Review

Situations for Distracted Listening

Impressions from the Darmstadt Summer Course 2025

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Every time cultural organizers huddle to pick a festival theme, their brainstorming heat surely counts as a modest contribution to global warming. In today's attention economy—where information is overabundant and rage-bait has surpassed click-bait like an evolved Pokémon—art institutions are forced to perform the same precarious dance, navigating survival and relevance under the increasingly standardized pressures of the neoliberal economy. Devising curatorial frameworks isn't simply a matter of aesthetics or conceptual backing; it must conform to the demands of the market.

In new music—where the value of newness is right there in the name—this becomes all the more pertinent. The "new" ultimately demands a spectacle, though not the kind delivered by MrBeast's videos. We expect institutions to confront pressing artistic and sociopolitical questions and gesture towards something beyond the tried and tested—a spectacle well worth witnessing, however imperfect.

At the **Darmstadt Summer Course 2025**, one such pressing question was the devastation unfolding in Palestine. Ada Gomiz, a participant in the workshop "The Enby Future Manifesto," saw her performance-installation "Huella Winka" withdrawn over slogans such as "Free Palestine" and "Stop Genocide." The venue, the Schader Foundation, demanded their removal or threatened to cancel the entire concert. In an **open letter**, Gomiz denounced the move as "repugnant fascist and colonialist censorship" and urged the Darmstadt Summer Courses to acknowledge the episode and offer reparations, while a city **press release** argued the work conflicted with the foundation's mission and that the workshop group itself had chosen to discontinue sessions at the venue, insisting "there can be no question of censorship." Mayor Hanno Benz backed this view, claiming the slogans exceeded artistic freedom.

"Huella Winka" was later performed at the Orangerie Darmstadt immediately preceding the second running of Maryanne Amacher's "GLIA." Just before the piece began, the festival's artistic director Thomas Schäfer remarked that he had learned about the performance only ten minutes earlier, suggesting it had not been coordinated with the organizers. In the aftermath, fellow participants and composers, including **Fredrika Gullfot** and Marco Momi, condemned the episode as censorship, and Momi even **returned** his Kranichsteiner Diplom in protest. (The festival referred me to the city press release when asked for comment.)

So far, so **tried** and **tested**. The Gomiz episode made clear that the freedoms Darmstadt affords are never absolute, but contingent. Beyond these fraught political negotiations, the standard-bearer of all new music festivals also grappled with questions of aesthetics. Under the artistic direction of Schäfer, who has held the post since 2009, the press release highlighted a "**special focus**" on the hot new thing: how sound, space and site-specificity intersect, emphasizing "works located within the intermediate area between concert, installation and performance." Darmstadt is, of course, a large festival of manifold delights and cannot revolve around a single theme, yet this was the flag it chose to wave.

It's hardly a secret that audiences are thirsty for new ways of experiencing music outside the traditional concert setting. They crave fresh forms of artistic expression, which in turn shape new ways of experiencing art—or perhaps the relation is inverse. That new music festivals are finally riding this wave of hybrid concert formats suggests not just genuine curiosity; I sniff a bit of trend-chasing at play. So what do this year's *situations* reveal about the healing and corporeal power of music, the quirks of spatial arrangement and the possibilities of shared listening? And how do we navigate distraction and the irresistible pull of Instagrammable moments in our topsy-turvy times?

Situations, Old and New

As every boat needs a name, so does every approach to concert-installation crossovers. Enter *situations*—the Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2025's take on it. This latent buzzword's conceptual frame comes from artist Terry Fox, quoted in the festival booklet: "Performance has changed so much. It's almost impossible to talk about performance anymore… There must be a better word, we could say 'situation'… The actual situation is what's going on in the space we're in.

And the situation involves everybody there, and there is a blend when everybody starts participating."

We must always watch out for semantic inflation that hides nothing behind it. But I actually like the sound of *situations*: It suggests a certain passivity, something open to chance beyond the control of composers, performers, or listeners. Of course, someone still has to make "it" happen.

Darmstadt is hardly the first festival to take up the theme. A few months ago I **reviewed** the second edition of **Musik Installationen Nürnberg**, which revolved entirely around presenting music "not as a normal concert, but as an experience in space." Its so-called *music installations* left vivid impressions: proof that compelling durational art can resist the tyranny of short attention spans and that music, dance, architecture and scenography can coalesce into a powerful gestalt. Two further examples include **Music Space Architecture**, which held its first and only outing in 2018 in Moscow, and **ZeitRäume Basel**, which has presented four biennial installments since 2015 in the heart of (new music) Europe. The upcoming **Ultima** in Oslo appears set to feature more installations than any previous edition.

As a large, unwieldy institution with a long-standing reputation, Darmstadt isn't always in a position to dictate trends. What it can do well is pick up and absorb existing developments,

carrying them into the international mainstream. This year, Schäfer told me, the festival drew around 380 course participants and 60 tutors from around the world, along with numerous guests. Without a doubt, some of these ideas will take root in new realizations across different cities and continents.

Another thing Darmstadt can do well is acknowledge its history. It wouldn't be the festival as we know it without a nod to one of its OG superstars, Karlheinz Stockhausen. While "Musik für ein Haus"—a 1968 piece involving musicians performing in isolation across three floors, their sounds layering into a spatially fragmented sonic experience, heard in full only through basement loudspeakers—wasn't on this year's program, the work earned a mention in the booklet as part of his cherished legacy. Though Darmstadt's engagement with hybrid forms was firmly rooted in its past, Schäfer and his team weren't aiming for a simple reenactment. Stockhausen's work "was the inspiration for us to look back, but it was really just a trigger to go somewhere completely different," Schäfer said.

“Rainforest IV”: Shared Listening in a Forest of Smartphones

“Rainforest IV”

David Tudor is best known for his virtuosic pianism, which animated much of the 20th-century repertoire from Stockhausen to Cage. Yet after teaching at Darmstadt between 1956 and 1961, he increasingly developed as a composer and sound artist, building his own electronic instruments. From 1968 to 1973, he wrote four versions of “Rainforest,” the first commissioned by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Cunningham’s title came from childhood experiences in the Olympic National Forest in the Pacific Northwest. Tudor drew on this to craft birdlike and animalistic calls with hand-built “instrumental loudspeakers”—compact objects with transducers that served as “acoustic filters.”

In 1973, at the New Music in New Hampshire festival, he staged “Rainforest IV,” where young musicians installed larger objects to resonate freely before performing them live in a rustic barn. The six-hour presentation encouraged visitors to walk among them, engaging with the work’s spatial dimension. In this way, the “Rainforest IV” evolved from a live-electronics composition into a performed installation.

Darmstadt restaged the piece at Centralstation, a former power plant turned performance venue. In its spacious, dimly lit hall, 24 objects hung from the ceiling—a sink, a baking tray, a trolley cart, a barrel and more. When I entered, the space brimmed with people and chatter, and the four-hour premiere was already half over. Catching the distinct sounds of each fixture proved difficult; bone conduction—leaning my ear directly against each object—was chosen instead. Glass, wood, metal and other materials acted as rudimentary filters, producing everything from undulating sine tones and soft humming to glitchy noise and the Nyan Cat song (despite the score forbidding pre-existing music). As I mentally compiled a top-five-sounds list, 90 minutes drifted by. By the end, only a handful of visitors remained, almost motionless, intently absorbing the dense, buzzing polyphony of the soundscape.

It wasn't just the polyphony of sound, but the polyphony of phones too. "Rainforest IV" turned out to be Instagrammable art *par excellence*, a forest of smartphones poking up from the crowd. While photography has **become** customary in museums over the past 15 years, snapping pictures (or even using a smartphone) at a typical classical concert can still be **highly divisive**. This installation, while not explicitly designed for Instagram like some **immersive exhibitions**, reminded me that the perennial tension of the experience economy—between marketability and artistic integrity, between luster and depth—must be negotiated in new music and the classical world more broadly. Here, though, the nature of the installation meant the phones didn't feel intrusive: the documenting became part of the spectacle.

Just like the original barn premiere, these enchanting sounds did not emerge on their own: along the opposite walls, participants of a workshop led by composer **Matt Rogalsky** and sound artist **hans w. koch** activated each object with their own material. Rogalsky—who has presented Tudor's work since 1998 and continues to carry the torch by passing on its oral tradition to new performers—noted in an interview the remarkable sonic continuity from one performance to the next, "considering that all the objects change and all the performers change."

On the legacy of "Rainforest IV," Rogalsky described a "generosity of spirit," in which "the whole point of it is that each person has the freedom to bring their own practice" to it. Tudor once summed this up as wanting to "give the piece away," a democratic ethos extended from performance to the audience's experience. Unlike a traditional concert, where listening can often be solitary, this *situation* became a physically shared act, with people leaning in together to hear the same object. Mesmerized and dumbfounded, visitors eagerly shared their sonic discoveries with friends and strangers alike.

“Eure Welt”: Spatial Arrangements for Distracted Listener

“Eure Welt”

One early morning, composer **Hannes Seidl** gave a talk called “The Distracted Listener,” reflecting on his difficulty maintaining focus—distracted by news, social media and caring for his children. He recalled first hearing a Bruckner symphony at around ten, struggling to sit still without disturbing others, and contrasted it with Xenakis’ dense, overwhelming “Pléïades,” which lacked a clear sense of musical narration. “It didn’t talk to me, it was *there*—a clear process for its own sake,” he observed.

Seidl also cited Morton Feldman’s five-hour “String Quartet No. 2” as music suited to what he called *distracted listening*. At a performance in Graz Seidl attended, the space was arranged for quiet comings and goings, with carpets and pillows on the floor and chairs at the back. Knowing he could leave at any time, he stayed throughout. He observed others drawing, sleeping and listening, and a family with two children who lingered—perhaps thanks to the freedom to move, lie down or leave whenever they wished.

The question of how to organize space for different modes of engagement has occupied me for several years. Seidl's description of the Feldman performance in Graz represents an ideal we should aspire to. Yet institutional and economic barriers remain. When I asked Schäfer how Darmstadt handled this, he explained how "really tricky" it was this year to decide how often a concert should be played and in what spatial setting. Some projects had a capacity of 500 or 100, while others, like Maia Urstad's "IONOS," had only 30 seats, albeit with multiple run-throughs. Providing accessibility while avoiding audience exclusion was key. "We don't want that," Schäfer said.

Throughout his talk, Seidl returned to Claire Bishop's book *Disordered Attention: How We Look at Art and Performance Today*, which has found a receptive niche among musicians and music researchers. Drawing on psychologist William James, Bishop challenges what she defines as *normative attention*: "an attention directed at objects (rather than other subjects), that is intellectual and cognitive (rather than sensorial and affective), that is framed in terms of ownership ('taking *possession* of the mind'), and which is individual (rather than socially or collectively constituted)."

These ideas must have been on Seidl's mind when he conceived his Darmstadt sound installation "Eure Welt" ("Your World"), created with Marc Behrens. It evolved from an earlier project of the same name—a multichannel one-hour audio drive—presented in May at Frankfurt's Museum Angewandte Kunst. Since the original format wouldn't suit Darmstadt, where attendance would be limited to eight visitors per day, they shortened it to 15 minutes in the backseat of a stationary car, an intimate space that remains private for many.

With raindrops drumming softly on the car window, I couldn't anticipate just how healing these 15 minutes would be. It allowed me to decompress from the festival's hubbub, which

bombarded us left and right with music. “Eure Welt” presented conversations with practitioners in outpatient care and sound therapy alongside calming tones of so-called healing frequencies—handled by the artists with neither ridicule nor reverence—leaving it to each listener to decide whether it worked for them.

“It’s logical to me that Darmstadt this year focuses on these kinds of formats, however you call them,” Seidl told me. Everyone seems to have their own term, some more marketable than others, but “it’s just too early to say where this will go.” He spoke about other festivals, for instance Wien Modern or MaerzMusik, which are interested in performances that move beyond the concert hall and traditional formats—though everyone’s motivations may vary. “Sometimes, it’s really about opening the festival towards others,” he said, “because there’s this feeling that you have a very specific group that goes to concert halls. You reach different people when you go out.”

He also noted the growth of works over the past two decades where musical narration—like the one he saw in a Bruckner symphony as a child—is no longer a goal. He recalled his experience as a student of the Darmstadt Summer Course in 2000, where most compositions had a clear dramaturgical line: “beginning, development, ending.” Nowadays, many pieces “tend towards more sound complexity in itself, but you as a listener can move in and out,” he said. Luckily, Seidl offered some hope of how such *situations* can be effective: “What I’ve figured is when you shape something in a way that welcomes the audience, it’s much easier to make very radical music.”

“GLIA”: Conjuring Healing Vibrations

“GLIA”

Inside the capacious Baroque palace of Darmstadt’s Orangerie—built around 1720 to preserve citrus fruits through the winter—something extraordinary was about to be preserved in memory. Two flutes, two violins, two accordions and a cello gradually swelled from hushed buzzing to overwhelming force, layered with extremely loud electronic sounds. This sheer physical force dissolved not only the architecture of the space, but also the dichotomy of *in* and *out*, of *real* and *imaginary*.

Like Tudor, composer and sound artist Maryanne Amacher was a towering figure of 20th-century experimental music, but unlike him she never visited Darmstadt—her indirect connection ran through Stockhausen, with whom she studied at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s. Amacher devoted much of her career to site-specific sound installations that stretched the boundaries of auditory perception, spatial acoustics and architectural resonance before her death in 2009. Central to her practice was the exploration of sounds generated by

the inner ear itself, called **otoacoustic emissions**—and it was these that tickled my sonic fantasies even before the performance.

Darmstadt presented an interpretative restaging of Amacher's 2005 "GLIA," whose title refers to the brain cells that support and protect neurons. Composer **Bill Dietz**, a specialist on Amacher and musical director of the performance, told me in an email exchange that the piece grew out of a conceptual framework she developed in the 1990s for a Kronos Quartet commission that never materialized. It explored the interplay between acoustic instruments, electronics and listeners to heighten bodily and perceptual awareness. Dietz wrote that, since Amacher abandoned a "provincial, representational paradigm of making," in the mid-1960s—including "the work-concept, the recital, the composer-performer-audience triangulation"—the Kronos commission would have been her first work for a classical ensemble.

The performance—given by Ensemble Contrechamps, members of Ensemble Zwischentöne, and Dietz—felt utterly absorbing through its hour and a bit. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be the loudest concert I've ever attended (Metallica possibly excepted). Hearing these otoacoustic emissions reminded me of seeing snow for the first time—a moment of pure magic. But at that volume, I could only endure a few seconds at a time. Thankfully, there were earplugs.

Deep Listen: Maryanne Amacher

Magic Eye images, or autostereograms, are those illusory images you used to see in books and magazines back in the ‘90s. If looked at in the right way or for the right amount of time, parts of the image would appear on a separate plane and acquire a kind of three-dimensionality produced entirely within the … Continue reading

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“The primary space for Amacher is always the space of a body: not the abstraction of ‘the’ body, but of her body, your body, specific bodies in all their positional and situated complexity,” wrote Dietz. The performance seemed to channel this idea perfectly: like many others, I ended up lying on the floor to feel the vibrations. There was something strangely restorative about it—a genuine exploration of space, both architectural and bodily, and of sound produced both externally and within the ear. Unlike with Tudor, where random objects became filters for the music, here my own body acted as a fleshy filter, letting low-frequency vibrations pass through me. And unlike with Seidl’s piece, where healing was merely sonic for me, here it became thoroughly corporeal.

More than that, the work opened itself up to multiple modes of experience: physical (vibrations), aural (otoacoustic emission), visual (hanging pieces of fabric) and even olfactory (Coco by Chanel sprayed around the hall)—from both inside and outside the beautiful Orangerie. If the goal was sensory overload, then “GLIA” succeeded marvelously. It may well have been the most compelling and convincing *situation* presented this year.

At Your Own Pace, in Your Own Time

The eight *situations* (if we include an art exhibition) presented this year at the Darmstadt Summer Course were not all amazing; some, in my view, barely worked. But those that did showed how exciting music can be when we give it a chance to stretch across unorthodox durations, inhabit unconventional spaces and foster unexpected interactions. Presenting older works alongside newly created projects was also a good decision. The festival's role as a mediating platform between experimentation and the mainstream—especially given its international reach—remains unchallenged within our delicate ecosystem, and may well be its strongest asset.

There is still plenty of work ahead: making spaces work for different needs, making music work for different ways of listening. These undertakings will always be constrained by institutionalism; inevitably, barriers exist, whether institutional or otherworldly. But as the history of art reminds us, it's always about prodding those barriers, persistently, until they slowly give way. The struggle between artist and institution is eternal and without clear winners—except the audience.

As to why this particular moment feels timely for hosting concert-installation hybrids, it has everything to do with the way we live our lives, with the on-demand availability of almost everything. Performances like those presented at Darmstadt this year align neatly with audiences' tendencies to switch in and switch out, without keeping their focus constantly fixed. It might simply be easier not to follow sonata form or keep track of all Wagner's leitmotifs. This flexibility allows listeners to navigate works—spatially and sonically—at their own pace, in their own time. As Bishop concludes in the introduction to her book: "Whether we like it or not, hybrid attention is 'OS XXI', the operating system of spectatorship in the twenty-first century."

It is worth pointing out that such immersive, hybrid and participatory works can easily fall prey to—and lean dangerously close to—all kinds of fetishizations of sensory overload, aesthetics of immediacy and immersion (see Anna Kornbluh's *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism*). They risk substituting contemplation with saturation: instead of encouraging reflection, they short-circuit the slow work of interpretation in favour of raw sensory absorption. Immediacy can flatten complexity into a saccharine pancake of instant gratification, aligning all too neatly with the logics of the attention economy.

Yet some crowds do find temporary refuge in slow, multi-sensory engagement, escaping the information overload of the circulation-forward economy. These works have every right to exist, but they should uphold themselves to the level of the three examples above, which maintain enough artistic integrity to allow people to engage with them in both mediated and unmediated ways. In them, music surely saunters beyond itself, unapologetically weird, magical and alive. ¶