

BERND ALOIS ZIMMERMANN

David C F Wright DMus

Zimmermann is one of the most fascinating composers I have encountered and who sadly died last year. Many have dismissed him as a modernist and his probably belonging to the Darmstadt School which the ignorant portray as the school of musical hell, a prison for criminals who claim to be musicians. He was not a Darmstadt composer.

This inanity goes back to Barbirolli who often said, "If it is modern it isn't music at all! Anything written after 1934 is not worth playing!". He did, however, make a few exceptions.

A composer who creates new paths is said to be experimental and avant garde. That is ridiculous. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven invented new paths. Were they avant garde? Why is it that we cannot criticise early music and yet we can shoot bullets at contemporary composers? To some, Bach can do no wrong; everything that Bruno Maderna did was wrong!



Bernd Alois Zimmermann was born at Bliesham near Cologne on 20 March 1918. This was a rural Roman Catholic community. His father was a railway worker and also a farmer.

A private school welcomed Bernhard (to give him his full first name) where he encountered music. Then the Nazis closed all private schools and so the lad went to a Catholic school in Cologne, where, in 1937, he graduated with his high school diploma.

He joined the Reichsarbeitsdienst, Reich Labour Service, in 1937 studying pedagogy, the principles of teaching. He also studied in Berlin. In the winter of 1938 he studied musicology at the Music University in Cologne under Lemacher and Jarnach.

He was drafted into the German Army in 1942 but released due to a skin condition. The war hindered his obtaining his music degree until 1947. By then he was a freelance composer mainly writing music for radio productions. He was actively involved in promoting new music and further his studies with Wolfgang Fortner and Rene Leibowitz.

In the 1950s he continued to compose incidental music and to arrange light music for films and radio. He also composed over sixteen original pieces including a Violin Concerto, a splendid Symphony, an Oboe Concerto, a Trumpet Concerto and two ballets. It is interesting to note that he wrote three solo string sonatas for violin, viola and cello respectively.

He studied serial music and was one of the comparative few who could write in this demanding style. He was a man of great intellect and this magnificent gift is shown in some of his excellent serial music.

He had a great interest in the classics, philosophy and German Philology (the development of language). He loved fine art and the theatre. He was moulded by Roman Catholicism and many of his scores end with an expression of the glory of God as did Haydn.

Some aspects of Roman Catholicism advocate feelings of guilt and I believe Zimmermann felt guilty that he was a German when considering the horrors they perpetrated under Hitler. That he was called up to the German Army repulsed him. What Germany was doing was the height of obscenity!

In 1957, Zimmerman won a scholarship to the German Academy in Rome. He became professor of music there succeeding the Swiss composer, Frank Martin. A second scholarship to Rome in the 1960s brought Zimmermann into prominence and his opera *Die Soldaten* became a great success and remains one of the most important operas of the 20th century. The Cologne Opera originally declared it as unplayable. It is only spoiled by the jazz section near the end.

Zimmermann suffered from depression. This was largely due to his disgust at his own people and the Nazis in particular. He also felt that German music had nowhere else to go. There were no new avenues to explore. But that disgust was first shown in his music with his Trumpet Concerto entitled *Nobody knows the trouble I've seen*

In 1968 he used his pluralistic method of composition in his work *Musique pour les soupers du Roi Ubu* and quotes from other composers in a multi-layered collage indicating his notion of pluralism. We have Berlioz's march to the Scaffold, Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries and a quote from Stockhausen's Klavierstucke IX. It has been wrongly said that Zimmermann was attacking these composers but the work is rather a complaint about the teaching methods in music colleges in which works were elevated as examples to emulate. Why should we in the 1960s have to study such things as species counterpoint and understand baroque ornamentation?

Occasionally he wrote good humoured pieces like *Un Petit Rein* which is great fun

One of his last works was *Requiem for a Young Poet*... actually it was inspired by three young poets who all had committed suicide.

Zimmermann had been haunted by deathly imagery for some time and it has been said that his *Requiem* was his final apocalyptic cry of despair like, or needing, a massive tranquilliser for his state of depression. He suffered from angst and profound anxiety as did Mahler. Zimmermann was pessimistic and said to be difficult. He also set words from Ecclesiastes namely I turned and saw all the oppressors that are done under the sun. He saw the world as evil and getting worse and was ashamed of being a German who had allowed Nazism. The world was not a fit place to live in.

After sending his wife and children on holiday in advance of himself, he committed suicide on 10 August 1970. He had reached a psychological crisis and also had a serious eye disease. He was 52.

His music is challenging and not for the shallow or faint-hearted. His music can sometimes be tough. It may be rarely played because it calls for Herculean performers. Could anyone but Siegfried Palm play his marvellous Cello Concerto? His music has explosive and overwhelming drama at times and a strange beauty at other times. It is original music. He is the only composer I know that can write so effectively for a very large orchestra. He is unsurpassed in the areas of nuances, timbre and balance. He is never boring but has the highest ability of inventiveness.

A truly great and fascinating composer. That he is an intellectual will not appeal to shallow or ignorant people.



Works include:

- Five songs for medium voice and piano (1942-1946)
- Extemporale for piano (1946)
- Capriccio for piano (1946)
- In Praise of Folly for soloists chorus and large orchestra (1947)
- Enchirion I for piano (1949)
- Sonata for violin and piano (1950)
- Violin Concerto (1951)
- Rhenish Carnival Dances (1950)
- Fairy Tale Suite (1950)
- Enchirion II (1951)
- Sonata for solo violin (1951)
- Symphony in one movement (1951)
- Oboe Concerto (1952)
- Radio Opera: The People's Maintenance Suit against God (1953)
- Trumpet Concerto: Nobody knows the trouble I've seen ((1954)
- Metamorphose orchestral film music 1954)
- Sonata for solo viola (1954)
- Ballet: Alagoana, Caprichos Brasileira (1955)
- Perspective Music for an imaginary Ballet (1956)
- Configurations for piano (1956)
- Canto de Speranza for cello and orchestra (1957)
- The Pious Helen for narrator and ensemble (1957)
- Omnia tempus habent for voice and ensemble (1957)
- Impromptu for orchestra (1958)
- Dialogue for two pianos and orchestra (1960)
- Sonata for solo cello (1960)
- Ballet: Presence for narrator and piano trio (1961)
- Antiphones for viola and instruments (1961)
- Cinq Capricci di Fescobaldi for orchestra (1962)
- Giostra Genoveva for small orchestra (1962)
- Vocal Symphony: The Soldiers for six voices and orchestra (1962)
- Tempi loquendi for solo flute (1963)
- Monologues for two piano (from Dialogue) (1964)
- Improvisations from Die soldaten for jazz group (1965)
- Un petite rein (1964)
- Opera Die Soldaten (the Soldiers) (1965)
- Ballet: Musique pour les du Roi Ubu (1966)
- Cello Concerto in the form of a pas de trois (1966)
- Die befristeten for jazz quintet (1967)
- Intercomunicazione for cello and piano (1967)
- Tratto, electronic score (1967)
- Photopsio for large orchestra (1968)
- Requiem for a young poet for narrator, soprano, baritone, chorus, tape, jazz combo, organ and orchestra (1969)
- I turned and saw all the appressions that are done under the sun (1970)
- Silence and reverse (1970)
- Tratto 2 (1970)
- Four Short studies for cello (1970)

Other works:

- String Trio
- Little Suite for violin and piano

Die Brunnlein for chorus and instruments
Songs

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