



Anna Ceeh in Conversation with Christian Fennesz

AC: We're in your studio in Vienna, the place where your sound works come into being. Do you have other studios abroad?

CF: I have another little studio in the countryside, and for many years I had a home studio in Paris, but now I'm no longer there but only here in Vienna. I had two residences at the time and continually shuttled back and forth. But I still have a desk at Radio France's TRM Studios that I can use whenever I want.

AC: As far as I know, you don't produce all of your work in the studio; there are also some pieces you've created on your laptop computer?

CF: I used to do that because I didn't have the production tools yet, only a laptop, a guitar, effects units, etc. Back then I also did a lot of producing in hotel rooms while traveling. Some of it sounds like it, too, but at bottom that was ok. It was a lo-fi sound that suited me quite well. Still, I like it better the way it is right now. I wouldn't want to do earphone productions anymore.

AC: Would it be fair to say that working in hotel rooms held a certain appeal?

CF: It did, yes. After all, traveling is also inspiring, and recording music in different places can be very interesting. But I ultimately realized that it was all taking place inside my head anyway. I can be wherever I want, and so then I do prefer to sit in a space where I can listen closely and go deep into the sound. And of course mixing, too, works a lot better. My music very much depends on the mix, you might even say that the composition sometimes doesn't come into being until the mixing process. And that takes a good space.

AC: Your laptop album was created in your hometown in Burgenland. That's also where your career in music got started?

CF: Yes, it sort of did. It's where I grew up, where I learned to play the guitar and did my first recordings. I also started experimenting with various tape recorders very early on, plugging the tape recorder's microphone into the acoustic guitar, using overdrive to create sounds. That started very early on, when I was eleven or twelve years old.

AC: Which is to say, the guitar was your instrument, but then you at once started experimenting with it, immediately going beyond what you learned from your teachers.

CF: I studied classical guitar and even taught it for a while. At the same time, I was always looking for new sounds for the guitar, from the very beginning. It's weird, but that was just how it was.

AC: I read somewhere that you also studied ethnology and musicology?

CF: Yes, I studied those in Vienna, and I'd even started work on my dissertation, but then I faced a decision: I would either become a pretty lousy academic who would never get a job anyway, or try to go with my music. At the time I had already played in many bands, done music for the theater, etc., so then I simply decided to give it a shot.

AC: So what was it like to leave working with a band behind and launching your new production



focus on your solo career.

CF: In the early 1990s, I realized that you could produce at a pretty high level of quality with electronic production tools, and that's when I bought my first sampler, which actually enabled me to realize all the things I could never do with the bands because a band always forces you to adjust to the other members and compromise. So I was suddenly able to work by myself, as a stand-alone and completely independent artist. From the very beginning it sounded like a good studio production, because the equipment was good and affordable. That's also what paved the way for the whole Techno scene. It was a revolution at the time that you could make an entire album using Atari computers and Akai or Sonic samplers. Then there was the Vienna label Mego, whose cofounder Peter Rehberg I had met at the Blue Box in 1993 or 1994. I gave him my stuff, and the people at the label were very pleased with it and quickly published it. My first four-track EP, *Instrument*, worked out really well, also on the international market. That's how it started. I got very lucky and met the right people at the right time.

AC: To your mind, is the acoustic guitar an important vestige, or is it a sort of appendix?

CF: It is still very important to me. I also play it a lot again now and at bottom still use it to compose, even if the final result may then be quite different. The underlying ideas are very often the products of playing around with it, trying things out, combining them. That is very important to me.

AC: How great a role do technological updates such as new software play in your productions?

CF: I'm a real nerd when it comes to that: I have everything that's out there. And I always want to be cutting edge because I'm just fascinated by it. It always opens up so many possibilities, because each new piece of software is like a new instrument you first have to learn to play. Then I'm like a child that has fun for hours exploring it. And that often also produces good results, since the studio is always also a field of experimentation, with analog technology sitting around while the software also gets updated continually.

AC: Do you prefer analog or digital tools?

CF: Both. The way I work is, I produce everything on the computer and then mix it all once more on a very high-end analog mixer, feeding the result back into the computer. Then I have this old Telefunken piece, these are microphone pre-amps. They're Telefunken V72s, the same ones the Beatles used.

AC: So there's a little bit of fetishism, in the good sense, involved?

CF: I confess there is.

AC: How did you get into working for movie and video productions? Does that come naturally to you?

CF: I like to work for movies, yes. It depends on the movie, of course. It was simply that people often got in touch with me, and when something is interesting and I have time, I'll be happy to do it.

AC: How is working on an album different from working on a movie soundtrack?

CF: Soundtrack pieces are different, of course, since I'm making music for something. It has to serve the movie as a whole, but should also reflect my own musical language. Albums are always



completely different—they are gigantic projects in which I’m utterly caught up for several years. Completing one is also always a heavy burden on my shoulders. That’s a very personal matter, and I think that all my albums also reflect my situation at the time I composed and recorded the music. They’re my babies, which I treat with great care and caution.

AC: Your releases map certain places or explore a geography. Is there a more or less direct meaning to that, or is it more about associations?

CF: The latter, I would say. But still, these are always themes that outline something. In *Venice*, which came out in 2004, I had once come across the claim that the Venetians were always very good at dealing with disaster elegantly. That kind of became the motto for the album. *Endless Summer*, from 2001, describes a sort of longing, you can also hear that it’s an album of love songs. The descriptions are always meant to be poetic.

AC: The listener constructs these worlds of yours not as something concrete and associated with specific places, but as ambient-esque or very expansive in terms of atmosphere. Is that a correct way of seeing it?

CF: I would say so.

AC: Do geographies play a role in your real life?

CF: They do. People don’t know this, but I was always in Vienna, although for many years I shuttled between Vienna and Paris. Paris did have a lot of influence on me; the atmosphere and the music there influenced me in many ways. Japan is the other country where I spent a great deal of time. That’s perhaps my favorite country.

AC: How active a part do you play when it comes to the “visualization” of your albums and the graphic design of a release, for instance with Touch?

CF: At Touch, the artistic director, Jon Wozencroft, does all the work, though he will discuss it with me as well, and when there’s something I don’t like he’ll do something different. But in principle he has carte blanche. When it comes to the visualization during live concerts, I like to work with Lillevan, who is based in Berlin; he has also traveled with me a lot, and that’s a combination that has always worked out well. My collaboration with him reaches into other things as well.

AC: Is the visualization during live concerts important to you?

CF: I doesn’t always have to be. I even used to reject it for years—my contract said that they mustn’t bring in a local video guy to support me. The digital overkill is what bothers me. Lillevan, by contrast, does it with great sensitivity and has a wonderful way of going with the music, it’s just a natural fit.

AC: But collaborations are still an immanent part of your work? Do they have a special significance to you? Is it about synergy effects?

CF: I’m always interested in learning from each other. Sitting in my cave in perpetual isolation and producing one thing after another can get tiresome at some point. Then it’s good to go out for a change and work with other people and allow them to influence me. I have the good fortune of knowing several great musicians who want to work with me. I’m privileged in that regard.



AC: With *The Morning Line*, you're back in Vienna. What's it like for you to do something in Vienna again, and in the public space?

CF: It's very interesting. When I'm here, I very much like to play not just the usual Fennesz stuff but more peculiar things such as the recent Gustav Mahler remix project and now *The Morning Line*. I suits me, and I look forward to it. Even I don't know yet what it's going to sound like—so far I have only a vague idea. The first day there will be exciting!

AC: Do you have any experience working in the public space, or on the interface between music and architecture or sound art?

CF: I've done a couple of surround works for exhibitions and public spaces, in Switzerland, for example. But sound art was never my field of choice—I very much like making it, but in the end I tend to be a traditional musician who just wants to compose good pieces, even if sound design plays a decisive role in the way I compose. So I'm not far removed from it but somewhere in between, as always.

AC: Which release was the most important one to you personally? After all, the reviewers always take their own different views.

CF: That's not something you can influence. To me personally they were all equally important. That's also why I always take such a long time, around four years, to finish an album. With every one of them there are also many memories and stories I associate with the production, and so they were all important. But if I had to decide I would say that *Endless Summer*, which was also the album that put me on the map, was certainly the most important one in terms of my career. But in a musical and emotional perspective they're all equally important.

AC: Your sound is of enormous complexity; it feels like a densely woven energetic fabric. Does the concept of a "wall of sound" mean anything to you?


CF: That's something that has always fascinated me. I used to play with bands a lot that sounded a little like Sonic Youth or My Bloody Valentine. These influenced me strongly, also because that was my pre-computer style at the time. I think you can still hear that today.

AC: There is something magical and spatial to your sound; its volume is somewhere between pop and rock, uniting the two elements. Is that a deliberate combination?

CF: It is. Pop and rock have always been important to me, I still like to listen to that sort of music, as well as jazz or electronic music. If you've grown up with it and fallen for it, you don't easily get it out of your system, it just stays inside you. And even though I don't write any pop songs, the principle of the perfect song is always there. What I try to do with my music is a sort of transcription in which the vestiges of this idea are preserved without being highlighted. I like it when the music intimates that a beautiful pop melody might be hiding behind everything that's going on.

AC: There's been a bit of a hype in media and cultural studies for some time now over the concept of the "sonic turn"; the idea is that sound as a medium and material is becoming more predominant. Do you think that sound is indeed playing a more and more important role?

CF: It has been my impression that people are much more open to extreme sounds today than



they were even ten years ago. When we started, many people thought our music was pure noise, without any logic to it. That has changed completely; to give you only one example, when I played my first EP to my mother in 1994, she had no idea what to do with it. She thought it was incoherent noise. I recently played a little bit of it, and she asked me why I no longer made things as nice as the music I created back in the day. She didn't even realize. So there's a learning process that has taken place.

AC: Do you think that people accord a greater role to sound, that sound is becoming more important vis-à-vis the visual media?

CF: Yes, that is my impression. You see it, too. People such as Ryoji Ikeda who used to work exclusively in the music context have now established themselves in the classical visual arts scene. I don't think you could have exhibited sound installations right next to completely different stuff fifteen years ago.

AC: With *The Morning Line*, there is a lot of discussion about how to describe these things, what the relevant concepts are for what is happening on Schwarzenbergplatz. Tony Myatt, too, thought that these concepts could be taken in a very wide sense.

CF: It seems to me that *The Morning Line* is a trailblazing project right now. Perhaps it's the beginning of something new that will be perfectly ordinary in a couple of years, that everyone will be familiar with. In today's perspective it strikes me as a pioneering sort of work, because it doesn't conform to the classical concept of the sound installation, taking a completely different route instead.