

# Brahms meets Schlumpf: a marriage of old and new in Baden

By [Sarah Batschelet](#), 12 May 2017

In functional terms, repurposing a local newspaper's print zone into a small concert hall might seem an anomaly; the one-time heavy presses' pounding would seem entirely foreign to the sounds of music. Yet Swiss composer Martin Schlumpf's unique weave of classical music and/or jazz themes into highly complex rhythmic formulae was nicely suited to a place that once printed the headlines. And for the second of the three concerts Schlumpf is staging here this season, three stellar musicians performed: Robert Pickup, first clarinet in Zurich's fine opera house orchestra; cellist Thomas Grossenbacher, first chair in the renowned Tonhalle Orchestra; and Yoshiko Iwai, an internationally renowned piano soloist and chamber music performer.

The programme began with the short B minor Intermezzo, Op. 117 no. 2 by Johannes Brahms, whom Schlumpf has cited as a "polyphonic composer". Primarily a melancholy work that dates from 1892, the intermezzo was most likely written as a lament for a child in poor health. Iwai's performance of the work was sensitive, her work marked by a fluidity that was almost soporific in effect. That sense of intimacy, tenderness and immediacy made a promising beginning to an evening of many moods.

Schlumpf's 30-minute *From the Book of Proportions* that followed marked an abrupt change of pace. The composer had introduced himself as a "numbers man", explaining that he carefully measured formal proportions and rhythms in relation to tempi, and observed mathematical formulae to do so. His dynamic work quickly gained momentum and virtuoso profile, the demands on the musicians being legion from the start. The cello's almost demonic pace was matched by the colourful syncopation of the clarinet and the broad and unexpected range of Yoshiko Iwai's piano. What's more, to ensure the coherence of the "tempi polyphony", the musicians used a click track earpiece to pace their instruments' individual rhythms. As clarinettist, Pickup took responsibility for implementing that technology in four sequences that marked the work's most divergent tempi, one couldn't help hope that each musician had been given the right earpiece.

That said, Schlumpf's work makes its home in the borderlands between modern composition and improvisation: no holds barred, no convention left unbroken. As such, polymetrical configurations and unexpected voices – solo cello emerging from the sound void like a cosmic ray, the clarinet suddenly cascading down the scales with remarkable flexibility – engaged in animated dialogue, even as dissonant as that conversation sometimes was. To define some of the disparate sounds, my notes included remarks as incongruent as "wailing duck," "mad scientist," and "Copland reflection". At the end, the passionate cello diminished its volume over several minutes until the last audible thread was simply absorbed, heralding the work as an enigmatic, if profoundly explorative, piece.

After the break, all three musicians wooed the audience with a lustrous performance of Brahms' *Clarinet Trio in A minor*, Op. 114. Pickup's clarinet startled with its clarity of tone, particularly in instances – such as at the start of the second movement – where he held the melody in silvery solo while the piano and cello successively joined him. Pickup has

something of a cherubic face, and his expressions are close to playfully boyish. By contrast, Grossenbacher's are acutely emotive, sometimes even seemingly pained; one could write a Dostoevsky novel around the contractions of his eyebrows, lips, and clenched jaw alone. Then in the third movement, where the score lifts around a folklore melody, all three players were generous in sharing animation and body movement. So, too, in the final *Allegro*, where they almost moved as agile dancers to give homage to the marriage of old and new that this highly demanding concert repertoire prescribed.