The very first „Hörspiel“ ever broadcast in Germany was called "Zauberei auf dem Sender", that is „Radio Magic or Wizardry on the Air“. Presented on October 24th 1924, a few months after the founding of the Frankfurt station it significantly marked the anniversary of the overall start of German radio in October 1923. Due to the lack of recording facilities in early German radio the original „Radio Magic“-play is of course not preserved. We listened to a production of 1974. But for the prominence of its author the script had been printed in the weekly „Journal of Funkwesen“ shortly after the original broadcast. The subtitle reads: „Attempt of a radio grotesque“. It's a kind of stand-up comedy on one hand. On the other it conveys an important message about radio that shall interest us in the following.

As actors we have the station -„leader“/director, his so called artistic assistant, the announcer, a little orchestra, a man named „electrical“ bandleader, in short, the typical small staff of an early radiostation playing themselves. Unexpectedly the „Märchentante“, the girl usually perfoming fairy tales for children, pops into the opening of the evening concert. And that's where the trouble begins.

In the middle of the chaos the boss arrives. "Where is the typewriter girl, we have to set up a memo … Are you ready?". "Yes, Herr Doktor", the girl replies. And indeed, the "real" Hans Flesch had been a physician working at a research institute for radiation medicine in Frankfurt right before he turned his career into the adventures of a new medium. "On October 24th", dictates the Doktor on October 24th to the „Schreibfräulein“ in a radioplay about October 24th – "at around 8:30 pm as usually – you got it? – the evening concert had just started. The announcement… what, .. what the hell is going on now?" While writing a memo about the disturbance just having passed the next interference already occurs. The action, the plot of the "Wizardry on the Air" are the ongoing feedbacks of interferences of a radio program.

Scratching noises, obscure messages and strong brass sounds are intruding the ears of the doctor and of the listeners. Flesch desperately calls for the artistic assistant, Mr. Schön. Again we have a role played by the real man under his real name. Ernst Schoen, the program director of the Frankfurt station has been working with Flesch since the first day. He was a trained musician and composer, a former student of Ferruccio Busoni’s and Edgar Varèse’s; moreover one of the closest and lasting friends of Walter Benjamin’s since their mutual schooldays until they both had to leave Germany in the thirties. - "Schoen, did you hear this on the control receiver?" the play-doctor asks. Again the interferences are multiplying, after Schoen declares to

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have heard nothing. Flesch is the one under distress, who has heard the interference as the radio-listeners did. But nobody in the studio has.

Yes, Doctor, – we have – I mean – there hasn’t been any piece of music – there was nothing to be heard....

And Flesch replies:

Mr. Schön, do you think – in general – a music could be heard that has not been played anywhere?

In the greatest confusion Flesch smuggles in the key-question of his play. „Radio magic“ might not be considered of great prominence literarily. But its content poses nothing less than the key-question of radio as audio-art. Can music be played in the radio without any instruments? In 1924 that seems wizardry. But Flesch argues that with radio a specific kind of new music must be possible. Transmitted violins and orchestras apparently come to our ears through electronic devices. So radio should play by the means of these electronic devices only, that means by radio itself.

That is in fact a loony and „grotesque experiment“ in 1924. Now everybody – we are back in the play – believes Flesch to have gone insane. A doctor is called for the doctor, however no physician arrives – but the wizard.

Hans Flesch, author, director, main actor and head of the station had been an experienced user of x-ray tubes during his medical career. He knows the technical conditions of radio. From a technician’s point of view in 1924 radio waves were in fact caused by „Störungen“, disturbances and interferences of the ether due to the feedback of tube oscillations. These technical conditions are precisely what Flesch’s play from 1924 refers to.

Not even seven years ago Hans Bredow had tested the first ever tube based radiotransmitters in the abandoned battlefields of France. His new wizardwonders were working quite well but too late for World War One. Now, not yet a decade later, radiotubes were ready for general use.

It’s The the Wizard speaking: „Ladies and Gentlemen look straight into your radio-device, into the filaments of the amplifying tubes. I’ll count until three, and at three you’ll see me. One, two, ...“.

It is too late to put the wizard into the madhouse. The magic works, the music slows down, becomes more and more atonal, out of tempo, finally stammering like „a Grammophon, that hangs“ as the wizard explains. „Stop it“, Flesch shouts, „I can’t stand it anymore“. That’s the end of the experiment. Everything has to be put back in order. The wizard is thrown out of the studio. We hear the Donau-Waltz as innocently as it has ever sounded.
We’re back to radiomusic as it was supposed to be, as the first licenser of German radio, Hans Bredow, secretary of the postal office, expected his radio to sound. But it wasn’t the radio Flesch was after.

With Dr. Hans Flesch, just 27 years of age at the time of the play, we meet the most important, most innovative, most competent and most courageous pioneer of Weimar radio. During the following five years Flesch continued his work in Frankfurt and then moved to Berlin as the head of the famous „FunkStunde“. Without his support neither Walter Benjamin, Ernst Krenek, Paul Hindemith, nor Arnold Schönberg or Eugen Jochum – to name just a few – would have found their way into radio. Flesch encouraged Bertolt Brecht’s radiowork and employed Arnolt Bronnen. He introduced Alfred Döblin to radio and commissioned some of Kurt Weill’s compositions. Paul Hindemith the concertmaster of the Frankfurt Opera when radio started, was his friend and brother in law.

In 1927 Hindemith moved to Berlin as a professor of composition and he worked from the very beginning on the development of electronic music. He brought one of his students – Oscar Sala – in contact with the first ever fully electronic instrument called Trautonium after his inventor Friedrich Trautmann. This instrument had been built at the so-called „Rundfunkversuchsstelle“, an institution established at Hans Flesch’s suggestion in the year Hindemith moved to Berlin. In advertisements the Trautonium was praised explicitly as „a new universal radio music instrument. All tones from bass drum to flute can be imitated and also effects of sounds never heard before can be produced. Furthermore it works as a radioreceiver and a grammophon amplifier“. It can be heard in some of Hindemiths compositions and – probably best known – in the Oscar Sala soundtrack of Hitchcocks thriller „the birds“. To understand the important role of Hans Flesch in the avantgarde scene of the Weimar republic one has to remember the astonishing fact that German Radio started under the explicit order to fulfill, as Bredow put it, a purely cultural task. Otherwise a man like Flesch, a certified physician and subtle intellectual would have never become a top radio executive.

Only publishers, producers of printproducts or photoequipment, academics and the like got permission to found radio stations. The reason wasn’t a special liking for arts and culture in the Weimar government but their will to keep radio free of politics. They would have prefered to interdict the new medium altogether. But that seemed impossible, somehow it had to come. Especially since it was already there in America and England. It had taken Bredow some years of hard work to convince the military still in control of all telecommunication devices after WorldWarOne of the usefulness of public radio. Bredow only knew too well, that after the desaster of 1918 and the “shame” of Versaille all wizardweapons of the future would depend on the core element of radio, the electronic tube. To possess tubes in the early 1920ties meant to produce them in large quantities, just as it is with computerchips today. If the defeated Germany wanted to keep up with foreign electronic industries the useless thing called radio had to be accepted as a kind of testing field.
On the flip side of the cultural task of radio we have to recognize a concealed calculus of the military-industrial complex to put Germany back into the lead under the restrictions of the Versaille contract. This calculus was superimposed by old political anxieties, yet panic hystery. Establishing radio, wouldn't that allow voices to come out of the ether? Who should be interested in something like that but the mob and the ragtag of the streets? Would it seduce the masses again? Once again November, once again revolution? Once again „Funkerspuk“, the spook of wireless, as it had been in 1919, when tens of thousands of homecoming war radio operators went under the flag of the Spartacus Alliance? But alas, how well-behaved and harmless the spartacists did hand off their wireless comrades for empty promises. From that moment on USPD, SPD and the German-Nationalists had been united in the goal to prevent any kind of wireless spook in the future. Once and for all. The postulate for a radio free of politics, social and current affairs, was a result of the fear of phantoms, especially of the phantom of an anarchistic radiomovement which had never occured in reality.

The next menetekel came from overseas. In 1920 Mr. Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, had licensed the first American radio station. And the first broadcast was of course about a political event. KDKA Pittsburgh reported the presidential election of Harding against Cox. Harding was elected and henceforth no presidential candidate failed to use radio as a platform for his campaign. The foundation of radio in America proceeded without any hysterical uncertainties or political phantoms. RCA, AT&T, General Electric and Westinghouse were the ones in control and secretary Hoover followed RCA's David Sarnoff perfectly, that „broadcasting ... will be primarily supported by the radio industry itself and by its returns on the sale of radio apparatuses.“ No fees, no extremely high listener licenses were required as Bredow had set them up in Germany explicitly to keep lower class people away from radio just for fear of their misuse of the device.

Since the radioact of 1912, only interrupted by the war, the free and open movement of amateur and semiprofessional broadcasting had been the primal promoter of American radio, transmitting and receiving wildly and chaotically across the country all on the same one or two frequencies. On pain of penalties exactly this had been prohibited in Germany. From 1925 on the „Reichstelegraphenverwaltung“, the license-administration, was even allowed to search houses and arrest at any time unregistered listeners or registered radio owners under suspicion of misuse.

From todays point of view the cultural task of radio in the early Weimar republic presents itself as nothing but a fateful false start. Not surprisingly, nine years after its start, another well known radio professional could harvest the fruit. In early 1933 Josef Goebbels noted in his diary:

[radio] is an instrument of mass propaganda, which today has not been appreciated yet in its efficiency. At any rate our enemies didn't know what to do with it.
Maybe the „Attempt of a broadcast grotesque“ in 1924 should also be understood as a kind of allusion to the grotesque conditions of the radio beginnings in Germany? Maybe. But Flesch made the best of it:

For radio, for this kind of wonderful synthesis of technology and art by way of transmission, the following sentence has full validity: In the beginning there was experiment. (...) Radio has to experiment, (...) and so the whole program is to a certain extent experimental.

From the very beginnings, Hans Flesch took serious the cultural radio-task as a task to search for an autonomous form of art – radio art. To improve the content of his program he sought guidance in the silent films of Charlie Chaplin for example, which he adored – just as Brecht, Benjamin, Hindemith, Weill and Döblin – as pieces of art. As little as Chaplin provided a ‘pure’ copy of the visible world and instead presented a new world through cut and collage, as little should radio be simply a copy of otherwise existing acoustic phenomena.

That’s why, says Flesch in 1924, a radio concert will never have any artistic value, if radio sees its only task in transmitting good concerts. It will provide just an inartistic substitute for a concert.

What a courageous sentence. Did any radio station in the beginning do anything different? Concerts were transmitted constantly and regularly from all over Germany. If Flesch didn’t want that anymore he had to experiment radically. Hence a different kind of radio music becomes the plot in „Radio Magic“. It is the music that turns everything into grotesque wizardry. Flesch kept his sceptical view of radio used merely as a transmission channel. In 1928 he wrote

I have not yet found a so-called „hörspiel“, which didn’t turn out to be just a hidden drama having expelled its optical sense.

Flesch sees what only few saw in his time. Radio art must be more than a piece of literature, music or drama being performed in front of a microphone. His explanation leads to the main point of his theory. „The director of a radio drama“, Flesch says opposing his colleagues,

„should remember that by means of microphones and transmitters he is switching on a machine between his players and the radio listeners, a machine, through which he can press neither the personal impact of the artist on stage nor the invisible tie bound between a theater audience and the artist.

Flesch insists:

Radio is a mechanical instrument, and its artistic effects can only arise out of its mechanics. If one doesn’t believe this to be possible, one has to disbelieve in radio art altogether.

Flesch’s wording may be unfamiliar, because in his times our concept of „media“ was unknown. Instead he names it the „machine“.
Flesch reminds us. The invisible tie between audience and the artist is what Benjamin will later call in the tradition of Aby Warburg the „aura“ of the artistic moment. “Aura” can be experienced in a theatre or concert hall. The invisible tie, or as Flesch calls it elsewhere, the „divine spark“ (perhaps we should translate: the „divine flash“?) cannot ‘click’ over the radio. Instead he demands quite explicitly the artistic use of recording machines for radio. He calls for a reproducational aesthetic at a time when recording machines weren’t used in radio at all.

Other great directors of radio drama at the time – Fritz Walter Bischoff, Ernst Hardt, Alfred Braun or Arnolt Bronnen – were in contrast still counting on the so called „artistic vividness“ and the „veracity“ of the moment. They relied on the experience of „mental or spiritual streams“ being transmitted by the „voice as a disembodied absolute being“ as the Nazi-theoretician Richard Kolb had coined it. This „körperlose Wesenheit der Stimme“ remained an unchallenged guideline for German radiodrama productions widely accepted far into the sixties, maybe until today.

For Flesch art in radio could only exist through montage, by cutting the material, by „inserts“ and collages, we could say by means of conjectural techniques of reproduction. This anticipates in 1927 again very much the later propositions of Walter Benjamin. One could even assume that Benjamin learned the core concept of his later theses from his longtime employer Hans Flesch.

Flesch also commissioned the legendary and revolutionary radio-collage „Weekend“, by filmmaker Walter Ruttmann. “Weekend” sounds like radio collages won’t sound again before the seventies. That is so say, Flesch as well as Ruttmann as radio practitioners were way ahead of their time.

Radio had to gain its artistic means from the apparatus. That is the simple truth Flesch subscribes to from his „Radio Magic“ on. The atonal discords prescribed in his script very precisely lead us to Flesch’s sources. In the spellbound parts of atonality – to be heard as a kind of evidence of direct radio music – Flesch hints at the work of Hindemith and Kurt Weill. Weill in the 20s earned his living as a radio critic and of course supported Flesch’s ideas in countless articles. Hindemith, Weill and Flesch are proclaiming nothing less than an absolute „radio music“. This expression refers directly to Busoni’s „Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music“ from 1907 and 1916, when it was republished and led to Busoni’s being blamed by Hans Pfitzner to be a futuristic revolutionary. Indeed: In his „New Aesthetic of Music“ Busoni refers to a completely new electrical instrument created by Thaddeus Cahill in 1897, named telharmonium. The Trautonium I mentioned earlier can be seen as its successor.

The concept of absolute music proposed by Flesch and Weill can easily be understood if Busoni’s Telharmonium is being replaced conceptually by the electronics of radio. Let’s hear again the key sentence of „Radio magic“ when Flesch is asking Ernst Schoen, who as I’ve mentioned, was a student of Busoni’s and Edgar Varese’s:

Mr. Schön, do you think – in general – a music could be heard that has not been played anywhere?
When Flesch arrived as director at the Berlin Funkstunde in 1929 he established associated to the „Rundfunkversuchsstelle“ a studio of electro-acoustic and electronic music. In the opening ceremony Flesch muses:

Today we have no idea what this yet unborn creation will look like. Maybe the expression „music“ is wrong altogether. Perhaps some day out of the unique characteristics of electric oscillations, out of their transformation into acoustic waves there will emerge something new that is concerned not anymore with music but with sound alone.

Similar arguments we find in early Weill papers. And it reminds us also of what John Cage will demand in his „Credo of Music“, just seven years later inaugurating the early fluxus movement. But in contrast to Cage or Weill for Hans Flesch the question of art in radio is not only a question of aesthetics. „Certainly, order is the right thing and disorder is wrong,“ Flesch says as Flesch at the end of „Radio Magic“. For Flesch absolute radio music is part of the search for a new order. If possibly out of radio a new art for the world can emerge, the world must achieve a new order for a new man as well.

We encounter the social pathos of art that Flesch definitely takes over from Brecht. In 1927 in his introduction to the radio version of „Man is Man“ Brecht develops his idea of the „new type of Man“.

This new type of man will not be what the old type of man thought it would be. ... He will not be changed by the machine but he will change the machine, and whatever he will look like, he will most of all look like a man.

The new man is neither individualist, nor collectivist nor communist. „At first he will become strong as part of the mass“.

And if in the end he conquers a mountain fortress, he seems to fulfill the unconditional will of a great mass of people desiring to pass through the gorge the mountain fortress is blocking.

For Brecht as for Hindemith, Weill and Flesch radio is the most modern machine able to bring forth a new type of man thereby making the face of the mass more human. The artist is required to link art and mass appeal. Only art accepted by the masses can correspond to the new type of mass-man. Examples of these ideas put to work are the Brecht/Weill cooperation in the Three Penny Opera and the Lindbergh-flight-radio-drama, the latter again directly commissioned by Flesch and produced by his station.

After 1929 Flesch extends his radio experiments into the organizational structure of his station. First of all he established a so-called „department of current affairs“, eine aktuelle Abteilung. His new type of radio programming has to organize, as Flesch somewhat clumsily describes, „the communication of an event as it is happening“. Except for the famous soccer reportages the concept of „live“-reporting didn’t exist in the cultural-task-radio of Weimar. Whether a politician had been shot on a sidewalk,
riots erupted in the streets or forest fires threatened the Berlin Grunewald – nothing was ever reported on the radio. Now Flesch founded „information offices“ and ran transmission cable throughout the city. Political „Zeitberichte“ – newsreports – started to be broadcast regularly. Flesch organized transmissions out of Parliament and demanded radio microphones in courtrooms. The latter failed due to resistance of the control boards but was realized later when the Nazis came to power. Flesch also established a so-called „Rückblick auf Schallplatten“, a review of events recorded on phonographic records. Thus Flesch created in 1930 the first German radio program containing regular original recordings of political events of the week, a program at that time unique in radio history and not even comparable to the „march of the times“ a program set up a year ago in America where actors replayed the original scenes and Orson Welles became famous for imitating five different crying babies.

Flesch in contrast „wanted real life and controversial debates“. One of his program series called „Gedanken zur Zeit“ – thoughts of the time – is still ongoing in some German radio stations today. As we can see in the last phase of his radio work Flesch punched through the roof of prohibitions and interdictions that had paralyzed early German radio for so long. Only for a few months Flesch directed a modern journalistic mass medium obviously supporting the declining republic. As the director of the main radio station in Berlin he was able to do so. But his so powerful position brought back the old phantoms of anxiety in the political class. Within weeks in 1931 a radio-reform was set up and accomplished. All radio stations were brought under control of the ministry of the interior and almost every innovation Flesch had established was taken back. Flesch himself was fired one year before the Nazi-Regime took power. In 1933 he was put on trial for a first, in 1934 for a second time. But even before the Nazi-Courts the prosecutions against him could not lead to any conviction. Flesch still remained in jail for another year. Thereafter he was classified as Half-Jewish and not allowed to work in any of his professions. He was a defeated man but not discouraged. A man like him could probably appraise better than anyone else that this 3rd Reich couldn’t last forever. After all we know Flesch never thought of emigration. Somehow he managed to get by. Not until the very end of the war he was allowed to practice as a doctor. The last thing we know of him is that in the first days of April 1945 he started a small hospital for the wounded in the vicinity of Frankfurt/Oder. Since then Hans Flesch has been missing.

With him for decades his radio play had been forgotten. „Radio Magic“ was considered meaningless and of little worth for a long time. Until the seventies the play was said to be incomprehensible, at best somehow „interesting“. A biography of Flesch is still a desideratum, no academic institute has shown interest in his literary estate. Presumably his son while realizing his father’s dreams of moving to a remote island has taken parts of Flesch’s papers to French-Polynesia where he still lives breeding pearls.