

Portrait concert Bernd Alois Zimmermann

2010 is the 40th anniversary of the death of one of the most characteristic figures in European musical culture after the Second World War: composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann. Striving to overcome the aesthetic dogmas of his time, Zimmermann created a unique and still incredibly fresh compositional style. He himself poignantly remarked: "I don't want to be avant-garde, I want to bring something new."

Tonight's program bears witness to this great artist, featuring four of his outstanding later works:

Présence - *Ballet blanc en cinq scènes pour violon, violoncelle et piano* (1961)

Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu - *Ballet noir en sept parties et une entrée* (1962 –1967)

Concerto pour violoncelle et orchestre en forme de „pas de trois“ (1965 – 1966)

Stille und Umkehr - *Orchesterskizzen* (1970)

The common thread among all pieces is the idea of "dance": Renaissance dance movements serve as underlying fundament in **Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu**. Subtitled *ballet noir*, it constitutes a direct counterpart to **Présence**, subtitled *ballet blanc*. Both ballets – *blanc* and *noir* – may be seen rather as imaginary scenes. On the other hand, the **Concerto en forme de „pas de trois“** is conceived as actual ballet music, drawing on idioms ranging from Stravinsky to Cool Jazz. Finally **Stille und Umkehr**, though quiet and introverted, is held together by a distant reminiscence of Blues rhythm.

*“Présence, that is a thin layer of ice, on which one's foot merely lingers until it breaks. But whilst the foot assumes to be resting for a split second, this thin ice sheet is already breaking, and what remains is the certainty of pack-ice: eyes gazing forward to the future, certain of the ever recommenced fracture of the ice; and the absurdity, which lies in the eternally repeated attempt to find hold. Thus Présence appears to be the moment uniting past and future.”**

The subtitle *Ballet blanc en cinq scènes pour violon, violoncelle et piano* already hints at the fact that the work is not simply a piece of chamber music. Each of its five movements features an imaginary scene in which literary figures appear. Zimmermann describes: "Don Quixote with his tufted gold helmet and visor: props from the pack-ice; danseur noble (violon)"* and "Molly Bloom, prima ballerina in a tutu and the mask of Gaia-Tellus, the great mother of all beings... »and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes... and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.«⁺ (violoncelle)"*.

The musical analogy to the "props from the pack-ice" are quotes from various 20th century compositions, beginning with Richard Strauss, Debussy, Prokofiev and ending with Stockhausen. Another important figure joining the piano trio is a "speaker", who oddly enough is voiceless and communicates with the audience only by means of written "word-emblems". (Apart from one moment where he silently spells Ubu's favourite word: "m e r d r e" – "s h r i t" so to speak...) Those "word-emblems" are a peculiar sort of enthralled scenery. Zimmermann himself describes them as "vague signposts on the ice field – who knows whether they aren't deceiving?"*

The piano trio **Présence** forms **the axis of tonight's dramaturgy**. It presents the simultaneous view into two opposite valleys in which *Musique pour les soupers du roi Ubu* and the *Concerto en forme de „pas de trois“* lie.

Whilst dadaistic elements appear subtly and ambiguously in *ballet blanc* *Présence*, *ballet noir* **Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu** uses them without restraint. This time the „speaker“ arrives on a bicycle and interrupts the piece with his crude satirical couplets. The musical quotes, from which the piece is constructed in its entirety, take us on a wild journey through musical past and present. Over the course of this trip, the amused smile changes into cruel laughter of its wounded and hag-ridden creator. *Musique pour Roi Ubu* is a burlesque, wandering around bourgeois-like in superficially good mood, but flatulently like king Ubu himself.

The *entrée*, which precedes the actual ballet, quotes members of the former Berlin Academy: amongst others Paul Dessau, Arthur Honegger, Luigi Dallapiccola and Zimmermann himself. Roi Ubu is the only work that he did not subtitle with the Jesuit motto O.A.M.D.G. (Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam - All for the greater glory of God), as if he was aware of the "devilish" nature of laughter.

Within the field of orchestral music, the **Concerto pour violoncelle et orchestre en forme de „pas de trois“** is probably as exceptional as *Présence* is within the field of chamber music. Elements of ballet, reflections on literary subjects, an incredible instrumental virtuosity and an equally brilliant and demanding treatment of the orchestra create a sheer incommensurable depth and richness of form, texture and style.

The music unfolds like a card play of imaginary characters. There is the fairy (*La Fée*), the over-sensitive princess (*La Sentimentale*), three white swans, three paladins – and again Don Quichote, the dreamer negating borders of banal reality. Who knows, it may be the composer himself hiding behind this literary character, who left house and home to achieve what he was dreaming about: to prevail over the past.

The Concerto en forme de “pas de trios” does not only combine ballet music with an instrumental concerto. It also puts a classical symphony orchestra together with a Jazz combo and the solo cello with a cimbalom (used primarily in folk music) and a glass harp, which belongs in the sphere of vaudeville. These combinations open a window to a surreal world.

In its core, the music is organized rather strictly according to serial composition techniques. But on its surface, it breathes with unheard colours and overwhelms with its dramatic gesture.

Stille und Umkehr (Silence and Reversal) does not only close today's concert, but also Bernd Alois Zimmermann's life. After the turmoil and the restlessness of interfering time layers and dances (we have encountered basically everything from Renaissance dance movements up to Radetzky March, Ride of the Valkyries and crazy up-speed Jazz), the movement in *Stille und Umkehr* ceases.

The composer felt that his life would soon disembody into eternity... Like a wounded dancer, a Blues rhythm tries to take over several times, but the thread of time on the spinning wheel's spindle already stopped turning. It seems as if the dance froze in a black and white fresco on a Renaissance house façade. It is all about one note, the tone d, that is being passed from one instrument to the next, embellished, tinted, until it finally unites with its endless memory: past, present and future at the same time.

© Jiří & Jan-Filip Āupa

*) translated according to B.A.Zimmermann: “Intervall und Zeit“, Mainz 1974

†) James Joyce: “Ulysses”