
Editorial (in the form of a record review)

As we commemorate the end of the war in Europe 50 years ago, the interrogatory title of John Warnaby's article 'A new Left-Wing Radicalism in Contemporary German Music?' gives pause. Mr Warnaby usefully introduces the music of several important figures, as yet little-known to UK audiences. Yet from a German perspective – as supplied by Elke Hockings' article on Helmut Lachenmann – the need for the query perhaps betrays our notorious British insularity.

Throughout the postwar half-century, as she points out, many German composers and musicologists have engaged in a 'radical' critique of bourgeois aesthetic assumptions, whether as cultural attitudes or as manifestations of the prevailing socio-political conditions. Almost by definition, that critique is from a 'left-wing' perspective, with such still-potent examples as Adorno's wide-ranging philosophico-critical activity for inspiration. Warnaby, perhaps, locates a new articulation of the compositional critique, as it revises its rules of engagement. The 'end' of the Cold War, the 'fall' of Soviet Communism, has reduced the Capitalist West's ideological need to tolerate a critical, audience-challenging modernism in music. At the same time, the reunification of Germany has legitimized former East Germans – such as Friedrich Goldmann – who had developed their own forms of that modernism as a means of opposing very different, more overtly political constraints.

The ongoing critique of accepted forms in German music derives its special urgency, as Ms Hockings also suggests, from the historical trauma of the SS-state, and the complex mixture of feeling which causes so many to 'ride the horse of guilt' against an enemy who, curiously, 'has never been less abstract than "society"'. More concrete targets must always have existed in the artistic establishment of a nation which drove many of its gifted musicians into exile – or to the gas-ovens, along those railway-tracks which RAF Bomber Command, despite its ability to mount 'thousand-bomber raids' and incinerate Dresden, could never spare the forces to destroy (guilt cuts more ways than one).

A number of recent CD releases concentrate thought on such issues; none more mindfully than the 2-disc set devised and produced by a former editor of *Tempo* and just issued by Largo Records, under the title 'Testimonies of War (*Kriegzeugnisse* 1914-45)'. These dates entertain the idea of a single World War, 31 years long, with an extended armistice, a murderous caesura, during which the combatants regrouped their forces and perfected their techniques in more distant theatres: a war of nation states, not merely upon each other but (in the totalitarian nations) upon sections of their own populations. Any commemoration of it should be contrastingly international in spirit, as reflected in

Kriegzeugnisse's assemblage of European and American composers and performers. Central to the collection, and bulking largest, is the contribution of Boris Blacher, born in China to Baltic German parents, who settled in Berlin in 1922, a stateless person after the expiry of his Russian passport. Anglophile (and Dublinophile), Blacher embodies a true internationalism of creative outlook, combined with what we tend to think of as an essentially German mastery of craft and tradition.

He occupied a crucial position. Despite their disquiet at his interest in jazz and other 'foreign' influences, Blacher's abundant talent was briefly indulged by the Nazi authorities he abominated, until they realized his part-Jewish ancestry. His subsequent, perilous inner emigration and connexion with the German anti-fascist Resistance are of a piece with the integrity and stature of his works, which proclaimed civilized values by virtue of their artistic precision, absence of bombast, their laconic wit and covertly expressed political criticism (which became overt in the then-unperformable *Drei Psalmen* of 1943). For the rest of his life he continued his principled, relentless search for what Brecht called 'minimal value', writing music which justified itself, not him; and as Director of the Berlin Academy of Music and of the Composition Masterclass at the Academy of Arts, he exercised a profound influence on postwar German music, though one largely ignored in Darmstadt and Donaueschingen.

Much of Blacher's output aspires openly (and subversively) to the spirit of *divertimento*, as in *Dance Scenes* and *Chiarina*, the respectively just pre- and just post-war ballets on the Largo discs. The former, with its grand Tchaikovskian waltz, Copland-like openness of harmony, its pungent Tango, utterly undislodgable from memory; and the latter, largely structured as variations on a tune that's first cousin to Walton's 'Popular Song', well illustrate Blacher's commitment to comprehensibility, his guilt-free eclecticism and his ability, which the Nazi critics found so culpable, to create community of expression among diverse material. By contrast, the Partita for string orchestra and percussion, begun before and finished after Germany's surrender, proves nothing less than one of the great tragic string works of our century, peer to the eve-of-war Bartók *Divertimento* and Martinů *Double Concerto*. Yet I understand Largo's recording was probably the first performance of this masterpiece since 1950.

Blacker yet are the *Drei Psalmen* for baritone and piano which Blacher composed after the second edition of the *Lexicon der Juden* had made him a marked man. These are stark, uncompromising both in musical language and choice of text, most of all the central Psalm 141. 'Incline not my heart to any evil thing,/ to

join with the evildoers/ in ungodly works . . . Our bones are scattered/ to the mouth of the Pit . . .’ David Drew’s notes relate these impassioned Psalms to the recently-discovered Psalms for voice and strings (also on the Largo discs) which Berthold Goldschmidt composed in 1935 shortly before he fled from Germany to the UK. Indeed, one could go further and hypothesize a quasi-liturgical genre arising out of the Nazi oppression, in which the words of the Lutheran Psalmist took on a newly urgent relevance, as in Zemlinsky’s *Psalms* 13 of 1935 or even – by a British composer aiming at Germany – Havergal Brian’s *Das Siegeslied* (composed 1932–33 in German to Luther’s Psalm 67: ‘Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered’).

But 1943, the year of Blacher’s *Psalmen*, saw many creative correspondences of this kind. In Theresienstadt concentration-camp, Viktor Ullmann was composing *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, a chamber opera concerned, precisely, with the theme of nations making war on their own populations until Death himself abdicates in disgust and the people become the ‘living dead’. When Emperor Überall (from ‘Deutschland über alles’, which is parodied in the score) finally agrees to forfeit his life to Death, the music flows into the opera’s most poignant passage, ‘The Emperor’s Farewell’, followed by a chorale finale of unmistakably religious form and feeling, musically built upon *Ein feste Burg* (which Ullmann also quotes in his contemporary *Second Symphony*) and textually echoing the chorale *Komm süßer Tod* – with almost unbearable poignancy given that Death was indeed, and inevitably, already on the way for Ullmann, his librettist, and most of their performers and intended audience.

This extraordinary human document, performed by the Leipzig Gewandhaus under Lothar Zagrosek, with Michael Kraus (Largo’s exponent of the Blacher *Psalmen*) as the Emperor and Walter Berry an eloquent Death, is now one of the most valuable releases in Decca’s ‘Entartete Musik’ series. Paula Kennedy’s English-language notes adduce Ullmann’s use of the ‘Angel of Death’ motif from Josef Suk’s *Asrael* Symphony as evidence that he was re-engaging with his Czech heritage, largely suppressed when his identity was as a younger member of the Schoenberg school. But only Hans-Günter Klein’s German notes discuss the problem of establishing a definitive text of an opera that was still in rehearsal and discussion before the Nazis forbade its performance. (This doubtless accounts for the two musically and textually distinct versions of ‘The Emperor’s Farewell’ mentioned in Michael Graubart’s book review on p.39. Decca helpfully includes both: it’s the first, Track 19 on the disc, which Graubart detects as an apparent reworking of an earlier Ullmann piece.) Klein stresses the need to make interpretative choices; Kerry Woodward’s performing version, which first brought Ullmann’s opera before the public in 1975, is sometimes so far from the manuscript that it should be considered an arrangement, and Klein says the first production to follow Ullmann’s score faithfully was by the Neuköllner Opera in Berlin in 1989. The (unstated) implication is that Decca’s CD has a like fidelity. Whatever uncertainties remain* the disc assures us

that, despite the hardly believable circumstances of its creation, no special pleading is necessary for Ullmann’s work – any more than for its coupling, a set of three superbly balanced and expressive Hölderlin-Lieder he composed at the same time, beautifully sung by Iris Vermillion.

Half a world away, that same year, Hanns Eisler was also setting Hölderlin – the poet of limitations and of absent gods – in his *Hollywood Liederbuch*, a restless compendium of exile. Pithy, complex, ironic, these vocal apothegms (to many poets, but especially Brecht) chronicle with wit and pain how the Lieder tradition has itself become alienated. A fragment from Hölderlin’s ode to Peace becomes ‘Elegy 1943’, a prescient vision of the world war currently raging. 32 songs from Eisler’s US exile, and from the *Liederbuch* itself, have been issued on Teldec in performances of magisterial illumination by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Aribert Reimann (who as long ago as 1962 combined in the first, and virtually unnoticed, recording of Blacher’s *Psalmen*). It’s a judicious selection, ending in Eisler’s German setting of Horatio’s monologue from *Hamlet* (‘. . . of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts; of accidental judgements, casual slaughterers . . .’) with its long-held final cadential trill, angrily unresolved.

Elsewhere in California another of Brecht’s collaborators, Paul Dessau, was writing string quartets (unintimidated, it seems, by the bitter pun in Brecht’s ‘Hollywood Elegy’, set by Eisler on the Teldec disc, about Bach and the *Strichquartett*). Dessau, like Eisler, would return to Berlin and become one of the crucial figures in the post-war evolution of music in East Germany; his seven quartets, written at intervals between 1932 and 1975 and now released as a 2-CD set on the CPO label, chart the fascination which this form, which he considered almost culpably esoteric and exclusive, held nevertheless for such a politically engaged composer. The most immediately impressive are, precisely, Nos.2 and 3, composed 1942–3: substantial and deeply-felt 12-note scores registering Dessau’s admiration for that other Hollywood resident, Eisler’s and Ullmann’s teacher – though Dessau had learned his serial technique from René Leibowitz, not from Schoenberg himself. The later quartets are more curious, stylistically makeshift affairs, ranging from the Fourth (for children, lasting less than three minutes), to the seven-movement Sixth, assembled from miscellaneous movements (one an epitaph for dead cosmonauts) composed in the early 1970s. These

(cont’d on p.61)

* Michael Graubart – who examined Ullmann’s manuscript when he mounted and conducted two separate productions of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* in London during the 1980s – has voiced doubts about some aspects of the Decca recording. He questions, for instance, why the harpsichord Ullmann calls for is so often replaced by the piano. ‘The very fact that there was a harpsichord – and, evidently, a big one – in the camp is remarkable enough, and Ullmann clearly wanted to invoke the *secco* recitative tradition of 18th-century opera: I imagine, too, that he wanted the sound of the harpsichord to create the skeletal clanging, like desiccated funeral bells, of the unrelated chords in Death’s last aria’ (private communication to the Editor of *Tempo*).