



The Freshness of the Idea

Ernst von Siemens Music Prize 2012 for Friedrich Cerha

When someone has survived eighty-five years of artistic creativity one often speaks of his having attained the wisdom of age or having reached the peak of creative maturity. Last year Friedrich Cerha reached this stage, although, on the one hand, he has demonstrated diverse aspects of creative maturity for the last half a century, and on the other, he has always been unsentimentally sceptical about wisdom having anything to do with experience. So aren't such conventions surely out of place here? After all Cerha has recently presented positively juvenile works that show no fear of spontaneity. Or works that present conflicts figuratively, as in the orchestral piece *Wie eine Tragikomödie* (2008/09). It exposes what Goethe called the "identity of opposites". In Cerha's works this means ulterior affinity of the material. A quick change from dramatic episodes to episodes of contemplative calm. Finally the timbre of timelessness, but shortly before that forte wind chords sinking down as if they wanted to open up the realm of the eternal. Subtle chords such as only Cerha can compose. Criteria of his personal style, which has its roots in the cultural space of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Personal style is an unpopular term these days, but detached from temporary fashion, in accordance with his music, which draws its individual strength from unmarked paths, it can be used anyway. On these unmarked paths he saw plants at first foreign to him, from these he formed organically complex structural progressions, contrapuntal lines, variants, coming together in the congruence of the musical parameters. Tragi-comedy: synthetic form of dialectic tension (Ionesco), or expression of doubt and disbelief. Or at bottom perhaps the retrospective and serene self-assurance of maturity after all? It is now 54 years ago that Cerha and Kurt Schwertsik founded the ensemble "die reihe", which is still active, and which started the encounter with genuinely new music in Vienna. The interpretations were professionally prepared, the success was instant and lasting, but its intended continuity was not possible without subsidies. When Cerha went to the relevant ministry to appeal for funds he wasn't kicked out by the household staff as was Mozart, but seen off with the Ministerialrat's indelicate words, "we can't just let anybody off the street in here". A tragedy for the then delicate ensemble seedling, certainly; today, decades later, a ridiculous comedy. Looking back, even existential shocks become tempered by a soothed mind.

As a child, Friedrich, demonstrating his enormous need for freedom, ran away to the gypsies, taking his violin with him. In Vienna, his birthplace, he brought his command of the violin, to that of an accomplished soloist by 1953, thanks to Vaša Přihoda. Shortly before the end of the war he absconded from the Wehrmacht to the Tyrolean Alps, where, in 1945, as a Hüttenwirt and mountain guide he began to broaden his mind. Even at this early stage his latent aspiration to reach new heights became evident, in a geographic sense, at first, and soon after, intellectually: searching, inquisitive, always looking to discover new musical territory. Comic situations would have been part of his personal development, if they hadn't been suppressed by the guardians of the unresolved political past, who tried to nip 20th century musical innovations in the bud. A tragic constellation with lasting consequences, in which Cerha, as an extremely disruptive element, had some trouble asserting himself. This had dire consequences: no secure, lucrative career.

The first successes at home came in 1957, internationally beginning in 1961, at which time he had already experienced the fascination of the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt. He experienced the sense of a new era, fundamental aesthetic inversions, infectious and stimulating. He didn't copy orthodox serialism, however. For the sake of musical flexibility he created aggregates that he serially bundled into groups, for example in *Formation et solution* or *Relazioni fragili*. Soon after, in 1959/60, he noted the concept of the seven part *Spiegel-Zyklus*, an epochal document of the compositional technique that gives apparently static mass structures and vegetatively, as it were, developing soundscape complexes absolute priority, conceived at the same time as, and independently of, György Ligeti. Premiers of the *Spiegel* pieces, inevitably delayed, took place between 1964 and 1972 in Warsaw, Donaueschingen, Stockholm, Graz, Munich, Hamburg and Vienna; the whole cycle was to be heard for the first time at the Weltmusikfest of the IGNM in Graz in 1972. Reflections of visions and evolutions. The acoustic impressions evoke spectral phenomena: bright or bleak colours, relaxed cheerfulness or distressing severity; but also, brutality – determined by his war experiences as Cerha himself supposes – in the sound and noise spectrum. It would be a fatal error to assume he had delivered illustrative programme music. Welded into the *Spiegel* blocks are compositionally autonomous forms of complex artistic structure. In 2011 he progressed (as in 1989) to become the main composer of the "Wien Modern" Festival, which opened with the *Spiegel* cycle. The performance, about fifty years after the birth of the sketches, confirmed without a doubt the work's singular status in the music of the twentieth century.

Alongside sound-masses and tonal areas Cerha concentrates on clear lines and transparency of

the musical structure. For Cerha, polyphony means precise composition, minutely controlled harmony, coherent thought. "Ideas can only be noted speedily in short forms", he says himself, since during the protracted work on large, complex scores "some of the freshness of the idea is lost". Not so in the case of spatially confined structures and values. Moreover, Cerna has "gradually recognised that the composer's sweat shouldn't be audible". That is aimed at his late works, for middle-sized to small ensembles. Of nearly 160 works, roughly 60 are chamber music. A hybrid, as it were: *Kammermusik für Orchester* (2004/05). Some fifty musicians perform, on the whole soloistically, ramified filigree passages without symphonic posturing. The atmosphere of the subtle serenade-like beginning is reminiscent of the *Langegger Nachtmusik I*, composed in 1969, which is hardly coincidental, for this is the year the prehistory of *Kammermusik für Orchester* begins, with *Catalogue des objets trouvés*, which is assembled from bold, cut-like transitions. *Kammermusik für Orchester*, too, is full of the original breaks, but otherwise "quite different and new, like starting from scratch". It was clear to him "that variety and richness, induced consciously, are, or can be, artistic qualities."

In *Les Adieux* (2005/07), contemplative thoughts find their way into the sounding world, where consciously perceived reverberations suggest an uneasiness with the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Not a farewell in the sense of Beethoven's op. 81a, but rather farewell to some compositional characteristics: continuity and compact masses. In their place, short, eruptive Phases and fragile finishes. Loud points of energy and quiet, porous lingering. Remnants of figures. And once more turning his back to the hectic world: *Bruchstück, geträumt* (2009). A work requested by the Klangforum Wien on the occasion of their 25 anniversary. At first Cerha didn't want to write it, regardless of the close relationship to this ensemble, with which he had, in a series of rehearsals years ago, prepared interpretations of works of the Vienna school which were, with regard to expression and agogic, as authentic as possible. In particular Webern's music was seen in a new light. But then he dreamt a gently tentative pianissimo, "a singular praise of slowness", a foreign body in today's environment. A shimmering, hardly audible begin, lispings strings, as if the music were emerging from acoustic mist. Rising veils assume form, sink back into intangibility. Music of inner peace.

Cerha's life has not been without calamities, that is certain. Creative crises? If they arose, hardly anybody noticed them. But there are definitely periods of existential doubt, critical phases in his life which brought death threateningly close. A series of works with requiem-like characteristics are perhaps sublimations of these negative experiences: *Requiem für Hollensteiner* for baritone, narrator, choir and orchestra (after Thomas Bernhard, 1983), *Triptychon* for tenor and orchestra

(texts: Cerha, Zuckmayer, Bernhard, 1983/97), the bleak third string quartet (1992), the cautiously resigned concerto for viola and orchestra (1993), the weightily cumulative *Requiem* for choir and orchestra (Latin text: Ordinarium, 1994), extended by the composer's cycle of poems *De Profundis*, the fatalistic a cappella choral work *Nichtigkeit ist alles* (1995). Strewn in amongst all this is the opposite pole, comedy, Cerha's sense of humour and irony: *Keintate I* and *Keintate II* (between 1980 und 1985). The title combines the name of the late Viennese dialect poet Ernst Kein with the term cantata. The sarcastic texts, hitting on the central nerve of the Viennese mentality, are the basis for the stylised showpieces, musically articulated to the point, and in an artificially exaggerated Viennese song idiom. The substance and the standard remain untouched in elevated regions. A further instalment, as it were: *Eine Art Chansons* (1985-87), linguistically experimental and absurd (Ernst Jandl, Gerhard Rühm, Kurt Schwitters etc.), compositionally virtuosic and seasoned with quotes.

At first glance a middle-class urban lifestyle. The stately Vienna residence with pool (Cerha needs exercise) in the Villenviertel on the western edge. An exclusive residential area. As an alternative the refuge in Maria Langegg near the Danube and the Wachau, lush vegetation in an unkempt garden, glasshouse, swimming pool, a stone chapel he built himself amongst trees. Silence to stimulate his creativity. Alone in the woods. Isolating himself. That is what he requires. His attitude non-conformist. As is his composing. Never imitating any fashions for the sake of being up to date. Always reflecting the centres of current musical thought. Non-conformists, too, the protagonists of his three operas. But first *Netzwerk* (1962-67, 1978-80), his most complex stage work (for those who require categories: experimental music theatre), he particularly cherishes it. A critical look at the world as a networked system, with a lethal conclusion. The process of change in society, in the individual, in organisms. The text is non-semantic, built up from abstract vocalised phonemes, it elicits associations at best. Presenting the sociological tension between the poles individual and collective on the stage is still the composer's imperative. For decades the *Netzwerk* idiom was kept underground; it resurfaced in *Zwei Szenen* for seven voices (2010/11), initiated by the capabilities of the Neue Vocalsolisten from Stuttgart: *Wohlstandskonversation* and *Hinrichtung*. The original text structure, in Cerha's words "the backbone", is maintained, but "all the organs surrounding it are new".

Between 1960 and 1970 innovative stage works demonstrated a scepticism towards the word. Cerha's (literature) opera trilogy takes quite the opposite direction: *Baal* (1974-80, text: Bertold Brecht), *Der Rattenfänger* (1984-86, text: Carl Zuckmayer), *Der Riese vom Steinfeld* (1997-99, text: Peter Turrini). Words and their meanings are essential to these works, particularly as Cerha takes his musical cue from the melody and rhythm of language. In these three operas, he

suppresses historical clichés and enriches them formally. The conflict-ridden, and therefore problematic relationship between the individual and society remains the main thematic interest. Baal is neither able nor willing to accept the organised living conditions offered to him and as an outsider takes refuge in inner emigration and ultimately self-destruction. The Rattenfänger opposes social imbalance, is confronted with decline and disintegration in both the feudal ruling class and in the exploited lower classes and remains, sociologically a priori on the side-line, dubious, since at the end we are left with a question mark rather than a utopian renewal. The naïve giant is a different case, he behaves passively, waiting statically, he attains his position as an outsider against his will. As far as the compositional technique is concerned, each of the three works is given different forms and structures. The common theme is a result of Cerha's flexible personal style. It is evident in many details: the way the voices are treated, the linear counterpoint, working with interval proportions, and particularly the harmony, which is derived from core cells, and, even in moments of cluster-like agglomeration, never leaves the organic progression. All of this is based on sketches of permutating row principles (usually not twelve tone rows), which in end effect remain inaudible and are supposed to remain so.

The music for *Baal* has three layers. Melodic priority and formative ballads correlate to the individual; formulaic repetitions relate to the society; dense meshes of sound signify impenetrable nature. In accordance with the musical dramaturgy, highly stylised historical musical forms are used, such as passacaglia, fugue, and dance forms, too, such as reggae and foxtrot. The emphatic *Baal* finale is, strictly speaking, a requiem, too. - The *Rattenfänger* is held together by a basic material of seven various tone groups, which put in place a multiply interlaced system. Guiding elements signalise certain procedures. Each figure is assigned specific vocal topoi, and also certain instruments (for the *Rattenfänger* it is the saxophone). - In *Riese vom Steinfeld*, a station drama, two necessarily strongly contrasting sound worlds are connected. Each scene has its own aura, its specific orchestral colour. The main protagonists each have a tonal world befitting their character. The giant's internalised music is two-dimensional, static, shielded dark and soft, the music of his real and unreal environment on the other hand fluctuates, it is dynamically exalted, it overflows hectically in grotesque episodes. An external framework, strictly polymetrically layered in twelve voices, holds fast the melancholy inner framework (sung legends, dream visions), bypassing time. Within this border Cerha spans an arch: the giant's rise, peripeteia and tragic downfall. Embedded as a crass alternative the intrusive world of contrasts. It shows the work to be a *dramma giocoso*, or a *tragi-comedy*. The parody sparkles by way of allusions and approximations of quotes: Prussian and British military marches are parodied, grotesque echoes of the Valkyries are to be heard, as is a pathetically

collapsing Nazi song, and several internal musical jokes. In-between all this: the abrupt and frightening turnaround of the progression from tragedy-comedy: what begins humorously in the Prague ghetto in the flavour of klezmer music ends abruptly freezing in the pale and *morendo* sounding anticipation of the Holocaust. And then once again absurdity, onomatopoeic grim humour, when the giant's legs are sawn off for the funeral because the coffin is too short.

Friedrich Cerha's creative curiosity shows no sign of weakening. In the first instance composer, then conductor, musicologist, teacher, naturalist. His living aspiration: to create primarily organic forms, "in which developmental processes play a role that is always comprehensible to our experience".

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