument or gesture is unable to 'transcend [...] media representations of tragedy to give a convincing voice to the individuals who suffered'.²⁹ In response one could cite the work's polyphony and stylistic pluralism (or style-modulation) as a refutation of (musical) monolingualism. As we have seen from his own comments and those of musicologists

²⁶ <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/to-thine-own-muse-be-true-1271456.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_songs_about_the_September_11_attacks> [accessed 4 August 2018].

²⁸ Quoted, for example, in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology*, ed. by Arvid Ashby (Rochester, NY, Woodbridge, 2004), p. 351.

²⁹ Robert Stein, 'First Performances: BBC Proms 2016: Julian Anderson and Thomas Larcher', *Tempo*, 71 (2016), 81-2 (p. 82).

commenting on and reviewing his work, Larcher translates and incorporates a number of different musical languages into his piece.

A third and more specific question: is Larcher's pluralistic, post-Mahlerian idiom appropriate for the task he has set himself? Put another way: are the musical language he adopts and – extra-musically – the circumstances of the commission which brought it about, sufficiently engaged with the catastrophe the piece commemorates to function as a symbolic tomb? Tim Ashley, after all, read the scherzo's *Ländler* quotation as a meta-commentary on the inadequacy of an Austrian response to the migrant crisis. Could or should this accusation of inadequacy be extended to the piece as a whole? Is *Kenotaph* an empty symbol, a metaphor devoid of human life? Despite its eclecticism, or what Michael Church termed 'pastiche',³⁰ the piece does not, for example, engage in any very explicit way with non-Western culture: there is no space for North African music, no Syrian Muwashshah (موشح) or Arabic music more broadly. On the other hand, as Larcher explains to Haas in interview, he is actively engaged in cross-cultural programming and *Kenotaph* should also be heard within this broader context.

In interview with Stefan Knupfer in 2015 Larcher expressed his doubts about titles in terms which are not only reminiscent of Eisenman's remarks on his Berlin Memorial, quoted above, but also suggest a keen awareness of the aporia of programme music:

Natürlich denkt man sich was bei einer Titelgebung, aber wenn man ehrlich ist, kommt manches erst im Nachhinein dazu und gibt dann Raum für Assoziationen, vielleicht auch Hilfen für die Zuhörer. [...]

³⁰ <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/prom-57-elisabeth-kulmanbbc-symphony-orchestrasemyon-bychkov-review-a7219816.html>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

Auf der anderen Seite ist es aber auch so, dass man als Komponist ein Stück schreibt, sich etwas ganz Bestimmtes vorstellt und auch bestimmte Gedankenlinien, Bilder usw. im Kopf hat. Nur: jedes gute Stück lebt gerade davon, dass sich jeder Zuhörer seine eigenen Welten dazu bilden kann, man soll also nicht zu viel vorgeben wollen.

[Of course you have ideas when you give something a title, but if one's honest, much of it comes retrospectively, where there's room for associations, perhaps also to help the listener. On the other hand it can happen that as a composer you write a piece and imagine something very specific and have particular trains of thought, images and so forth in your mind. However: every piece comes alive when the listener is able to imagine their own world when listening to it, so you shouldn't try to be too prescriptive.]³¹

Dedicating a symphony to the victims of the migrant crisis clearly represents for Larcher a step in this direction. It might therefore be churlish to question the nature of this move, and it is certainly not my intention here to challenge its integrity, not least given how passionately and eloquently Larcher describes his outrage at recent political developments in Austria in interview with Haas. Here he describes how the migrant crisis unfolded as he composed the piece as a 'nightmare' and how he wanted to speak with a 'voice of humanity and empathy'.

For the individual listener, of course, the issue remains as to whether the music lives up to its programme, or at least its title, without linguistic exegesis, without *Versprachlichung* [verbalization]. As Joy H. Calico has it in the afterword to her study of the reception of Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*: 'Insufficiently intelligible memorials run a risk of

³¹ <<http://www.thomaslarcher.com/de/2015/12/10/musikalischer-grenzforscher-thomas-larcher-im-gesprach-mit-stefan-knupfer/>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

miscommunication or even noncommunication, with the attendant ethical and aesthetic consequences.³² She concludes that whilst ‘legitimate objections to representation may be raised on both ethical and aesthetic grounds’ – to which, perhaps, should be added theological – Schönberg ‘considered it necessary’.³³ She summarizes the result of Schönberg’s recourse to the rhetoric of nineteenth-century monumentality in the following terms: ‘*A Survivor* may be brief, but it marshals large forces, makes a direct emotional appeal, presents unambiguous content, and deploys an undeniable theatricality in the service of commemoration.’³⁴ Whilst Larcher’s *Second Symphony* is clearly not illustrative in the manner of *A Survivor from Warsaw* – it does not, after all, incorporate a narrative text – the two compositions have much in common in terms of their programmatic outrage at the horrors of recent history, in their recourse to a symphonic monumentality that is unmistakably Mahlerian and in their style-modulation which goes so far as to embrace quotation (Larcher’s *Ländler*, Schönberg’s fragment of the *Sh’ma Yisrael* [Hear, O Israel] sung in Hebrew).

It can be argued that in *Kenotaph* Larcher is consciously avoiding the ephemerality of spontaneous intervention³⁵ – and thus the pitfalls of banality, or what Calico refers to as ‘big gestures and effects [...] the very explicit modes of communication [...] rooted in popular Romanticism.’³⁶ The question will of course remain for some as to whether he has, in the process, sacrificed legibility and relevance – what musicologist Frank Schneider has termed

³² Joy H. Calico, *Arnold Schönberg’s A Survivor from Warsaw in Postwar Europe* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 2014), p. 163.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 164.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 165.

³⁵ See: Calico, *Arnold Schönberg’s A Survivor from Warsaw in Postwar Europe*, p. 166.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 165.

music's *Sprachcharakter*³⁷ – in favour of abstraction and the risk of non-communication. The same question can and has, of course, been asked of Eisenman's memorial.

A cenotaph is, as already noted, an empty tomb, an architectural or sculptural concealment. The strange concurrence of commemoration and emptiness that a cenotaph embodies – as a hollow container signifying bodies lost or buried elsewhere – is addressed by performance artist Stuart Brisley and Maya Balcioglu in their 1987-91 work *The Cenotaph Project* in which they exhibited, in locations across England, scaled-down replicas of the Whitehall Cenotaph designed to accord with the ceiling height of a typical council flat. As Balcioglu writes on Brisley's webpage:

the deconstructive process remains active, for both the external (objective) history that has created the Cenotaph and the internal (subjective) histories that are attached to and reflected upon it are not final. [...] The Cenotaph Project is above all an art work, a sculpture looking at its own meaning and production, a vessel of its own undoing.³⁸

Whilst Larcher's project does not aspire to explicit political discourse of the kind encouraged by Brisley and Bolcioglu, which was accompanied by artists' statements and discussion, there is a similar tension at work in *Kenotaph*. It is possible, for example, to read the circumstances of the work's genesis in productive dialogue with personal histories of migration both at home and abroad. The fact that a piece commissioned from a leading Austrian composer by the OeNB should explicitly address the migrant crisis could be seen as a token gesture, or to amount to a conceptual dissonance and avowal of irresolution on the part of the composer,

³⁷ Schneider, *Von gestern auf heute*, p. 296.

³⁸ See <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/28/80s/Works/The_Cenotaph_Project/page:37> [accessed 4 August 2018].

not dissimilar to the kind intended by Brisley and Bolcioglu, in which, for the attentive and critical listener at least, ‘a deconstructive process remains active’ and where public history sits uncomfortably alongside personal stories.

Whilst the tensions between external history (in this case of Austria, of its National Bank, of that bank’s history during the Third Reich, of the ‘migrant crisis’) and internal history (of the victims of this external history, but also the audiences of the piece) are not easily quantifiable – and will change radically both over time and geographically, for example when the piece is performed in London rather than Vienna – they are certainly integral to the genesis, form and style of the composition discussed here. Something of the ‘catastrophic mood’ Larcher experienced when composing the piece – as described in interview with Haas – can be felt not only in the periodic violence and dissonances within a musical idiom that is predominantly tonal, but also in its deployment of unusual, often quotidian percussion instruments (oil barrels, sanding blocks, whips, mixing bowls and a biscuit tin), the unresolved stylistic juxtapositions and quotations already noted, and what Gavin Plumley terms a ‘displacement of the symphony’s shadowy home key of A minor’ in the coda coupled with a final ‘uneasy tritone’ indicating ‘that the drama is far from over’.³⁹

In his brief biography of Larcher for the Proms premiere of *Kenotaph*, Tim Rutherford-Johnson notes that the composer’s eclecticism, the manifest influence of Pärt, Takemitsu and others on his music, has helped him avoid ‘the trap of a restricted personal style’; citing Larcher’s recordings of Schubert and Schoenberg, Rutherford-Johnson further identifies diversity in his repertoire as a concert pianist, noting that he is ‘admired for

³⁹ Gavin Plumley, ‘Symphony No. 2, “Cenotaph” (2015-16)’, Prom 57, 28 August 2016, programme booklet, pp. 5-6 (p. 6).

drawing imaginative connections between the modern and classical repertoire'.⁴⁰ What is clear from these observations, and from listening to and analysing Larcher's *Second Symphony*, is that his musical response to the deaths in the Mediterranean in 2015 and 2016 – and indeed his compositional style more broadly – is purposefully and persistently pluralist. The idiom adopted for *Cenotaph* embraces programmatic and absolute musical material, incorporates echoes of composers from across the globe, and engages in a dialogue with the form and history of symphonic form itself. Seen this way, Larcher's piece is catholic in a non-denominational sense – accessible and inclusive. And as such it is also, despite the composer's careful protestations to the contrary, a political piece.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Tim Rutherford-Johnson, 'Thomas Larcher', Prom 57, 28 August 2016, programme booklet, pp. 6-7 (p. 7).

⁴¹ See Plumley, 'Symphony No. 2, "Cenotaph" (2015-16)' for further claims in this respect.