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Who Follows Eisler?

Notes on Six Composers of the GDR

Biographical data

Siegfried Matthus

13 April 1934 Born Mallenuppen (at that time in East Prussia).

- 1952- Studied at the Deutsche Hochschule für Musik, Berlin, with among others Rudolf Wagner-Régeny.
- 1958- Studied with Hanns Eisler at the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1960- Freelance composer in Berlin.
- 1964- Dramaturg¹ and composer at the Komische Oper, Berlin.
- 1969- Ordinary member of the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1970- Awarded the Arts Prize of the GDR.
- 1972- Awarded the National Prize of the GDR.
- 1972- Secretary of the music section of the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1978- Corresponding member of the Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste.

Georg Katzer

10 January 1935 Born Habelschwerdt (at that time in Silesia).

- 1953- Studied at the Deutsche Hochschule für Musik, Berlin (composition with Ruth Zechlin and Rudolf Wagner-Régeny) and at the Akademie Múzických Umění, Prague, with Karel Janáček.
- 1959- Freelance composer in Berlin.
- 1961- Studied with Hanns Eisler and Leo Spies at the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1963- Freelance composer in Berlin.
- 1975- Awarded the Arts Prize of the GDR.
- 1978- Ordinary member of the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1981- Awarded the National Prize of the GDR.

Rainer Kunad

24 October 1936 Born Chemnitz (Saxony).

- 1950- Studied at the Volksmusikschule, Karl-Marx-Stadt.
- 1955- Studied at the Dresden Conservatory.
- 1956- Studied at the Musikhochschule, Leipzig (composition with Fidelio F. Finke and Ottmar Gerster).
- 1959- Appointed lecturer at the Robert Schumann Conservatory, Zwickau.
- 1960-74- Director of music at the Staatstheater, Dresden.
- 1971- Co-Dramaturg at the Deutsche Staatsoper, Berlin.
- 1972- Awarded the Arts Prize of the GDR.
- 1974- Ordinary member of the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1975- Awarded the National Prize of the GDR.
- 1976- Teacher (professor from 1978) of composition at the Carl Maria von Weber Hochschule für Musik, Dresden.

Friedrich Goldmann

27 April 1941 Born Siegmarschönau (Saxony).

- 1951- Member of the Dresden Kreuzchor.
- 1959- Studied at the Carl Maria von Weber Hochschule für Musik, Dresden.
- 1959- Participated in the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik and Stockhausen's seminar at Darmstadt.
- 1962- Studied with Rudolf Wagner-Régeny at the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1964- Studied musicology at the Humboldt University, Berlin.
- 1968- Freelance composer in Berlin.
- 1977- Awarded the Arts Prize of the GDR.
- 1978- Ordinary member of the Akademie der Künste der DDR.

Friedrich Schenker

23 December 1942 Born Zeulenroda (Thuringia).

- 1961- Studied at the Hanns Eisler Hochschule für Musik, Berlin (composition with Günter Kochan).
- 1964- First trombone of the Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra.
- 1970- Founded the Gruppe Neue Musik Hanns Eisler.
- 1973-5- Studied with Paul Dessau at the Akademie der Künste der DDR.

Udo Zimmermann

6 October 1943 Born Dresden.

- 1954- Member of the Dresden Kreuzchor.
- 1962- Studied at the Carl Maria von Weber Hochschule für Musik, Dresden.
- 1968- Studied with Günter Kochan at the Akademie der Künste der DDR.
- 1970- Dramaturg and composer at the Staatsoper, Dresden.
- 1974- Director of the Studio Neue Musik, Dresden.
- 1975- Awarded the National Prize of the GDR.
- 1976- Teacher (professor from 1978) of composition at the Musikhochschule, Dresden.

Occupations and position

All six composers have established themselves in the musical life of the GDR and have also won international recognition. Their main occupation in every case is composition, and both the state and society in general offer an abundance of commissions. Some among them have, particularly in recent years, taken on positions of responsibility—as members of the Akademie der Künste der DDR or as professors in colleges of music. Three of them have special links with the musical stage and work as Dramaturgen—Matthus at the Berlin Komische Oper, Kunad at the Berlin Staatsoper, and Zimmermann at the Dresden Staatstheater. Matthus and Goldmann do some conducting, and Schenker is an orchestral musician. So-called 'applied' music—the theatre, cinema, television, and radio plays—offers many, materially rewarding opportunities. In the past Matthus, Kunad, and Katzer have been particularly involved in this area, though their work has met with varying success; the interest of all three is now increasingly turning to other fields.

¹ There is no precise equivalent in British musical life of the Dramaturg. The term may best be translated as 'musical adviser'.

The generation of composers who are now 35-45 years old were able to benefit from the experience of their predecessors in the realm of socialist music, including such classic exponents as Eisler and Dessau, but they did not adopt previous practice as a formula. They had to establish their own position, taking into account the social changes that had taken place, and the continuing development of musical language.

Teachers

After Hanns Eisler returned from exile and settled in the GDR he took over a master-class in composition at the Akademie der Künste der DDR in Berlin and directed it until his death in 1962. Rudolf Wagner-Régeny also had numerous students, but Paul Dessau taught only intermittently. Occupying positions of authority, these three exercised great influence. As early as the twenties and thirties they were known for their progressive musical thinking, and when in the fifties dogma impeded progress and twelve-note music in particular came under criticism, Eisler, Wagner-Régeny and Dessau remained staunchly loyal to the technique and declared themselves (verbally at least) in its favour. Their close links with Brecht (in Wagner-Régeny's case through their mutual friend Caspar Neher), whose aim was to broaden the concept of realism, confirmed them in their stand.

Exchange of information between East and West

Matthus has pointed out how difficult it still was at the beginning of the sixties to know what was happening elsewhere.² Avant-garde music was almost never to be heard at concerts; no recordings or scores of such music or books about it were available. In those days he would sit by the radio, tune in to the broadcasts and simply give himself up to the impact of the sound; Boulez and Nono made the greatest impression on him. Without taking account of the fact that the new sound was the product of highly organised and pervasive structuring, he simply tried to develop a feeling for it. He borrowed the colour of serial music but not the serial method. For Zimmermann the dangers of this type of emotional surrender became clear in his *Sonetti amorosi* for alto, flute, and string quartet (1966); a technically competent work, it shows him to have been dazzled by Henze's Italian lyricism, though as he admits himself, his imitation of Henze went no further than the general sound-world.

The so-called Polish school—helped considerably by the Warsaw Autumn festivals—had a powerful effect on young composers at this period, though, as soon became apparent, its influence too was pernicious. Few ultimately went in this direction, and the exploitation of aleatoric procedures, even 'controlled' in the Lutosławskian sense, became less and less central.

Conservative beginnings

The six composers produced their first works between 1954 and 1963, according to their age and education. Their first pieces were almost all tonal and, notwithstanding the occasional infiltration of other idioms, they held firm to tonality for some long time. Their musical education had been conservative, partly because lecturers in higher education were that way inclined and partly because teachers such as Eisler restricted themselves, on methodological grounds, to a traditional approach. Added to this, the official aesthetic dictated that tonality and melody be taken as guiding principles.

² Here and elsewhere the opinions and words of the six composers are quoted from a series of interviews with them recorded by the author between 16 February and 12 April 1976 and between 7 and 28 July 1978.

In these early works there are none of the signs of rebellion and unrest so often typical of youth; the scores are worthy and competent. Only the most hardened musical reactionaries (such as those at the Leipzig Hochschule, where Kunad was) could find fault with such efforts; for the most part the criticism was very favourable—perhaps too favourable since praise so liberally bestowed is apt to spoil and lead to complacency. Fortunately the composers kept their heads and withstood these hazards, viewing their successes with scepticism, and, without the help of teachers, familiarising themselves with new compositional techniques, knowing that the critics would carp or even slate them for it.

Experimental phase

In the mid-sixties the six composers started out on an experimental phase, trying out new materials and structural methods. It is no coincidence that at the same time the aesthetic debate was running high—it doubtless afforded them encouragement. Paul Dessau had already dared to demonstrate how avant-garde expression could be combined with political material, though at the time this unleashed some fierce criticism: between 1957 and 1959 he composed the twelve-note opera *Puntilla*, in 1959 *Hymne auf den Beginn einer neuen Geschichte der Menschheit* (Hymn to the beginning of a new history of mankind), and in 1961 *Appell der Arbeitklass* (Call to the working-class). The explorations of the young composers were also controversial at first, but the sixties were already beginning to see the development of different opinions, and as time went by they received more and more encouragement.

After early student works Matthus used serial elements in the choral *Liebeslieder 45* (1960). His orchestral songs, *Es wird ein grosser Stern in meinen Schoss fallen* (1962) are unusual as much for the juxtaposition of different texts (by Hebbel, the Lasker school, Mörike, Brecht, and Klabund) as for their sensitive use of sound. The *Inventionen* for orchestra, composed in 1964, go further in the use of a new language; at their première three years later in Erfurt they caused a sensation. *Das Manifest* (1965), which combines the same idiom with political texts, had a mixed reception. Politics is also the subject of the opera *Der letzte Schuss* (1966-7); Matthus sees this as the peak of his efforts at that period, and finds in it more convincing and considered syntheses than he had achieved hitherto.

For Katzer his First String Quartet (1965) marked a turning-point. It was written after a visit to the Warsaw Autumn followed by a spell in hospital as the result of an accident, during which his enforced inactivity allowed him time to reflect on new compositional possibilities. Kunad had used twelve-note technique in 1963 in his opera *Old Fritz*, and in the following year he wrote a twelve-note symphony. His more advanced experiments—with aleatoric procedures in his Symphony No.2 (1966-7)—provoked criticism.

Goldmann describes his *Essay I* for orchestra (1963-4) as having long stretches based on clusters; his aim was to show 'how massed acoustic phenomena could be organised'. The première of the work, postponed many times, did not take place until ten years after its composition. Schenker was still a student when he composed his *Orchesterstück I* in 1965; this is a twelve-note work, but it was above all in *Interludia* (1968; revised 1970) that he made a decisive break with conventional musical language. After trying out twelve-note technique Udo Zimmermann discovered new concepts of sound and form in his *Streichmusik* (1968).

Criticism of aleatoric techniques

None of these composers greeted avant-garde ideas such as aleatoricism with uncritical euphoria. They have all experimented with aleatoric procedures and have all now

expressed reservations about them. Matthus, who used aleatoricism primarily in his Octet (1971) and String Quartet (1972) complains that in his experience it leads to a loss of thematic and melodic substance; he considers it justified only as a means of simplifying rhythmic problems in chamber music and rejects the idea of building an entire aesthetic upon it.

In his *Neruda-Liedern* (1965) Katzer made use for the first time of durational values that could be varied aleatorically; his *Trio ad libitum* (1969) extends the element of choice to the selection and ordering of phrases. The principle is most extensively called for in *Baukasten* for orchestra (1971). But Katzer was frequently disappointed in the practical results of aleatoric methods in performance; the intended involvement of the players and their creative participation never materialised—they seemed to have no desire for the 'democracy' that was discussed at such length. Goldmann, who worked with aleatoricism chiefly in his *Essay II* (1968) and *Essay III* (1971), both for orchestra, had the same experience. He finds fault with its 'compositional imprecision', and in his opinion it leads to 'blurred musical thinking'.

Electronic music

Experiments with electronic music have run into difficulties in the past and still do because of the lack of facilities in the GDR. A Studio for Electro-acoustic Sound Production was founded in Berlin in 1963, but in the mid-sixties work there was discontinued. Anyone who still wanted to work in this field either had to make do with conventional equipment such as that used in radio, which they could rig up at home, or leave for the studios of Warsaw and Bratislava.

In his *Galilei* of 1966 (based on Brecht's play) Matthus combined electronic sound on tape with the live sounds of a voice and five instruments. He was able to use the facilities of the Berlin studio to make his tape but he claims that they were modest. The effects of the studio's shortcomings and of his own still imperfect grasp of the medium are evident in the work; but *Galilei* was the first attempt at avant-garde treatment of electronic music in the GDR—previous work had been restricted to music for light entertainment and the electronic transformation of conservative material. The mid-sixties was a favourable time for the piece to appear and it opened the door to new developments. Matthus saw himself as having to create the new medium through the theme of his work—a montage on the view of the cosmos and world expressed in the play.

By the time Katzer turned to electronic music in the mid-seventies a more developed understanding of the aesthetics of the medium had emerged. In articles and broadcasts he expressly warned against establishing definite associations with electronic music, and using it to characterise 'the uncanny, the horrible, and the alien'; such clichés, he says, are 'dehumanising'. He recognises the differences between electronic and traditional music, the challenge offered by greatly expanded sound-resources, and the necessity to develop new principles of composition specific to this material; but he opposes the view that the listener's rich musical experiences are of no relevance and that the medium is divorced from tradition.

New Romanticism

Udo Zimmermann professes himself in favour of a new Romanticism. In doing so he aligns himself with a world-wide tendency in musical composition at the end of the seventies. While this often signifies a turning away from the present and a fear of the future, for him (and for others of the six composers who are following a similar course) it means arriving at an understanding of the present that opens the way to the future. In an interview in 1975 he said: 'For me Romanticism means to think and dream in future realities.' The attraction is not nostalgia

but Utopia—playing with fantasy. Self-examination is also desirable; Zimmermann even mentions 'meditation'.

New light is also being shed on tonality (or consonance) and melody. What until now has been considered stale, banal, and old-fashioned will again come into its own. Of course the contexts are new: the old elements exclusively are used, but they are combined in a new way. Matthus has explained this 'cycle' in terms of history and pointed out its international character; tonality, he says, is an irreplaceable, not an interchangeable factor in the cycle. In his Cello Concerto (1975) he uses a D flat major chord as a foil to the general conflict. In his Second Symphony (1976) his starting-point is a sound-constant that he calls the 'central tone', 'pedal tone', or 'entrance sound'; hand in hand with differentiation of the sounds, melody and ornament emerge into prominence.

The challenge of the present should never, of course, be ignored, and the technical achievements of music in the last decades, the process of rationalisation, for example, must be preserved. Unfortunately there seems to be little willingness to pursue the possible applications of information theory and cybernetics to musical composition, though such experiments have long been going on in other fields. Herein lies the task: to subjugate musical material—wherever possible in its traditional forms—to a system that accords with modern conditions, both ideological and technical.

MusICA

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