

Beat Furrer's Kaleidoscope Of Composition And Sound In Residency At BU



Composer Beat Furrer. (Courtesy David Furrer.)

Keith Powers April 8, 2016



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BOSTON — It's impossible to keep abreast of the vast international changes that have been sweeping through the contemporary art world. When it comes to new music, [Boston University's Center for New Music](#) has been doing its part.

Over the course of the past few years, residencies at BU have brought composers and performers like Olga Neuwirth, Du Yun, Joan Tower and Salvatore Sciarrino to Boston for extended stays to present ideas on campus and to supervise performances of their music.

The Austrian composer [Beat \(pronounced BEE-awt\) Furrer](#) joins that group this month, coming to Boston for multiple lectures, coaching sessions and performances of his music all over town, from the BU campus to the Institute of Contemporary Art to Symphony Hall. It's a chance to get acquainted with

the substantial body of work that Furrer has compiled over the decades — almost none of it ever heard in Boston before.



Composer Beat Furrer. (Courtesy David Furrer.)

Furrer was born in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, in 1954 and moved to Vienna as a young student. He has worked there largely ever since. He trained at first on piano, but after moving to Vienna, studied conducting with Otmar Suitner and composition with Roman Haubenstock-Ramati.

He founded Austria's leading contemporary music ensemble, [Klangforum Wien](#) — a kind of Boston Modern Orchestra Project for Vienna — in 1985, and although he no longer directs the ensemble, he still conducts occasionally. Since 1991, he has been a professor at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Graz, Austria.

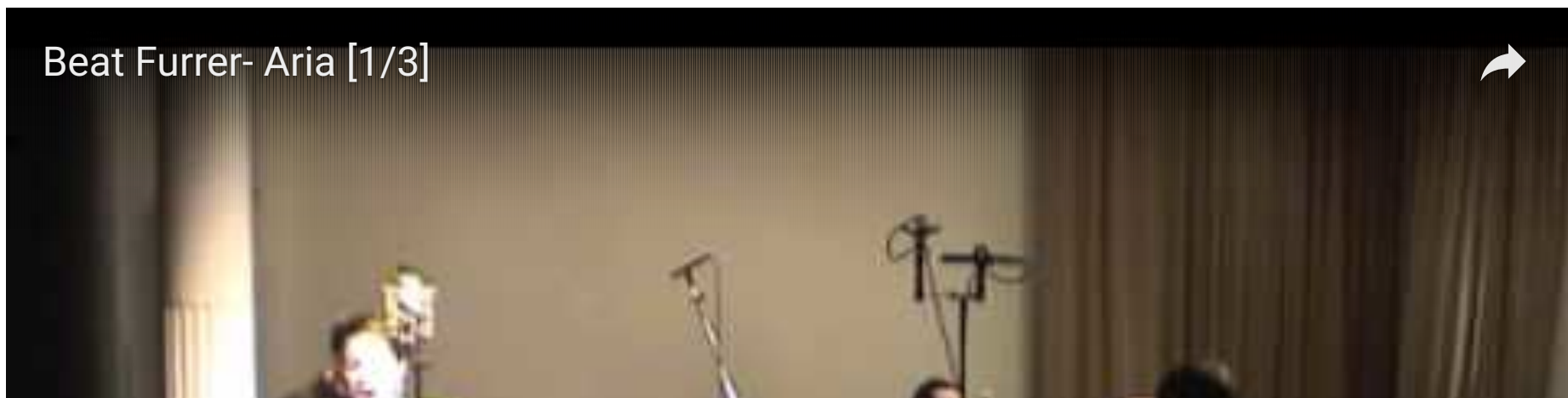
Furrer has composed multiple operas — his first, “Die Blinden,” was commissioned by the Vienna State Opera — as well as other works of musical drama. His compositions also encompass chamber and orchestral settings, and many of those pieces are being performed during his residency.



Furrer lectures at BU on April 5 and 12; additionally, the New York-based [Argento Chamber Ensemble](#) performs his compositions at BU's Fine Arts Concert Hall on April 16. The BU Symphony Orchestra performs his "Zwei Studien" at Symphony Hall on April 26, and Boston-based Sound Icon [performs](#) his music at the ICA April 28. Time's Arrow New Music Ensemble closes the residency May 2 with another performance at BU.

Experiencing Furrer's music means transcending standard concepts about listening, and opening up to advanced experiments in alternate sound worlds. It's worth it. His music carefully explores pitches, rhythms and dynamics, like all compositions do, but also explores ideas — how sound can be kaleidoscopic, or how speech transforms to singing, and vice-versa.

A quintessential short work of Furrer's is "Aria," included on Sound Icon's April 28 program. Furrer explains that this composition "was a nucleus for my music theatre piece 'Begehren.'"





“In ‘Begehren’ I had this idea of a character who changes speaking into singing, and this other character who does the opposite,” he says. “In ‘Aria’ we have both, in one piece, at the same time. There are four different kinds of expression: whispering, shouting, instrumental singing, speaking. At the end there are long, echo-like instrumental sounds that recreate a homogenous environment. The instruments of the ensemble carry this idea forward.”

“Zwei Studien,” part of the ambitious program at Symphony Hall that includes Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and is conducted by Ken-David Masur, furthers the notion of ideas being represented in the context of sound. “Zwei Studien” presents two differently textured sections — the first strongly accented and episodic, the second a contiguous atmosphere of sound — but for Furrer they spring from the same idea.

Beat Furrer - Zwei Studien (for chamber orchestra) (2015)



“First, they are Studien, pieces where I try something out, ideas I may use later,” he says. “The two parts are intended to be complementary. The first part is about harmonic mutation, but those are not in constant transition. The second in continuous transformation, like if you turn on a light slowly.

“It follows the idea of kaleidoscope,” he says. “You’ve got different colors, different shades, different brightness layers cut together into one. You look at one thing, but it appears as something different if you change perspective.”

Apart from the performances, Furrer presents his ideas about composition and sound during the residency as well, in two lectures on the BU campus. “Over the last decade I have been thinking about the relationship of spoken voice and singing,” he says. “Music theater and opera became my main focus. I think in my lectures I will talk mainly about opera strategies, aesthetics and ideas.”

For more information about Beat Furrer’s appearances at BU and the month-long series of performances of his music, visit the [BU Center for New Music](#).

Keith Powers, former music critic at the Boston Herald, now freelances for a number of newspapers and magazines. Follow him on Twitter at [@PowersKeith](#).



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