

Hans Werner Henze
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HANS WERNER HENZE

INTERVIEW BY LANCE BOSMAN

Recognised by no particular musical idiom, each new composition of Hans Werner Henze is a fresh departure from those before and after. Often as not, they are inspired or motivated by extra-musical forces, the theatre, observations on basic human behaviour and his political beliefs in radical socialism. While his intention is to make contact with a wide audience, he will not compromise his musical style. This, on more than one occasion, has been siezed upon by critics, in that his apparently sophisticated music is hardly receptive to the common man for whose improvement his political sympathies are meant for.

To fuel his electism, Henze draws on a wide net of past and present resources for a range of expressive devices, forms and mediums. Adherence to a particular 20th century style or 'school' is musically stifling to Henze, and in social terms, dehumanising. Born in Westphalier in 1926, his revulsion of stigma and authoritarianism were instilled by a repressive father and, in his teens, through Nazism. In 1942 he attended Brunswick Music School, and even at that time saw music in pictorial terms and poetic images. Introduced to Schoenberg's 12-note method through René Leibowitz, he applied this in a most individual manner, demonstrating his independence from the later treatment of total-serialism promoted by the 'Darmstadt School' of Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage. In total-serialism all elements, pitch, rhythm and dynamics, too, submit to a serial order. Highly mechanical indeed. To Henze, total-serialism is technocratic and elitist. The only affinity he has with the Viennese 12-tone technique is with Berg. For Berg he interprets serialism 'as a language, not as Webern or Schoenberg where it remains theory, grammar.* During the fifties Henze concentrated on the relationship of music to movement and its application to the theatre. But finding no solace in the post-war, organised bourgeois values of Germany, Henze moved to Italy to consolidate his thoughts through the simpler lifestyles around and a traditional culture.

Throughout his recently published autobiography, Henze denounces those composers who latch onto specific 20th century styles as though they were the only valid expression of the period. One can detect his disregard of a definitive musical language within his broad output, embodying all styles and forms. From an apparently divergent stance, Henze voices his political commitment

on one hand without relinquishing his musical integrity with the other — not, as some critics point out, always the best means for conveying a message to a wide audience. But on balance, formal techniques have served to convey overtly his political ideology. "Be prepared at all times to sacrifice everything to a new stimulus, to a new experience — to model yourself to your subject." Between many compositions with no political connotations are others with revolution as their theme. Formal technique is then summoned for the full expression of conflict, repression and opposition. These would include *The Raft of Medusa* referred to as the 'Medusa scandal' when students hoisted red flags at the concert hall during a performance, followed by the arrival of the police to quell the ensuing heated outbreak. We would still feel, I think, the reverberations had a comparable reception been given to *Sinfonia No. 6* (1969) first played in Cuba to an audience of 3000, comprising revolutionary soldiers, workers and students. With Cuban associations too, is *El Cimarrón* (1969) discussed later. On a more international front *We Come to the River* (1974) is a moral on the struggle between the weak and the strong — the decline of power and the rise of the weak.

At the time of his 50th birthday, and in acknowledgement of his host country, Henze undertook the commendable 'International D'Arte de Montepulciano'. A small Tuscan town became the venue for an international gathering of musicians (with a complement of guitarists) taking music into the street, and encouraging participation from the local people. Also as an expression of his sentiments for Italy are the Neopolitan-inspired songs of *Kammermusik* (1958) from which three lyrical instrumental interludes are known to us as *Drei Tientos for Guitar* between Hölderlin's *In lieblicher Bläue* "I have attempted to make a synthesis between popular music tradition and the fully evolved style of our own age. *Kammermusik* signals a change as there are once again more austere elements in the octet movements, amid the Neopolitan texture of the voice and guitar."** From quite another tangent of his versatility is the guitar music from *El Cimarrón*. This consists of a small group of players working to aleatoric scores supporting a singer who relates the story of an escaped slave, from a text by Miguel Barnet. "In early 1969 I heard Leo Brouwer play the guitar

and decided to add that part to the Cimarrón ensemble. This would add a harmonic dimension. Leo helped with the composition with new ideas, extending the sound of the guitar. It is a piece that the ensemble must work up slowly, not in a few days of rehearsal. The players must invent things for themselves, there are points where only a 'graphic' serves as a clue",

"The preparations included making the personal acquaintance of Esteban Montejo, the Cimarrón himself. I have never seen such an old man. He was then 107 years old, tall as a tree, walked slowly and upright, his eyes were lively, he radiated dignity and seemed well aware that he was a historical personage. He told stories of *cimarroneria* and of his sexual life which must have been unusually promiscuous.***

Henze's biggest undertaking for the guitar, and one that will cause mixed feeling for some time to come, is his *Winter Music* recorded by Julian Bream (RCA RL 25419). Over 20 minutes long it is a solo work on a tableau of images from Shakespeare. Conceived several years ago, this piece was nurtured with Julian Bream, with whom Henze has a long-standing friendship. That recorded is subtitled *1st Sonata on Shakespearean Characters for Guitar* to which Bream adds: "The complete work consists of two sonatas that may be played singly or in tandem. The second sonata is a shorter, 3-movement work which is more straightforward, musically speaking, than the 1st sonata. I was originally involved with editing the 2nd Sonata, but this piece has been taken up by a German guitarist recently." Some years after premiering *Winter Music*, Julian Bream referred to it in his interview with *Guitar Magazine*, Feb. 1980. "I did about 16 performances around the world, and by and large it went down very well. It is a difficult work to come to terms with, not only because it's very hard to play but of the musical difficulties of keeping the audiences' attention focussed on the music throughout. For most guitar audiences it was a taxing piece to listen to, but I think it is quite good for guitar audiences to be taxed; the audience should make an effort occasionally to readdress itself to new music and new sounds."

Musical content aside, *Winter Music* encompasses the guitar's full effects and breadth of pitch. A challenge to player and audience alike, responses are varied, from fascination, perplexity to open antipathy. It may assist an approach to the work and present a more integral picture of the music's portrayal of the characters, given a background of the composer's intentions and the reasons for his choice of material. For these Hans Werner Henze spoke during a few minutes free between concerts on a recent London tour.

"Well, the piece was written more than seven years ago. Julian played it for the first time in '76 at the Berlin Festival, I remember. But we had been working on it at least three years beforehand, on and off. I came to his place in Dorset for a while once to work on it together. And the process was like that: he told me to write what I felt would make a good effect on the instrument, without bothering too much whether the technical side was realisable or not. The theme, the Shakespearean characters was an idea of mine, I can't remember how I came to it. I was always thinking of the prologue to *Richard the Third*, Now is the Winter of Our Discontent, and there's a line, I think the 5th or 6th, 'and listens in a lady's chamber to the lascivious pleasing of the lute.' And I began to hear this 'lascivious pleasing' not of the lute but the modern concert guitar, and somehow that opened a door for me into the castle of Gloucester, you see. I visualised this man and I began to think of music on the guitar, creating the mood of what is contained in that famous monologue. That was the first idea. From there I

thought, now the curtain is up, so to speak, why don't I bring on more characters, my favourites from the Shakespeare plays.

"The first movement is a sonata, the monologue is A—B, and the thematic opposition is contained in the idea of Gloucester's rage and anger and hatred — the beautiful music that others may enjoy, but he cannot enjoy himself, but to think of vengeance. So the first movement ends in a kind of frenetic dance of anger. There are no more notes, only noises on the instrument, that characterises this man very much I thought. And then *Romeo and Juliet*, this was a duet: its a song for two, a two-part piece. *Romeo and Juliet* is a 12-tone piece really, it doesn't sound like that, more original I hope and quite cantable; some tonal chords occur quite unconsciously out of the series. But as a 12-tone piece, there's no tone really, or key. Later on, in *Oberon* for instance, it's in E, in an E area. And the dance, *Touchstone, Audrey and William*, that is in A flat major sometimes. This I hoped to be more tonal than the others, in order to give the idea of a dance with the trio with also a repeat."

Each of the six movements represents either one Shakespearean character, or two or three from different plays. Consequently the musical texture changes sharply as in the strident but sinister opening movement *Gloucester*, followed by the tender counterpoint of *Romeo and Juliet*. Linking these movements are interval groupings with 2nds and 4ths heard within the first movement as a quaver pattern, and projected into the second in the serial row. Considering the period of the characters, did Henze evoke the harmony of the Renaissance, and did that influence his musical syntax?

"Yes there are references to Dowland, who is of course later than Shakespeare. Let's say, much better, reference to Elizabethan music. Again, I try to get the atmosphere, back in the castle of Richard The Third where these characters appear. But I hope that these quotes will not seem like something extraneous to the subject, but as a logical appearance of the musical language that helps us to stay aware of the fact that this is a kind of art where quotation is not there for a gimmick but for meaning.

"For the same reasons I used *rasgueado* which you comment on. Do you know the scene with *Touchstone* in the theatre? He is a clown, a melancholic clown and he is in love with a cow-girl, *Audrey* who can hardly speak and is very clumsy. But he is very elegant and intelligent, he is a court-jester in the *Twelfth Night*. And then on comes *William* who is the real boyfriend of *Audrey* and engaged to her, and he wants to get her back. For the first and last time in his life, this elegant and rather inactive clown gets an enormous attack of rage and begins to insult *William* with grandeur, like a Spanish *grandee*, and that is why it has this Spanish allusion."

On the sleeve notes of the recording of this music, Henze refers to the guitar's capacity as 'knowing and knowledgeable, possessing a richness of sound capable of embracing everything that one might find in a gigantic symphony orchestra'. As for the latter claim, well somewhat exaggerated you might think; and the former adjective, just a bit precious. "What I wanted to say is that the guitar has a long history, and a lot of music written for it. I can't remember what I said in German, for it doesn't make much sense here. Sophisticated instrument might be a better translation for knowledgeable. The guitar is something rather mysterious for me; there is something marvellous about it. In a small room it has an intensity, a life and so many colours, like a huge orchestra: tutti strokes, legato, espressivo, glissando; it sounds almost like woodwind, percussive sounds, hundreds of sounds. Perhaps it's due to Julian's dedication to art and the instrument.

"You ask if this piece reflects my present thinking on composition. It's important to forget one's personal means of expression and techniques and so on, before approaching a new piece. If you begin with too many prefabricated plans, let's say, or if you come with too much of your routine, sometimes called experience, then you are in danger that you repeat yourself, I don't think that an artist ever has a style, a harmonic system, or should have them, something he sets as his territory, here I stay

and water my garden and grow my salad. An artist is somebody who travels all the time; and so I have a harmonic world coming up now, and when I have written it down it will be finished for me, and I have something new to invent, a new harmonic world."

* Music and Politics, 1982. Hans Werner Henze. p.154.

** *ibid.*, p.53

*** *ibid.*, pp.172-4

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