

Soni VENTORUM Feb 19, 1969

SCHOENBERG: HIS CIRCLE AND HIS INFLUENCE ON THE WIND QUINTET

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The three works on this evening's program present a unity difficult to find elsewhere in the literature of the wind quintet. Rather than simply a case of a teacher's work providing an impetus for similar works from pupils, we also have the historic situation of a new system of composition making its first appearance in complete form. The teacher in this case was Arnold Schoenberg and the particular work involved was his Wind Quintet, Op. 26 (1924). The pupils influenced by the man and his work to compose quintets of their own were Hanns Eisler and Roberto Gerhard. While others of Schoenberg's circle were later to compose quintets, those of Eisler and Gerhard are particularly close to Schoenberg's both in the dates of their composition as well as the directness of their relationships to it.

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Hanns Eisler was born in Leipzig in 1896 and died in East Berlin in 1962. He studied at the Music Academy in Vienna with Arnold Schoenberg (1923-24) and subsequently moved to Berlin, remaining there until 1932. He emigrated to the U.S. the following year, teaching first in New York and then moving to Hollywood in the 'forties where he was active in film music. In 1948 he returned to Europe and eventually settled in East Berlin, becoming an outstanding figure in the musical life of East Germany. His didactic-political aesthetic, already strongly manifest in the years following his study with Schoenberg, and accompanied with a simplification of his style, found its spiritual home in these surroundings and was given great attention. After his death, a "Hanns Eisler Archiv" was established in order to provide a housing for his manuscripts, letters, articles, documentation of his long association with Berthold Brecht, and other materials relating to his creative output.

Back in his student days with Schoenberg, Eisler showed an astonishing affinity for his master's techniques and his first several works were written under the influence of Schoenberg's continuing developments. Eisler had already aroused sufficient notice by 1924 to gain the City of Vienna Music Prize. An article in the "Musikblätter des Anbruch" in October of that year summed up his accomplishments to date:

"Although the 26-year old Hanns Eisler has completed the first of two years of his studies with Arnold Schoenberg, he has already presented 7 finished works, each of which possesses his own style, and which already bear the stamp of a characteristic individuality. These are both Piano Sonatas, Op. 1 and 6; Six Songs, Op. 2; piano pieces, Op. 3; the Wind Quintet, Op. 4; the melodrama 'Palmström', Op. 5; and the Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7."

In discussing these, the article gives us the relationship of Eisler's quintet to Schoenberg's by stating:

"The outward inducement of its origin was a challenge of Schoenberg's who at that time had just begun the composition of his Wind Quintet, Op. 26."

Dr. Henry Leland Clarke, who knew Eisler in New York, recalls: In Hanns Eisler, young composers found a warm friend and an unerring critic. While he was teaching at the New School in New York, he discovered a group of eager disciples attacking one of their fellows for writing "like Schumann." No point in that, said Eisler, was it "good Schumann?"

Roberto Gerhard was born at Valls, near Tarragona, Spain in 1896 of Swiss-French parentage. His early musical training included the study of piano with Granados (Barcelona, 1915-16), and composition with Felipe Pedrell (1916-21). He was well on his way to becoming the leading figure in a succession of Spanish nationalist composers when he felt the need to broaden his experience and further organize his compositional techniques. He therefore submitted himself to Schoenberg who accepted him as a private student (1923-25) and then took him into his master class, first in Vienna then Berlin, as an outstanding pupil and later teaching assistant (1925-28). After his studies with Schoenberg, Gerhard returned to Barcelona where he became associated with various Catalanian institutions, editing music of 18th century Catalan composers, and writing and translating a number of theoretical works. With the fall of the Spanish Republic and its attitude of relative autonomy toward Catalonia, Gerhard emigrated to England, settling in Cambridge where he still resides.

Up to this time, his usage of 12-tone principles had been neither complete nor systematic, but his arrival in England seemed to coincide with an extension of his technique via stricter elements. These were related primarily to permutational treatments of sections of the 12-note row and to deriving time units from their disposition, and have continued as the basis of his present style. In England, Gerhard's works were slow in gaining attention, but beginning with performances in the 'fifties his music has become increasingly known. Two of his relatively recent successes were documented in "Time" Magazine: (Jan. 18, 1963), the U. S. premiere of his First Symphony with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic, and (Apr. 10, 1964), the London premiere of his oratorio, "The Plague", after Camus.

Gerhard's Wind Quintet (1928) was written at the end of his studies with Schoenberg and represents perhaps a desire to pay his respects with a consolidation of what he had learned. In the following account from Gerhard himself, in answer to a letter concerning the origins of the Quintet, we can readily perceive how strongly he was moved by Schoenberg's Op. 26 and thoroughly steeped in its content:

"I vividly remember the first performance of the work in Vienna, on occasion of the various musical manifestations with which the city honoured him on his 50th birthday. It made a tremendous impression on me, and you are right in assuming that my own quintet was a consequence of that experience. I also remember that in 1926 or 27, in Berlin, we analysed his work in the class. To this end we formed 4 teams of two pianists who would play one movement each in Greissle's piano-duet arrangement. In the course of that analysis, the discussion ranged far and wide, as you can imagine..."

Yes, indeed, we can well imagine as we picture the "teams" choosing up sides and groaning through the near-chiropractic demands of Greissle's arrangement, some in awe at the unfolding of the new system, others in violent opposition to every note! Greissle's arrangement (Felix Greissle: Schoenberg's son-in-law and conductor (!) of the Quintet's first performance) pointed out early the significance of Op. 26 -- it was Schoenberg's first and totally systematic work in the 12-tone technique -- and made it available for wider study and analysis. Study, analysis, and attendant palaver were the fate of the Quintet for many years however, and whereas the proof of the composition is in the hearing, it has only been in the last decade or so that the work has received any frequency of performance in this country.

Samuel Baron, the highly perceptive and articulate flutist of the New York Woodwind Quintet, wrote an engaging article dealing with performance preparation of the work, ("A Case of Mal-Practice--Schoenberg's Woodwind Quintet" in Listen, March-April, 1964) and has kindly given us permission to quote from it:

"Arnold Schoenberg's Woodwind Quintet is a universally acknowledged landmark of music. One simply cannot travel musically from 1900 to 1964 without passing through it, or at least very close to it. But it is a work that is extraordinarily well-known theoretically, and hardly known at all as a piece of music. By this I mean that there are many musicians who have analyzed the row technique of the work, but fewer, far fewer, who know 'how it goes'.

"What is the elusive quality that dogs this piece of chamber music? Why does it escape performers so? Speaking as a member of a woodwind quintet I can try to give partial answers. I can say, first off, that performers of this work in the past have not respected what is to be found on the page; Schoenberg's own indications relating to metronome, dynamics, articulations, main and subsidiary voices, and accented and non-accented tones. 'He can't have meant this,' is a common comment, as is 'But that's impossible; let's do it this way'. Nothing, but nothing, in the woodwind quintet literature prepares an ensemble for the task of organizing this long, complicated, rich, fascinating, expressive work into a lively, moving, absorbing performance. The lines are too big, and the minutiae too seductive...

"Routine caution is one of the enemies of this work. Pedantry--the attitude that causes a player to say, 'Don't drown me out; what I have is thematic'--is another. Everything in this piece is thematic! One simply cannot make it all sound. The same attitude causes a player to say, 'I really practiced this difficult passage. Now I am going to play it loudly.' Alas, there is a lot (sob) that has to be thrown away in the playing... Next to nothing has been written about the Quintet as a piece of music. Has anyone remarked on its humor and lightness? Has anyone commented on its drive and passion?

"Schoenberg said, 'A Chinese poet writes in Chinese. But what does does he say?' Few seem interested in what the Quintet says, though many have written at length on its grammar. Isn't it time for the musical world to know how this masterpiece goes?"