

Hans Werner Henze *Ballet-Variationen* (1949)

a choreographic poem, first staged 1958; revised 1992

I Allegro con brio

II Allegretto con grazia

III Vivace

IV Allegramente

V Valse Lente

VI Finale. Allegro Maestoso

After a difficult youth subjected to Nazi idealism (his father enrolling Hans with his other sons into the Nazi youth movement) Henze was able to begin music studies in earnest at the State music school in Braunschweig 1942. Soon compelled however to enlist in the army in 1944, he trained and served as a radio officer before being captured by the British and held as a prisoner of War. Throughout this time he consistently practised composition without a piano, an experience which developed his musical ear, so that he could construct the most complicated harmonies purely internally. Despite the difficulties of life in post-war Germany, Henze eagerly absorbed new music, particularly the developments in art that had been dismissed by the Nazis. As he explained later: "Everything that the fascists persecute and hate is beautiful to me". He was among the first participants at the Darmstadt Summer School, studying serialism with René Leibowitz, though at the same time absorbing the compositions of Hindemith, Bartok and Stravinsky.

Through working in a variety of theatrical productions he became increasingly inspired by dance and it was after encountering Frederic Ashton's *Scènes de ballet* (performed by Sadlers Wells ballet company in Hamburg) that he wrote the choreographic poem *Ballett-Variationen*. Although he sent it to Ashton hoping to interest him, it was never taken up by the choreographer.

Henze has described himself as a 'north german contrapuntal temperament projected into the arioso south'. This is partly due to his politically-motivated decision to leave Germany and reside on the Italian island of Ischia, later moving to Rome. Also however, it refers to the difficulty in identifying his many-sided musical personality: able to embrace any number of utterly different composing techniques, Henze often walks a tightrope between tonality and atonality, using as required 12-tone techniques, protest march songs, cabaret, extended instrumental techniques and controlled improvisation. Having led to a famous split with the Darmstadt school (Boulez and Stockhausen reputedly walking out of a performance of 'Nachstücke und Arien' in 1957), his move away from pure serialism was significant in that his style embraced greater freedom of expression, an increase in lyricism (inspired by Italian folksong) and an extraordinary skill in combining seemingly opposite elements within the same framework.

Matthias Pintscher *En Sourdine* (2002)

b.1971 The unprecedented success of the young German composer Matthias Pintscher, is reportedly due to his talent being accepted by leading figures of both compositional camps, both traditional and 'avant-garde'. While it is surprising and indeed disappointing, that Germany (a traditional meeting-point of musical styles) should still be fighting their cultural war along the same tired lines, the fact remains that young talent is immediately categorised and filed under such leading names as Helmut Lachenmann (for the abstract 'modernists') and Hans Werner Henze (for the 'traditionalists').

Pintscher himself remains aloof from the stylistic debate, concerning himself with the pursuit of his own cultural ambitions and inspirations. His music is characterised by textural delicacy and precision while exploring a richly expressive depth of feeling. In general terms he remains influenced by all things French, their culture, cuisine, art etc, and the paintings of the Flemish school from the 15th and 16th centuries. For each piece however, a separate and widely diverse inspiration can emerge, for instance during the new music season "Contact" commissioned by the New York Philharmonic,

Pintscher worked closely with Thomas Hampson (the American baritone) on Hebrew scripts, using the unusual form, syntax and actual sounds of the language as a base for the musical sonorities. As he himself describes: “The moment when music arises in my imagination is always out of, well, you call it instinct, and maybe that is okay. I do not start with a form or with a construction; I start with the sounds, the sonorities, the gestures. One could even say I've got a catalogue of appearances, and then I develop my form out of this collection of material. It's not the form which exists before and is then filled with music, it's the other way around.”

His first violin concerto '*en Sourdine*' was written for Frank Peter Zimmerman receiving more than 40 performances since the premiere, including a performance in the BBC proms

Jean Sibelius *Fourth Symphony* (1910-1911)

I Tempo molto Moderato, quasi Adagio

II Allegro, Molto Vivace

III Il tempo Largo

IV Allegro

b. 1865-d.1957

“This is the crucial hour, the last chance to make something of myself and achieve great things” ..to his wife, written from Germany in 1905.

“(My 4th Symphony) stands as a protest against present-day music. It has nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it.” ..from a letter to Rosa Newmarch in 1911, after the premiere.

Between these two statements and the period of five to six years which they encompass, lie developments in Sibelius's life which would define his future compositional path: from the early influence of Anton Bruckner, in particular the 3rd Symphony with its massive proportions, long stretches of ostinato and mystical, cooler perspectives; also the discovery of the Kalevala (the national folk-epic of Finland written in archaic poems or runes), in fact the entire Finnish folk-culture movement was beginning to fascinate the Swedish-speaking Sibelius as he reported in letters to his fiancée from Vienna in 1890. In particular, he was beginning to find inspiration in the 'modern' nature of the ancient language itself, its creation of the world, the gods and heroes as depicted in the Kalevala. His young ambition was encouraged (after an initially difficult period of study in Berlin) by the early successes of the first and second Symphonies, and Sibelius believed that acceptance as a serious 'modern' talent in central Europe lay within his reach.

By 1909, through entries in a diary he had started that year, we can see that in spite of the addition to his family of two younger daughters and a more settled family life in *Ainola* their country retreat, Sibelius was suffering from bad financial debts. Perhaps as a result of his profligate, impractical life-style, he was also now bothered by a painful throat tumor and the accompanying threat of cancer. He had to undergo operations in Helsinki and Berlin and abstain on medical advice from alcohol and tobacco, two important emotional outlets and former aids to inspiration.

Now more self-critical than ever and experiencing bouts of depression, Sibelius saw himself as alienated from success and from new musical developments in France and Germany. His personal and unique discovery of Finnish culture and folklore was being interpreted as mere provincialism, 'nationalism', while his musical reworkings of classical elements in the 3rd Symphony and the powerful, expressive harmonies of the 4th were not welcomed or understood.

By the time of the 4th Symphony Sibelius was looking at symphonic development in terms of “severity and style and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motifs”. In fact most of the heroic rhetoric of the early works has disappeared: in the 1st Mvt an atmosphere of

desperate loneliness is sustained through impassioned string writing and long Kalevalic ostinatos. The angular, clashing brass passages which characterise his later style, are here deployed along with a new and uncompromising use of dissonance, these statements then strangely alternated with passages of almost exhausted tranquility. The relatively simple openings of the remaining movements form much of the difficulty in comprehending the tight, psychological drama of this symphony. The wistful scherzo (II Mvt), a collage of scherzo passages in the style of Berio's *Sinfonia* descends into a bitter, maddened struggle; the questioning simplicity of the III Mvt's opening phrases belie the later, desperate search for redemption resolutely denied by the composer, while the Finale equally betrays its guileless opening phrases by fragmenting once more into a dark despair. Could anything be further from the heroic affirmations and robust depiction of the natural world as expressed in the 5th Symphony only four years later?

Maurice Ravel (1835-1937) *La Valse*

Maurice Ravel, who was born in the far south-west of France (formerly a Basque region), is most appreciated for his descriptive and colourful musical works. Written in 1919 and premiered the following year, *La Valse* was completed in response to Diaghilev's commission for a ballet, originally called *Wien*. The ballet was dropped however when the entrepreneur announced the work as unsuitable: "it is not a ballet. It's a portrait of a ballet". Ravel was deeply hurt by the episode and refused to shake Diaghilev's hand when they met again five years later. A ridiculous episode was narrowly avoided when Diaghilev challenged Ravel to a duel over the insult, later recanting due to the persuasion of friends!

Perhaps as a result of his parents, (Joseph Ravel was a successful and ingenious engineer and inventor, while Maurice's mother Marie was of Basque origin) Ravel's music is extremely colourful and inventive, adopting strains and characteristics of many foreign sources, while combining these seemingly incompatible qualities into his effortless acerbic style. Interestingly he was regarded with deep suspicion within his own society for a long time: three times he was denied the *Prix de Rome* while studying at the Conservatoire in Paris. Clearly he was a rebel (along with Debussy and others), belonging to the musical *avant-garde*, and his works and development were eagerly discussed in the societies and journals. '*Impressionism*' was a term often used to describe the evocative musical poetry of composers such as Ravel, and yet this facile term is more suited to the painting movement from which it originates. Though Ravel was not interested in the traditional forms of sonatas and chose not to develop as a symphonist, his overwhelming skill as an orchestrator, a feel for colour, passion and ability to evoke scenes as diverse as a Spanish bordello (*Bolero*) or the poems of Stephan Mallarme (in the piano pieces *Gaspard de le Nuit*) give his music a massive popular appeal.

The lushly orchestrated tone-poem *La Valse* captures a depth of feeling probably experienced by Ravel following the death of his mother in 1917. In a society devastated by four long years of war the essence of the waltz eagerly captures the spirit of vanished opulence and security, epitomised in the *fin de siècle* culture of Vienna and the Austro-Hungarian empire.