
Roberto
GERHARD
Kreutzer
Quartet
String Quartets 1 & 2
métier

Roberto Gerhard String Quartets 1 & 2

Roberto Gerhard's two earliest essays in the string quartet medium have not survived, whilst a third attempt (later arranged for string orchestra as the *Concertino for Strings* of 1927-28) has only recently resurfaced in its original form. Gerhard's 'official' String Quartet No.1 (1950-55) was premièred by the Parrenin quartet at the 1956 Dartington Summer School of Music. The opening movement, dating from 1950, successfully combines Schoenbergian structural techniques with Spanish rhythmic elements. Cast in a quasi-sonata form, though reversing the traditional succession of themes in the recapitulation, it employs Gerhard's idiosyncratic, permutational 12-note technique, with hexachordal areas functioning in the manner of tonal regions in a conventional sonata movement. Five years elapsed before Gerhard returned to the work, completing the remaining three movements in 1955. Meanwhile, in works such as the Piano Concerto (1951) and the First Symphony (1952-53), Gerhard's style had evolved significantly as he became increasingly preoccupied with the re-orientation of serial form; developments brilliantly harnessed together in his 'theory of serially-controlled proportions'. The intensely introspective, concentrated third movement (*Grave*) was the 'first radical application' of this theory, employing a rhythmic series to determine 'the movement, duration and temporal succession of the total sound events'. If the result was a somewhat abstract play of proportions, in the almost Bartókian, propulsive finale - with its clearly defined metrical structure and sustained momentum which never lets up - Gerhard strove to make the rhythmic pattering yielded by the series 'more immediately perceptible': a conscious reaction, perhaps, to the continually changing rhythmic patterns of much post-Webernian *avant-garde* music. The function of the second movement scherzando - a mercurial study in rapid contrasts of register, texture and instrumental effect - was to reconcile the work's stylistic differences. Rhythmically free like the first movement, but anticipating the developments of the final two movements in the way that the 5/8 pulse is reflected in both the macrostructure and the microstructure, this improvisatory 'Capriccio' (as it was originally called) 'participates in the nature of both without being subordinated to either'.

The String Quartet No.2 (1960-62) was an attempt 'to see what sonorous possibilities still remained unexplored in this Classical medium'. It was commissioned by the University of Michigan and dedicated to the Stanley Quartet, who gaves its first performance in 1962. Gerhard began the quartet in 1960 and, like another work composed in that year, the Third Symphony, it is in a single movement form, subdivided into seven conjoined sections. These accelerate principally in multiples of two (sections 1-4) or at a lesser multiple (sections 4-7): section 1 (Lento 6/8) introduces the work's pitch and time scheme; sections 2-4 are fast with an imaginative deployment of various percussive string effects; section 5

is in a moderate tempo beginning 4/4 but later combining 5/4 and 3/4; section 6 opens with a moderately fast 12/8, complete with 'pulsating ostinatos' (a typical Gerhard fingerprint) and is followed by a spiky scherzando alternating between 9/8 and 3/4; the final, seventh, section begins in faster 12/8 and recapitulates material from section 2 before the metrically varied coda. The quartet reveals the customary traits of Gerhard's late style: textures have replaced 'themes' in the conventional sense; a balance is achieved in the interplay of the various parameters (between Motion and Stillness in sections 3 and 5; Close-position and Open-position clusters in section 2; Pitched and Non-pitched sound in sections 2-4); and Gerhard's hyper-sensitive ear for instrumental sonority coupled with a philosophy which viewed form as a function of movement is here, as in all the works of his final decade, brilliantly realised in the concept of 'sonic motion', a 'vision', in the memorable words of Susan Bradshaw, 'of music as a buoyant art: as the technique of setting sounds in motion and of propelling them through the space of their collective time span'.

A personal view

Perhaps the time is now ripe for the integration of the two Roberto Gerhard quartets into the accepted twentieth century quartet canon. There is no question that they have suffered an unjustifiable neglect. It is extraordinary to be writing this at the end of the century. As a student, a decade ago, I was extremely excited by performances of Gerhard's constellation of chamber works, which were widely known and respected. There was no question in any one's mind that this composer was master of us all. The notion that ten years later, I would be fretting over the neglect of his finest chamber works, is bizarre.

I approached these works with a degree of trepidation, unnerved by the knowledge of the daunting Ciaconna for solo violin, and the total absence of a received performance tradition for masterpieces forty years old. This is not a problem facing a musician studying, for example George Crumb. One might say that any performance of "Black Angels" will be, in part, a critique of other readings, as much as performance of Shostakovich involves as much reaction to other voices, as pure reading, or mis-reading of a score. However hard the artist tries to insulate themself from other voices or interpretational accretions, they are palpably there, and even the act of blocking them out is reactive.

So back to Gerhard, and one opens the score. The language is pellucid, ideas perfectly drawn, the structure distilled purity, and the score is closed again. Certainly the first time that I read the 2nd quartet, I was struck that all that would result from my trying to perform it would be an act of despoliation. I am sure that if one was to be handed the manuscript of

Op 131, unperformed, for some bizarre reason, since Beethoven's death, its perfection would certainly give one similar pause before attempting to perform it.

Gerhard's extreme compositional and technical refinement might have been partially responsible for inhibiting performance, but might also be one of the traits that draw performers and audiences back to these extraordinary works. String playing has changed immeasurably in the last quarter century, driven in part by composers, but mainly by the increasingly diverse musical empathies required of contemporary performers.

If I was to take a random, eclectic cross-section of recent quartets by living composers, from, say Elliott Carter, to Judith Weir, by way of Gyorgy Kurtag, and then to envisage the range of tone colours and instrumental techniques that these works demand, it would immediately be apparent that there has been a remarkable shift in the range of playing methods expected from string players in the past quarter of a century. The shift is not necessarily one of invention, as the majority of extended techniques have been fundamental to string instruments since they developed from the instruments that appeared from asia in the earlier part of the second millennium. It is rather from the use of the extended technique as ornament, or as a modernist might have it, effect, to it being a central means of expression and a structural integer. In Vitruvian terms, this might be better expressed as a move from "venustas" to "firmitas". Gerhard seems to be the one of the first composers to sense this change and use it.

As a player, I am aware that Gerhard's use of say extended percussion effects has a folk-like feel, strongly reminiscent of the rhythmic devices and colours of Iberian music. Perhaps his identification with these traditional techniques enabled him to incorporate the far edges of instrumental sound and technique, from vertiginous multiple-voiced polyphonies, to isometric rhythmic layering at dizzying speed, and lightning hocketings. This was amazingly prescient of the requirements of quartet technique now, of the playing skills, which whilst being resisted by a sizeable reactionary majority, are necessary to essay the thrusting repertoire of today, be it Ferneyhough or Henze.

What is more, Gerhard seems to make demands on the performer similar to his compositional discipline; one might illustrate this by saying that the experience of playing Gerhard incorporates the majority of devices and colours familiar to any one familiar with the string works of Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Bartok, but requiring the performers' experience of the aforementioned composers to be utterly sublimated, much as he transcended what he had learnt from Schoenberg. This is a tough call for most of us, who, whilst still trying to come to terms with the "Lyric Suite", find Gerhard expecting us to follow him way past it.

It is quite astonishing, as a performer, that one has to approach the quartets of Roberto Gerhard from a position of ignorance, or, at the very least, silence. I have found that if I mention the works to colleagues, there follows a learned shaking of heads, and vague generalisations about how good they are, which rapidly tail off into the eventual, and inevitable admission that they have never heard them or played them. In fact, the only quartet that has been performed with any degree of regularity since its premiere, the first, has been played from a set of parts and score, that are manifestly inaccurate and contradictory, so that a considerable amount of editorial work was necessary to render the piece ready to perform without error. Ironically, the second quartet, which has long been available in an exemplary edition from Oxford University Press, has suffered what appears to be total neglect, since its first performance in Dartington in 1961.

There is still the chance that a lone recording of the Gerhard quartets might merely prolong the neglect, or rather change it to the equally invidious "specialisation neglect" that infects the post-CD music industry. A result of the general reluctance of musicians to genuinely incorporate recent works into their developmental repertoire is that individual composers and works tend to be associated with the one group that has the opportunity to record them and are consequently ignored by other artists. There being a recording, there is apparently neither a commercial nor research-led imperative towards a second, and a third and maybe eventually a performance tradition.

Following a recent London performance of the Gerhard quartets, I was overwhelmed by the response from composers and performers, shocked at being suddenly confronted with such masterworks. This response came from an extremely broad cross-section of artists, from radical activists for the complex cause, to tonalists, minimalists and romantics. Gerhard's quartets have a universal appeal that is utterly non-partisan; programming him alongside Beethoven seems the only appropriate course of action.

Roberto Gerhard
Chamber works

Cantamen

Métier MSVCD 92012

“The Cantamen ensemble play the [Trio] with tenderness and sympathy. This performance [of Gemini] has real fire and conviction. Caroline Balding fulfils {Chaconne’s] virtuosic demands with distinction.” – Lionel Salter (Gramophone)

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ROBERTO GERHARD

Kreutzer Quartet

Peter Sheppard Skærved Gordon MacKay
Bridget Carey Neil Heyde

	String Quartet No.1	
1	I. Allegro assai	7:10
2	II. Con vivacita	2:35
3	III. Grave	5:24
4	IV. Molto Allegro	8:34
	String Quartet No.2	
5	I. Lento	1:56
6	II.	1:26
7	III.	1:33
8	IV	0:30
9	V.	4:28
10	VI.	2:22
11	VII.	1:58

Publishers: Boosey & Hawkes (String Quartet No.1) and Oxford University Press (String Quartet No.2)

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