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**Citation for published version:**

Dayan, P 2015, 'Zurich Dada's forgotten music master: Hans Heusser', *Modern Language Review*, vol. 110, no. 2, pp. 491-509. <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.110.2.0491>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.5699/modelangrevi.110.2.0491](https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.110.2.0491)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Modern Language Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

©Dayan, P. (2015). Zurich Dada's Forgotten Music Master: Hans Heusser. *Modern Language Review*, 110(2), 491-509.

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## ZURICH DADA'S FORGOTTEN MUSIC MASTER: HANS HEUSSER

The eight Zurich Dada soirées, from 1916 to 1919, were the central event in the founding of Dada as a spectacular international phenomenon. They have remained famous ever since in the history of the development of European art. But a key figure in those soirées has been almost completely forgotten: the composer Hans Heusser. He provided the first work to be performed at the first soirée, and the last work programmed at the final soirée; his work was performed at all but two of the soirées, and occupied the entirety of one of them. And yet most specialists of the period hardly recognize his name.

This essay has three aims. The first is to resuscitate the figure of Hans Heusser, and to sketch his contribution to the Dada soirées. The second is to relate how he was immediately and efficiently erased from the history of Dada. And the third is to suggest that this process of erasure was not a simple omission. It was (and remains) motivated by the extraordinarily complex and paradoxical relationship between the fundamental principles of Zurich Dada, and the very concept of music.

The few hard facts known about Hans Heusser's life are quickly summarized. He was born in Zurich in 1892. His early published compositions were songs and short piano pieces; and it was indeed works for piano and voice, and short piano pieces, that constituted his main contribution to the Zurich Dada soirées, from 1916 to 1919. However, his subsequent career took him in a different direction. He specialized in a capella choral music for female voices, and wind band music. In 1924, he became director of music for the town of Sankt Gallen, in Switzerland. There he remained until his death in 1942. The only music by Heusser that is still performed today, and still readily available, is his wind band music. The music web site [notendatenbank.ch](http://notendatenbank.ch), for example, lists a dozen pieces by Heusser for wind band, including probably his most famous, the 'Sankt Gallen Marsch' and the 'Russische Rapsodie', for

which one can order parts. None of the songs or piano works from his earlier period are thus available. Indeed, the general opinion seems to be that they are largely lost – and if they are not lost, they might as well be.

Almost nothing is known about Heusser's life in Zurich during the Dada years. Raimund Meyer, in *Dada in Zürich*, provides a full and careful assessment of the available biographical facts, and gives their sources, which are of only three types: contemporary newspapers; the accounts of other Dadaists; and the brief obituary of Heusser that appeared in the *Sankt Galler Tagblatt* in 1942. He was unable to find out more: 'Nachforschungen bei den Nachverlassverwaltern und Bekannten aus dem Kreise um Heusser haben keine weiteren Informationen über das Zürcher Leben von Heusser gebracht' [Enquiries directed to Heusser's executors and to those acquainted with his circle have not yielded any further information concerning Heusser's life in Zurich].<sup>1</sup> At least Meyer took the trouble to scrutinize those few available sources of biographical information, and draw what conclusions he could from them. Heusser's music of the Dada period has, on the other hand, been scrutinized by nobody.

The academic neglect of Heusser's music is symptomatic of a more general critical reluctance to acknowledge the place of composed music in Zurich Dada. In his article 'Duchamp: Dada Composer', Leigh Landy writes:

Inspecting documents which include lists of programmes of Dada soirées, one sees that relatively little accent was given to composed – as opposed to an occasional improvised – music. In Zürich Hans Heussen [sic] presented 'antitunes', and equally

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<sup>1</sup> Raimund Meyer, *Dada in Zürich: Die Akteure, die Schauplätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1990), p. 162. All translations throughout this article are mine.

unknown composers H. Samuel Sulzberger and Suzanne Perrottet are named.

Surprisingly a couple of the young Schönberg's works were played there as well. If ever there was an undadaist personality, it was he!<sup>2</sup>

This reflects quite accurately the stereotypical view of Dada music. Factually, however, it is quite misleading. Why does Landy characterize Heusser's music as 'antitunes'? This description does not correspond at all, as we shall see, to what we find in the pieces by Heusser that have come down to us. I find it difficult not to suspect that, like almost all the other scholars who have written about Dada music, Landy had not actually looked at Heusser's published scores. Furthermore, the programmes of the Zurich Dada soirées make it perfectly clear that 'composed – as opposed to an occasional improvised – music', by contemporary composers, was in fact a regular feature of the soirées. Satie and Cyril Scott are listed on those programmes, as well as Schoenberg, Heusser, Sulzberger, Laban, and Perrottet. Schoenberg seems quite at home in this company, if one considers that these are all composers, born between 1860 and 1880, who were lucidly aware of the ties, as well as the rifts, between their music and the great nineteenth-century melodic and tonal traditions.

Certainly, in the history of Dada, there were types of music which completely rejected those melodic and tonal traditions. Richard Huelsenbeck, in *En avant Dada: eine Geschichte des Dadaismus*, published in 1920,<sup>3</sup> provides a wonderfully clear account of the historical conflict within Dada between the composed music with its roots in the nineteenth-century

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<sup>2</sup> Leigh Landy, 'Duchamp: Dada Composer and his vast influence on Post-World War II Avant-Garde Music', in *Marcel Duchamp* ed. by Klaus Beekman and Antje von Graevenitz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989), pp. 131-44 (p. 131).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Huelsenbeck, *En avant Dada: eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Hanover: Paul Stegemann, 1920).

artistic tradition, and a new type of music, based on noise, which contested not only that tradition, but the very concept of art that subtended it, and with it, the word 'music' itself. He begins from a firm distinction between 'Musik' and 'Bruitismus'. Both, he says, were present in Zurich Dada. They corresponded to two distinct strands of its aesthetic. He makes it clear that for his own brand of politicized post-war Berlin Dada, it was 'Bruitismus' that mattered, not music. But Zurich Dada was very different.

One of the main concerns of Zurich Dada was, Huelsenbeck tells us, the movement towards the identification of true art with abstraction. In that movement, music was of central importance, as it had been throughout the previous half-century. The very concept of abstract art had grown to maturity through the development in the nineteenth century of the notion of absolute music, and through the subsequent application of that notion of absoluteness to the other arts. Music had thus become the keystone in the edifice of abstract art, hence of art in general as the Zurich Dadaists wished it to become. Huelsenbeck, proclaiming a new post-war phase in the history of Dada, wanted to remove that keystone from the edifice, to remove music from Dada by replacing it with 'Bruitismus', and thus to cause the construction of art to collapse. But he never sought to deny that music, together with a profound belief in art, had been present in the earlier phase of Dada, at the Cabaret Voltaire (where Heusser also performed) and during the Zurich soirées. All the evidence from the Zurich Dada period itself confirms that Huelsenbeck was right. When the Zurich Dadaists wrote about, programmed, and performed music, their concept of that art remained firmly rooted in the nineteenth-century concept of music as an art form with an exemplary tendency towards abstraction.

Sébastien Arfouilloux, in his article 'La musique aux temps de Dada', has very little to say about the Zurich Dada soirées. Like Landy, he does not note the full number of contemporary composers cited in the programmes. Like Landy again, he dismisses Heusser in

a single sentence. But unlike Landy, he relates Heusser to classical and nineteenth-century traditions:

Lors de nombreux spectacles entre 1916 et 1919, le jeune musicien suisse Hans Heusser propose des pièces de facture classique pour piano, nommées dans le style des compositions du XIXe siècle: *Lune au-dessus de l'eau*, *Humoresque turque*, *Cortège de fête à Capri*.<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre: surréalisme et musique*, he adds that Heusser was an 'ancien élève de la Schola Cantorum'.<sup>5</sup> It is indeed generally maintained that Heusser went to Paris before the War, studied with both Debussy and d'Indy, and wrote an opera entitled *Kismet* that was performed there. Jeanpaul Goergen, whose article 'The Big Drum: Boom Boom Boom Boom. The music of Zurich Dada' is doubtless the best-informed and most careful on the subject to date, states 'In Paris, where he had also studied with Vincent d'Indy, he created a sensation with his opera "Kismet"'.<sup>6</sup> However, I have been unable to find any trace of an opera of this title, performed in Paris at the time. *Kismet*, for the Parisian public of the pre-war years, was not an opera, but a very popular play, written by Jules

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<sup>4</sup> Sébastien Arfouilloux, 'La musique aux temps de Dada', in *Dada circuit total* ed. by Henri Béhar and Catherine Dufour (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2005), pp. 522-30 (pp. 524-25).

<sup>5</sup> Sébastien Arfouilloux, *Que la nuit tombe sur l'orchestre: surréalisme et musique* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanpaul Goergen, 'The Big Drum: Boom Boom Boom Boom. The music of Zurich Dada', in *Crisis and the Arts: The History of Dada*, ed. by Stephen C. Foster, 9 vols (New York and London: G.K. Hall and Prentice Hall International, 1996-2004), II: *Dada Zurich: A Clown's Game from Nothing* ed. by Brigitte Pichon and Karl Riha (1996), pp. 153-67 (p. 157).

Lemaître. I suspect that the assertion that Heusser wrote an opera with that title arose from a deliberate confusion between the title of the play, and the title of a little piece by Heusser called ‘Danse orientale pour piano, extraite de la suite *Kismet*’, which was indeed published in Paris, in 1914 – and that the inspiration for this confusion came from Heusser himself, or from his fellow Dadaists.

The origin of the notion that Heusser wrote an opera called *Kismet* seems to be an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, dated 24 May 1917. The article is a trailer for the ‘Hans-Heusser-Soirée’ which took place the following day. It states, ‘Hans Heußer ist ein Schüler Vincent d’Indys und Debussys. In Pariser Musikkreisen erregte er Aufsehen mit seiner Oper ‘Kismet’ [Hans Heusser is a pupil of Vincent d’Indy and of Debussy. In Parisian music circles he caused a stir with his opera ‘Kismet’].<sup>7</sup> But can one necessarily believe what one reads in the papers, especially when the copy has clearly been furnished by a Dadaist? After all, the *Neues Wiener Journal* was fooled into publishing a lengthy review of a Dada soirée that never took place at all.<sup>8</sup> There is, to my knowledge, only one piece of objective evidence that Heusser ever actually went to Paris. It is an inscription, in what must be Heusser’s own hand, on the copy of ‘Danse orientale’ held by the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich.<sup>9</sup> Underneath the printed dedication, on the front cover, ‘à mon ami Otto Uhlmann’, Heusser has written, ‘Zur Erinnerung an unsere fröhliche Studienzeit in Paris / Hans Heusser / Paris Juni 1914’ [In memory of our happy time as students in Paris / Hans Heusser / Paris June 1914]. Otto

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Dada Zürich in Zeitungen’, in *Dada Zurich: A Clown’s Game from Nothing* ed. by Pichon and Riha, pp. 191-259 (p. 216). All my quotations from newspapers are taken from this invaluable and authoritative collection of articles, assembled by Richard Sheppard.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Dada Zürich in Zeitungen’, pp. 251-53.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Heusser, ‘Danse orientale pour piano, extraite de la suite *Kismet*’ (B. Roudanez: Paris, 1914).

Uhlmann was a composer and conductor, born in 1891. I have been unable to find any other verifiable information concerning Heusser's Parisian exploits.<sup>10</sup> Seen from the standpoint of academe, the clearest fact about Heusser's career before Dada is its elusiveness.

His work with Dada, on the other hand, is firmly documented by the programmes of the Zurich Dada soirées, which have been preserved, and which are confirmed by contemporary accounts as a fairly accurate record of what was actually performed – or at least, of what the Dadaists intended to be performed. An inspection of those programmes leads to the astonishing conclusion that Hans Heusser was actually one of the two central figures of the Dada soirées in the sense that his music occupied more stage time than the work of anyone else except Tristan Tzara. It was performed (always with Heusser himself at

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<sup>10</sup> Further evidence that Heusser had studied with Debussy is generally held to be provided by a letter from Hugo Ball to August Hoffmann dated 2 June 1916, in which he refers to a young Swiss composer playing in the Cabaret Voltaire: 'Ein junger Schweizer hat in Paris bei Debussy studiert und spielt ab und zu eigene Kompositionen' [a young Swiss who studied with Debussy in Paris plays from time to time his own compositions] (Hugo Ball, *Briefe 1911-1927* ed. by Annemarie Schütt-Hennings (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1957), p. 56). Was this Heusser? It may well have been; or it may have been Sulzberger, as Chris Walton points out (see 'The many lives of Marcel Sulzberger', *The Musical Times* (Winter 2013), 5-18 (p. 13)). But even if Ball was referring to Heusser, it would prove nothing more than that Heusser had told Ball he had studied with Debussy. I have found no confirmation of this from any source that does not lead quite directly back to Heusser himself. There is no reference to Heusser in Debussy's correspondence, or in any of his other published works. Similarly, if he studied with d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum, this cannot be verified (the archives of that institution are not open to the public). I am grateful to Katharine Ellis for her advice on tracking down Heusser's references to his time in Paris.



the keyboard, sometimes with others singing, reciting, or perhaps playing stringed instruments) at six of the eight soirées. The first opened, appropriately enough, with his 'Prélude'. One of the soirées, the sixth, entitled the 'Soirée Hans Heusser', was dedicated entirely to his work (the only other soirée devoted to a single person was the Tristan Tzara soirée). What, then, can explain his almost total invisibility in the picture that is generally painted of Zurich Dada?

Two answers to this question are implied by Dada scholarship to date. Heusser's works, it is usually said, are largely lost. Furthermore, the Dadaists who left accounts of the soirées had almost nothing to say about Heusser. Does this not suggest both that he was not central to the Dada aesthetic and that there is little point trying to revive interest in him? I shall be suggesting that, on the contrary, the conspiracy of silence can be explained precisely by his centrality to the Dada aesthetic; that his works are not as lost as is generally believed; and that if we take the trouble to return him to his rightful position in the history of the movement, that history will be decisively inflected.

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According to the programmes of the Zurich Dada soirées, Hans Heusser performed only his own works, at the piano or harmonium. (Works by other composers were generally played by Suzanne Perrottet.) Most were short piano pieces. Some were songs or 'gesprochene Gesänge' [spoken songs], always for female voice. Only one work called for greater instrumental forces: his piano quartet, which, as we shall see, may never have been performed. So much is clear. But what do we know about the character of these works, and of their reception? We have well-known accounts of the soirées from no less than six of the other participants in those soirées (Perrottet, Tzara, Ball, Huelsenbeck, Richter and Glauser).

Most have absolutely nothing whatever to say about the character of Heusser's music. Ball's *Flucht aus der Zeit* names Heusser only when listing his contributions to the soirées; there is no description of his music at all. The same is true of Tzara's *Chronique zurichoise*, and in Suzanne Perrottet's reminiscences,<sup>11</sup> as well as in Huelsenbeck's *En avant Dada*. Friedrich Glauser, in his atmospheric essay 'Dada', first published in 1931, gives a description of the 'Abend neuer Kunst' [Soirée of New Art] in April 1917, which famously includes a cameo of a composer leaning his forearm on all available keys of a harmonium as he simultaneously plays a piano.<sup>12</sup> This has always been taken by critics as a portrait of Heusser at work. Goergen, for example, quoting Glauser's description, simply states: 'the musician involved must have been Heusser'.<sup>13</sup> However, this is, to say the least, a highly problematic inference. Heusser's name is mentioned nowhere in Glauser's essay. The soirée Glauser claims to be describing is in fact one of only two in which none of Heusser's music was performed. He did not participate in it, nor was there a harmonium present. (He did play the harmonium at another soirée, but no contemporary account suggests he did so in the manner described by Glauser. We will come to what the reviewer of that soirée had to say about his harmonium playing; it certainly does not imply a forearm on the keys.) It is, then, impossible to believe that the scene painted by Glauser is an accurate representation of Heusser's participation in the 'Abend neuer Kunst'. It is far more likely, as are many elements of Glauser's testimony,

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<sup>11</sup> As transcribed by Giorgio Wolfensberger in *Suzanne Perrottet: ein bewegtes Leben* (Bern: Benteli: n.d.). This fascinating volume consists largely of Wolfensberger's edited transcriptions of Perrottet's memories of her life, as recounted to him between 1981 and 1983.

<sup>12</sup> See Friedrich Glauser, *Dada, Ascona, und andere Erinnerungen* (Zurich: Arche, 1976), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Goergen, 'The Big Drum', p. 158.

to be an imaginative reconstruction, based on several conflated half-remembered episodes, and distorted by the twin lenses of hindsight and polemic. This is so obvious that one must ask oneself why critics have always taken it unproblematically as a description of Heusser, even though Glauser never names him and he was absent from the soirée in question. The only possible answer is that it corresponds too readily to the stereotype of the Dada composer, which we have already encountered; a stereotype built on noise, improvisation, and ‘antitunes’. Hans Heusser, however, does not correspond to that stereotype.

The American composer Otto Luening, writing in 1980, provides the nearest thing we have, to my knowledge, to a cameo of Heusser in the Dada years. Luening was only sixteen years old at the time, and a student at the Conservatoire in Zurich. He does not describe any of the Dada soirées, which he doubtless did not attend. But he does describe an evening at the Cabaret Voltaire, in which both he (accompanying the cellist David Rubinstein) and Heusser performed. Heusser, according to Luening, was not only a performer at the Cabaret; he was also ‘the professional music director for the Dada group’ (as well as a fellow student at the Conservatoire),<sup>14</sup> and responsible for programming the music at the Cabaret.

Heusser, Rubinstein, and I played at the Meierei one night at 1:30 A.M. The program included one of my compositions for cello and piano, known as the ‘Wet Dream Gavotte’! We also played an aria and a one-step. Why Rubinstein and I also played Saint-Saens’ ‘The Swan’, I don’t know, but Heusser found it suitable for his interesting programs. These included his own works for voice, piano, and harmonium, which were much hated by the Establishment. African dancers with masks were

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<sup>14</sup> Otto Luening, *The Odyssey of an American Composer* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1980), p. 126. I am very grateful to Chris Walton for drawing my attention to this book, and for much other guidance.

accompanied by Arabian tunes and tambourines. One-steps, ragtimes, noise music, balalaika concerts, music with magic lantern slides, piano improvisations, folk songs, brothel songs, and bass drum solos rounded out his programs. There was a huge crowd, an unearthly din, and blue smoke clouds, and everybody talked. Nobody listened except Heer, the Swiss poet.<sup>15</sup>

Although it was written over sixty years after the event, this accords very well with what we learn of the music at the Cabaret from other sources. It ranged from noise (including the bass drum), through folk music and exotic or popular African and American music, to tonal music in the great European tradition. And what of Heusser's compositions? Luening tells us that they were for piano, harmonium, and voice, and that they were 'hated by the Establishment' (how did he know this? the Establishment was not present at the Cabaret). But he says absolutely nothing about their character or style.

We have, in fact, only two sources of descriptions explicitly of Heusser's music at Dada events that do purport to reveal its character. One is a couple of reviews in contemporary Swiss newspapers; they are certainly intriguing and revealing, although they were evidently written by journalists without much knowledge of contemporary music. The other is the testimony of Hans Richter, in his *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst*. There is, as we shall see, a most striking contrast between the newspaper reviews, and the assertions of Richter; such a contrast, indeed, that we must ask ourselves who is telling the truth about the nature of Heusser's music.

Would it not make sense, then, to begin by looking at Hans Heusser's music itself, to see what it was really like? Goergen writes, 'Unfortunately, most of Heusser's compositions from his Dada time are lost. Among others, his 'Orientalischer Tanz' [Oriental Dance],

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

composed in 1915 and performed at the Heusser Soirée, and ‘Sumatra. Ragtime – One Step’ have been preserved’.<sup>16</sup> It is true that the majority of the titles given in the Zurich Dada soirées programmes do not correspond to those of any pieces by Heusser that currently appear in the catalogues of public libraries. However, the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich has a collection of piano pieces and songs by Heusser which includes all of those on the programme of the first half of the ‘Soirée Hans Heusser’.<sup>17</sup> That programme begins with a piece entitled ‘Prélude’, which is also the title of the first piece played at both the first and second soirées.<sup>18</sup> So we are entitled to think that with this piece, we have the music that inaugurated the first Dada soirée. Its opening is given as plate 1. We may note, before going any further, that the first sound heard at the first Dada soirée was not a noise, nor an improvisation, nor an ‘antitune’, but a C major chord, leading into a composed tonal tune.

**[Plate 1: opening page of ‘Praeludium’. NB the attached PDF gives the cover and the last page of the music, as well as the opening page, which is numbered 2; my proposed plate consists only of that page 2.]**

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<sup>16</sup> Goergen, ‘The Big Drum’, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> I have been unable to locate in any library any music by Heusser from his Dada period that is not also in the Zurich Zentralbibliothek. The Dada archives at the Kunsthaus in Zurich have nothing by Heusser; nor does the International Dada Archive at the University of Iowa.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Heusser, ‘Praeludium’ (Zurich: Ad. Holzmann, 1917). This ‘Praeludium’ is clearly the same piece as ‘Prélude’, since it is listed on the score, exactly as in the 1917 soirée programme, as the first of four pieces in a series, the others being ‘Adagio’, ‘Certosa di Pavia’, and ‘Novellette’.

The programme for the 'Soirée Hans Heusser' lists the pieces to be performed thus (the dates given in brackets are presumably intended to indicate when the pieces were composed):

- (1912) 1.      a) Prélude.  
                  b) Adagio.  
                  c) Certosa di Pavia.  
                  d) Novellette.

- (1914) 2.      a) Die Wanderer (Hans Rœlli).  
                  b) Tiefgelbe Rosen (Hans Rœlli).  
                  c) Herbst.  
                  d) Tanzweise (Huggenberger).

(Gesungen von Frl. Emmy Käser, Zürich)

- (1915) 3.      a) Danse triste.  
                  b) Danse orientale.

- (1917) 4.      a) Fragmente aus der Bühnenkomposition: 'Der gelbe Klang', (von W. Kandinsky).  
                  b) Impressions orientales. (Für Harmonium).

- (1916) 5.      Sheherezade: (Else Lasker Schüler)  
                  a) Ich tanze in der Moschee.  
                  b) Apollides und Tino kommen in eine morsche Stadt.

c) Das Lied meines Lebens.

(Gesprochene Gesänge Käthe Wulff).

d) Heimlich zur Nacht.

e) Der Tempel Jehovah.

f) Der Epilog spricht. (Nietzsche).

(Gesungen von Frl. Meta Gump).

(1916/17) 6. a) Humoresque turque.

b) Mond über Wasser.

c) Zwei arabische Tanzrhythmen.

(Gespielt vom Componisten).

The music in the Zentralbibliothek corresponds to what Heusser presented as his earlier work, composed in and before 1915. It does not, therefore, include the music composed during the Dada period itself, which began in 1916.

Might one speculate that Heusser's later work was somewhat different in character? His titles do not suggest any change in style. They continue to refer either to 'oriental' dances or impressions, or to contemporary literature. The 'gesprochene Gesänge' must certainly have been formally different from the songs and piano pieces that preceded them. However, they, too, reference both dance, and contemporary poetry; and the contemporary newspaper review (cited below) describes them as more old-fashioned, not more modern, than Heusser's other works. After the 'gesprochene Gesänge', Heusser returns to more traditional song, before concluding with a pair of oriental dances. Little further evidence is provided by what we know of his compositional activities in the years around 1919. There is a song in the Zurich collection entitled 'Augen, meine lieben Fensterlein', whose publication date is given

as 1925 (whereas the works in the Zurich collection that were performed in 1916 and 1917 were published no later than 1917). It seems to show some later stylistic influences; otherwise, though, it is very similar to his earlier songs. Like them, it is short, clearly tonal, conventional in its notation and quite conventional in its word-setting. 'Sumatra – Ragtime', which Goergen mentions as a rare Heusser survival, was recorded in 1919 by Marek Weber on Parlophon. However, the composer's name on the record label appears as 'Heuller', rather than 'Heusser'; and in any case, the piece is absolutely conventional in style and harmony, containing none of the eclecticism and harmonic oddities of Heusser's music of the previous few years. Certainly, then, the music we have provides no reason to suppose that Heusser's style altered radically after 1915.

It would thus seem likely that the music Heusser performed at the Dada soirées was not written in a specifically 'Dada' style with those soirées in mind, but rather resulted from his general evolution as an artist in the years leading up to that time. And this would correspond to the way that composed music in general figures in the Zurich Dada soirée programmes. Schoenberg, Cyril Scott, and Satie did not write works for the 'soirées' with a specifically Dada character; nor, doubtless, did Perrottet and Laban. The Dadaists were interested in their work, as they were interested in Kandinsky, Apollinaire, and Picasso, because, although not created as part of the Dada movement, it embodied certain of the core values of that movement. The same must have applied to Heusser.

What can we make of those pieces that compose the first half of the 'Soirée Hans Heusser'? The first characteristic that strikes the listener is that they are short, and apparently quite simple. They remind one more of Satie, in this sense, than of Debussy or Schoenberg. They are, however, very unlike Satie's work of the time in their lack of obvious experimental audacity. Heusser plays none of Satie's games with repetition and pointed parody. He sticks to all the conventions of traditional notation, including bar lines and key signatures. There is



always a clear tonality. The pieces are generally quite tuneful. They also produce quite rapidly the unmistakable impression that they belong to a very individual creative character. It is difficult to define exactly how; it has something to do with the way that Heusser, apparently without radically disrupting the rules of the genre of the song or piano miniature, manages to slip in, almost in passing, moments that evoke a curious variety of contemporary styles and sonorities, from folk music to Satie, Debussy, or even Mahler (plus, in one piece, the unmistakable sound of the overtones of a carillon), which flit by without disrupting the apparently simple flow of the music. It is also connected, again in a way that might remind one of Satie (but, again, without Satie's assumed radicality), with a deceptive apparent ingenuousness, a lack of ample rhetorical gestures and of complex development, with suggestiveness and juxtaposition taking the place of grand form, and hovering knowingly between irony and naïvety. One can see why contemporary audiences should have been charmed, intrigued, and rather baffled by these little works.<sup>19</sup>

The only accounts of Heusser's playing we have that were actually written during the Dada years are newspaper reviews, of which by far the most substantial is of the 'Soirée Hans Heusser'. Given its uniqueness, I shall quote it at length:

Was die Kunst Heußers trotz ihrem lockern Gerüste vor einem formlosen Verschwimmen in Klangfabeleien bewahrt, ist ein stark ausgeprägter Rhythmus, der freilich zuweilen in recht exaltierte Schwingung gerät. Daß Heußers der traditionellen Harmonie konsequent aus dem Wege geht und als Träger seiner musikalischen Ideen schrille Dissonanzen sucht, muß, in Anbetracht der Kunsttheorien, welche die Dadaisten verfechten, wohl als selbstverständlich hingenommen werden. Es fragt sich nur, ob Heußers dank seiner entschiedenen Begabung im musikalischen Ausdruck

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<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Peter Nelson for his help in listening to Heusser.

nicht weiterkäme, wenn er weniger exponierte Bahnen wandeln und seine Kunst etwas vernehmbarer und einheitlicher auch im Sinne des Melodischen gestalten wollte. Nicht ungeschickt verwertet Heußer für seinen Expressionismus (er nennt ihn vielleicht anders) das Harmonium, das gewissen damit verbundenen Klangnüancen eher gerecht wird, als das Klavier. In seinen orientalischen Tänzen versucht er Anlehnung an rhythmische Klangfiguren primitiver Völker und vermag hier tatsächlich *exotische turbulente Stimmungen bis zu einem sehr hohen Grade zu steigern*. Diesen aufreizenden, wilden Tänzen stehen die Begleitungen zu den rezitativen Gesängen in ihrer Tonalität fast diametral gegenüber, da sich Heußers Diktion hier wiederum mehr der Weise *alter* Kirchentönen und dem Oratorienstil nähert, während er in seinen lyrischen Klavierstücken *extrem Futuristisches mit archaischen* Tendenzen zu verbinden trachtet.<sup>20</sup>

[Heusser's music lacks a solidly constructed framework, but it is saved from dissolving into mere pretty soundscapes by its strongly marked rhythm, which sometimes, indeed, becomes quite powerfully intoxicating. Heusser consistently avoids the path of conventional harmony, and he seeks strident dissonances to express his musical ideas; this is only to be expected in view of the theories about art which the Dadaists defend. One might, however, wonder if Heusser, given his clear gift for musical expression, would not travel further if he chose a less exposed route, and developed his art more melodiously, in a more uniform and comprehensible way. He makes clever use of the harmonium for his expressionism (perhaps he has another term for it), which inspires certain nuances of sound better suited to that instrument than to the piano. In his oriental dances, he profits from the rhythmic sound figures of

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<sup>20</sup> 'Dada Zürich in Zeitungen', p. 218.

primitive peoples, and here he indeed succeeds in creating *exotic and turbulent moods of remarkable intensity*. These wild and exciting dances are almost diametrically opposed in tonality to the accompaniments for his recitativo songs; in these, Heusser's diction moves back towards the styles of oratorio and of the modes of *old Church* music, while in his lyrical piano pieces, he seeks to combine *the most futuristic with archaic* tendencies.]

In most ways, this corresponds well to how one might have imagined an intelligent provincial reviewer in 1917, with a conservative sense of harmony and unused to avant-garde formal experiments, reacting to the pieces by Heusser that have come down to us. We can readily agree with him that Heusser has a decided gift for musical expression; that his style is eclectic, and his harmonies unconventional (if one limits 'conventional' to the classically tonal); that in his dances, rhythmic drive carries the listener forward; and that generally, what is missing in Heusser's work, judged by the standards of the classical tonal musical tradition within which the reviewer was plainly operating, is extended melody and tight formal structure. As we shall see, in its perception that Heusser unites the archaic or primitive with the futuristic, the review corresponds precisely to Zurich Dada's own definition of its art in May 1917. What, on the other hand, should we make of the 'schrille Dissonanzen' which the reviewer heard? The pieces we have are rarely very dissonant. Was the reviewer thinking of other, later pieces? Or were his ears more sensitive to dissonance than we expect? Doubtless we should bear in mind that he was writing in Zurich, not in Vienna or Paris. But there is another possible explanation.

The text we have is given in 'Dada Zürich in Zeitungen' as an article from '*Der Landbote* (Winterthur)'. However, the critic from *Der Landbote* (named only as 'C.R'.) clearly did not himself attend the soirée, nor does he claim to have written the review. He

presents it in the form of a long quotation, taken, he tells us, from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. The passage I cite above is part of that long quotation. After the quotation, 'C.R.' gives his own, extremely derogatory, opinion of the new music, Dada, and modern art in general. The italicised words in the quoted text of the review have clearly been emphasized to support that opinion. I know of no evidence that the review actually did appear in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, nor of who might have written it. There is, then, a complex and tenuous link between Heusser's performance, and the only contemporary critical account of it that has reached us. It is at the very least possible that 'C.R.' has modified the text of the review he quotes, to support his own prejudices, based on complete ignorance of the music he is discussing. As we have seen, he would certainly not be alone in writing about Heusser's music without having heard a note of it.

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The last Zurich Dada soirée was the eighth, held on 9 April 1919. We have several contemporary accounts, all of which, with one exception (Richter's, to which we shall come shortly), give reasonably compatible versions of the events. The house was full, with probably over a thousand people attending; but the audience was less favourably disposed than at previous soirées. The programme was in three parts, all of which contained musical items. In the first, Suzanne Perrottet played piano music by Schoenberg, Cyril Scott, and Satie. In the second part, Hans Heusser played some of his own recent compositions, including his *Drei Tanzrhythmen*; then Perrottet played some more Schoenberg. After this, Walter Serner read out his 'Manifest'; and it was at this point that the audience, which

previously had been only mildly hostile, became aggressively disruptive, feeling insulted, apparently, by Serner's deliberately provocative assertions concerning the nature of art.<sup>21</sup>

The programme for the third and final part was divided into four sections: a dance, 'Noir Cacadou', led by Käthe Wulff; poems by Serner and Tzara; a 'Proclamation Dada 1919' by Tzara; and finally, two piano pieces by Heusser, followed by his piano quartet in E flat major. The accounts given in newspapers after the event, and by Tzara in his *Chronique zurichoise*, suggest that the quartet was not performed. There was such an uproar while Tzara and Serner read out their work, that it must have seemed hopeless to perform a tonal piano quartet. According to Tzara, the soirée ended with another dance; perhaps a repetition of 'Noir Cacadou'.<sup>22</sup> He does not mention the quartet. Nor do any of the reviews in the newspapers mention the quartet; though one of them, as we shall see, does suggest that Perrottet might have been getting ready to play when the performance broke up in chaos.

The exception to the consensus concerning the events of the evening is Hans Richter's *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst*. Richter describes the end of the soirée thus: 'Der Abend endete mit eigenen Kompositionen von Hans Heusser, die an Zwölftönerei nichts zu wünschen übrig ließen. Das Publikum war gezähmt ... (Ob überzeugt, das war eine Zeitfrage, die man erst heute nach 40 Jahren beantworten kann.)' [The soirée ended with Hans Heusser playing his own compositions, which were as twelve-tone as anyone could wish. The audience was tamed ... (Whether it was convinced is a question which required time; only today, forty years later, can we answer it)].<sup>23</sup> This is surprising in three ways. One: it contradicts the other

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<sup>21</sup> *Letzte Lockerung: Manifest Dada* [*Last Loosening: Dada Manifesto*] is Serner's published version of this text (Hanover: Paul Steegemann Verlag, 1920).

<sup>22</sup> See Tristan Tzara, 'Chronique zurichoise', in *Œuvres complètes* volume 1, ed. by Henri Béhar (Flammarion: Paris, 1975), pp. 561-68 (p. 568).

<sup>23</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst* (M. DuMont Schauberg: Cologne, 1964), p. 82.

accounts in stating that the evening ended with Heusser's work. Two: it describes Heusser's compositions as twelve-tone. And three: it is the only account by any of the Dadaists of audience reaction to Heusser's work. Clearly, Richter wishes to present us with a contrast between the reception of the words of Serner and Tzara, which incensed the audience, and the reception of Heusser's music, which calmed the audience.

Whom should one believe, concerning the question of whether or not the *soirée* ended with Heusser's music? I am inclined not to believe Richter. He was writing more than forty years after the event, as he indicates; his memories may have become muddled over time, and if he relied on the *soirée* programme as a document to remind him of what happened, this may have falsified his recollections concerning the order of events during the actual performance. Furthermore, some of his other statements concerning the contents of the *soirée* are clearly inaccurate. He states that Perrottet danced to the music of Schoenberg and Satie, rather than playing it;<sup>24</sup> but this corresponds neither to the programme, nor to Perrottet's own recollections,<sup>25</sup> nor to any other accounts, either of the *soirée* itself, or of Perrottet's part in the Dada manifestations. It seems to me more than likely, then, that Richter is a less reliable witness than those who wrote nearer the time. My guess is that none of Heusser's music was actually played at the end of the *soirée*, and it seems to me fairly certain, given that even Richter mentions no string players, that the piano quartet was not performed.

The stereotypical view of Dada *soirées* is doubtless that they were always provocative, always designed to create a hostile reaction in the audience, and often degenerated into tumult. Of the Zurich Dada *soirées*, however, only one fitted this stereotype: the last. All the others were relatively well received. There is no evidence that at the first seven *soirées*, any items on the programme were not performed because of negative audience

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<sup>24</sup> Richter, *Dada – Kunst und Antikunst*, p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Wolfensberger, *Suzanne Perrottet: ein bewegtes Leben*, pp. 137-38.

reaction. The only victims of public outrage at Dada provocation, the only pieces on any Zurich Dada programme not to be performed, were Hans Heusser's piano quartet and, probably, the two piano pieces scheduled to precede it. No one seems to know what became of the quartet. I have no reason to think it was ever performed, or that the parts survive.

At what point, during that extraordinary evening, when an audience of many hundreds was making its displeasure forcibly known to the score of Dadaists on stage, was the decision taken to abandon the last item? There is a rather haunting description in one of the newspaper accounts, which would suggest that at least one of the performers for the quartet was on the stage and ready when they realized they would have to abandon the work because they would not be able to make themselves heard: 'eine unglückliche und schöne Dame mußte am Klavier kraftlose Töne üben. Ihre Hände und Arme bewegten sich edel und still, und sie wendete das Haupt ab' [a beautiful and unhappy lady could bring forth from the piano only powerless tones. Her hands and arms made calm and noble movements, and she turned her head away].<sup>26</sup> Who was the 'schöne Dame'? The only likely candidate is Suzanne Perrottet, since she was the only woman who played the piano at the soirées (although one might wonder why she, and not Heusser himself, was at the piano; had she come on stage to play the violin part?). It coincides strangely with her own recollections of her relationship with Dada, as recounted over sixty years later to Giorgio Wolfensberger:

Es kam eine Zeit, wo ich immer noch mitgemacht habe bei den Dadaisten, aber bemerkt habe, dass einige nicht mehr so von innen aus begeistert waren für die Sache, sondern nur Freude daran hatten, die Bürger zu ärgern. Das hat mir dann missfallen. Und schliesslich habe ich bemerkt, ich bin doch kein disharmonischer Mensch, ich

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<sup>26</sup> 'Dada Zürich in Zeitungen', p. 242.

hatte nur ein disharmonisches Stadium, ich suchte mein Wesen zu verbessern und hatte im Moment diese Spontanität nötig.<sup>27</sup>

[There came a time when I was still collaborating with the Dadaists, but I saw that some of them were not really so deeply inspired in their hearts by the cause; instead, they were just enjoying provoking the bourgeoisie. That didn't please me. And in the end I realized that I'm not a disharmonious person, I was just going through a disharmonious phase, I was trying to improve my way of being and at the time I needed that spontaneity.]

It must have been, precisely, at this eighth and final Zurich Dada soir e that Perrottet was displeased by the enjoyment certain Dadaists found (Serner above all, but also to a certain extent Tzara) in provoking the bourgeois. It is revealing that for her, the question of what she finds acceptable in Dada is inseparable from the question of harmony. She is not, in the end, a disharmonious person; she must go through disharmony, but in pursuit of a deeper harmony. This theme, of an endless quest for harmony, is evident throughout *Suzanne Perrottet: ein bewegtes Leben*.

Hans Heusser is not the only key figure in the Zurich Dada soir es whose contribution has been for decades underestimated. As Ruth Hemus has so clearly shown, women, as dancers, singers, writers, designers, and visual artists, were central to those soir es, though many have since been largely forgotten.<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Perrottet was one of them. She had a long and distinguished career as a highly innovative dancer, but above all, perhaps, as a theorist and teacher of dance. To the Dadaists, she was a dancer, a pianist, a composer, and a

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<sup>27</sup> Suzanne Perrottet: ein bewegtes Leben, p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).



violinist. Her engagement with Dada, like Heusser's, was limited to the Zurich Dada years, from 1916 to 1919. Dada, for Perrottet just as for Huelsenbeck, contained within it two contradictory approaches to music. Plainly, the approach that triumphed at the end of the final soirée was not the one that had drawn her to the movement. It is, however, the one that is now generally remembered. Everyone knows that Dada provokes its audience to uproar. Who remembers that Zurich Dada included the music of Schoenberg, Scott, and Satie, let alone Heusser? And, more to the point, that whereas audience provocation was dominant only towards the end of the last soirée, such composed music was an important element of almost all the soirées – and had originally been programmed to conclude the last?

But let us return to the other unusual element of Hans Richter's account of the final soirée. Whereas none of the other Dadaists have anything whatever to say concerning the style or content of Heusser's music, Richter implies it is 'twelve-tone'. Nothing in the pieces by Heusser which have survived, or in anything else known about Heusser, suggest he would ever have composed in a style that could reasonably be described thus. The designation of the piano quartet as 'in Es-dur' surely demonstrates that Heusser's Dada music never abandoned tonality. Why, then, would Richter have described it as 'twelve-tone'? The answer is given by Richter's subsequent parenthesis. Writing in the 1960s, Richter is assimilating the fate of Heusser's piano music (totally unknown by 1960) to that of the avant-garde music of its time in general, notably Schoenberg's. To him, it is a kind of art which, in its refusal of tonality and thus of traditional harmony, can only, in the end, fail to convince the general public. But that is not at all how it appeared in 1919. To Perrottet, the music performed at the Dada soirées was not disharmonious in its essence. It was entirely compatible with a striving towards inner harmony. Had music not always, after all, been built on a play of harmony and dissonance? Plainly, Perrottet did not see the music of Schoenberg, Scott, Satie, and Heusser as a radical refusal of those fundamental principles. The provocations of Serner and of Tzara,

however, obstructed those same principles, and after those provocations had prevented the performance of Heusser's quartet, she turned her head away from Dada.

Going by the available evidence, Heusser also turned his head away from Dada after that fateful evening. There is not the slightest trace of his involvement with any of the subsequent Dada performance series, in Berlin, Paris, or elsewhere. Like Perrottet, I suspect, he could not collaborate with a Dada that prevented music from being heard.

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We have, then, several answers to the question of why Heusser's contribution to Zurich Dada has been so completely forgotten by posterity. One is that Dada tends to be remembered, today, as a fundamentally provocative and anti-art movement. Of the two faces of Dada that Huelsenbeck describes, the musical and the 'bruitist', it is the latter that has come to be the stereotypically identified with the sound of Dada in general. Heusser's music does not fit that stereotype; therefore, it has been evacuated from the collective memory of Zurich Dada.

A second reason for Heusser's fall into oblivion is the simple fact that none of the Dadaists had anything whatever to say about his music at the time; and the inaccurate later recollections of Glauser and Richter have only muddied the waters. That contemporary silence about music is, to me, relatively easy to understand. After all, none of the Dadaists said anything, either, about the music by Schoenberg, Scott and Satie performed at the soirées. Nor did the male Dadaists have much to say about the distinctive contribution of the women – Suzanne Perrottet, but also Käthe Wulff and Sophie Täuber – who were associated with the Laban school, and who had a view of art which reserved a vital place for a search for harmony. This need not be taken to indicate straightforward hostility or incomprehension on the part of the male Zurich Dadaists at the time, any more than Perrottet's silence on the

subject of Heusser should be taken to indicate hostility towards his music. As my work over the past decade has all aimed to show,<sup>29</sup> during this period as in the late nineteenth century, there was a powerful aesthetic principle at work which prized above all silence around music. About music itself, one should say nothing; there is nothing to say. The more famous and more verbally deft composers of the time, including Satie and Schoenberg, but also Stravinsky and Debussy (whose music was much appreciated by Hugo Ball, and of whom, as we have seen, both Heusser and Sulzberger proclaimed themselves students), found ingenious ways to maintain this principle, while nonetheless providing the verbal accompaniment to their musical activities without which their professional success might not have been achieved. Heusser, however, as far as we know, said nothing. Before giving the description of Heusser's music quoted above, the reviewer of the 'Soirée Hans Heusser', as quoted by 'C.R.', wrote, 'Um mich ganz dem "Genusse" dieser Musik hingeben zu können, dazu fehlten mir die nötigen Kommentare' [In order to give myself over entirely to the 'pleasure' of this music, I would have needed commentaries which were not provided].<sup>30</sup> The absence of any commentary on Hans Heusser's works has remained both exemplary and absolute ever since.

Is a third reason for the silence around Heusser's music to be found in its quality? Is he, quite simply, a poor composer, not worth resuscitating? I think it is fair to say that this is the spontaneous assumption of those who note the contrast between his presence in the Zurich Dada soirées, and his absence from Dada historiography. It would seem the best explanation of the lack of attention accorded to his work. However, given that no

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), or 'Apollinaire's Music', in *Forum for Modern Languages Studies* vol. 47 no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 36-48.

<sup>30</sup> 'Dada Zürich in Zeitungen', p. 218.

musicologist, no Dada historiographer, no academic, has ever, as far as I can tell, actually thought about or even looked at Heusser's Dada music, it has clearly been condemned without a fair trial.

There is an instructive comparison to be made with the other pianist-composer who performed his own work at a Dada soirée (the 'Sturm-Soirée', on 14 April 1917): H. S. (or Marcel) Sulzberger. 'Sulzberger', writes Chris Walton, 'is mentioned in none of the current literature on those involved with the Dadaists in Zurich'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the Dadaists themselves left nothing on the record concerning their reactions to his music.<sup>32</sup> Does that mean it is of no value? That has doubtless been the general assumption. Landy, for example, as we have seen, dismisses him along with Heusser. However, Walton, the first critic to take Sulzberger seriously and to seek out his music, demonstrates that this assumption is based on shaky principles. Surely being unknown, being the object of no critical commentary, does not prove that a composer is of no value. It could, on the contrary, be held to indicate that the composer in question is behaving in accordance with one of the true spirits of Dada.

Of the strands that Zurich Dada wove together, one lent itself to endless verbiage: the one that provoked audiences by challenging their preconceptions about art. Another refused all verbiage: the musical. The former, after 1919, rapidly drowned out the latter. The moral of this tale is simple: it is difficult to remember an art which is not defended in words. And defence of music in words is precisely what the musical Dadaists refused, it seems to me on

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<sup>31</sup> Walton, 'The many lives of Marcel Sulzberger', p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ball and Tzara did, however, express privately their appreciation of Sulzberger's music in an enthusiastic letter they sent to him two days after his performance at the soirée. It is in the collection of the Zentralbibliothek in Zurich; see [http://www.zb.uzh.ch/ausstellungen/mam/ausstellung\\_6293/bilder\\_dokumente\\_jQ10/mus\\_nl\\_30\\_bc\\_1\\_fremde\\_dichter\\_0210.jpeg](http://www.zb.uzh.ch/ausstellungen/mam/ausstellung_6293/bilder_dokumente_jQ10/mus_nl_30_bc_1_fremde_dichter_0210.jpeg) [25 September 2014].

principle, to provide. There had been three key players in Zurich Dada who had performed composed music on the piano: Ball and Heusser in the Cabaret Voltaire, Heusser and Perrottet at the soirées. All of them had abandoned the movement by the end of 1919, as the words of Tzara, Serner, and others began to create a public perception of Dada which did not leave space for their music. It would simply have been impossible for them to fight against that public perception, in words, in the name of music. They did not try.

Nonetheless, one should not think that the words of the Zurich Dadaists, in Zurich and after, simply stood in opposition to the music played by Ball, Perrottet, Sulzberger and Heusser. If one looks carefully at the vociferations of the Zurich Dadaists (as I hope to in a future publication), one can find therein the evidence of the true value they placed on music, as something that escapes their words. Zurich Dada's energy was born of its determination not to let the operations of traditional logic, rationality, and language get in the way of the truth where the truth, as it so often seems to do where art is concerned, refuses to be recuperated by those operations. The Dadaists were certainly not alone in thinking that the truth about music is that it is inaccessible to words. But more than any other movement of the time, Dada refused to betray music in that inaccessibility to words; the Dadaists honoured it by saying nothing. Hans Heusser's Dada music had no life outside Dada, and never acquired any body of words around it. Therefore, in our current cultural environment, where the unsaid has no secure place, it has vanished. If, however, we can give it back its place, we will be doing justice, not only to Heusser, but to music itself, as Dada saw it.

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