

An Unswerving Thinker, Virtuoso and Sonic Ecstatic

For Róbert Wittinger, on his 65th birthday on April 10th 2010 by Gabor Halász

If one thinks about orchestral music since the Second World War, then alongside some highly prominent names, that of Róbert Wittinger also inevitably comes to mind. His cycle of six symphonies – shortly to be expanded by a seventh – adds an extraordinarily multi-faceted and eminently important chapter to the recent history of the genre. In it, the imposing line of writing for large orchestra, and the expressively charge of someone like Gustav Mahler, finds a valid aesthetic continuation (though naturally with its own particular prerequisites and contents). This artist, born in Knittelfeld in Austria, raised in Budapest, and now living in Bensheim (Bergstrasse) is a born symphonist who will celebrate his 65th birthday on the 10th April. What predestined him to this is a grandly epic breath, melodic outpouring, the expressive force of his music, and above all his aural imagination, coupled with a Berliozian delight in symphonic splendour and an extravagant fascination with colour.

“Róbert Wittinger, or Love of the Symphony” – this story began very early on, with the *Sinfonia No. 1*, composed back in Budapest. This enormously imposing exemplar of the talent of a 16 to 18-years-old high school student had to wait 13 years for its premiere – in 1976 in Stuttgart. One reason for this was that, even at the outset, Wittinger’s way of composing was incompatible with the stylistic canon of Socialist Realism that still had unlimited domination in Hungary in the sixties. Despite this, he got through his studies in Budapest, with two highly esteemed and cosmopolitan composers - Zsolt Durkó and Rudolf Maros – to whom he is grateful for “priceless artistic stimuli”. Very important for his creative life was a period of study in Warsaw in 1964, and especially his contact with Witold Lutoslawski.

His drive towards new horizons was assisted by another early orchestral work: *Concentrazione op. 6*, that came two years after the first symphony, in 1965. Wittinger sent the score to György Ligeti, who then immediately secured for him a DAAD-scholarship, and participation at the 1965 Darmstadt New Music Summer School. After that, he never went back to Hungary. After a period working at the Siemens Electronic Music Studio in Munich, Wittinger settled in Germany, and with the premieres of his first cello concerto *Irreversibilitazioni* at the Donaueschingen Festival, and *Concentrazione* in Hamburg, he soon began his ascent as one of the significant representatives of musical modernism.

Wittinger’s artistic status and reputation are documented by, among other things, numerous awards: prizes from the Südwestfunk, the City of Stuttgart, the Budapest Bartók Competition, the Peter Cornelius badge of the City of Mainz, the Art Prize of the Rheinland-Pfalz region, and the Rome-based “Villa Massimo Prize“. His works were performed (and premiered) – and still are – in important musical centres in Europe and America, including all the German radio stations, Donaueschingen and Budapest, the Berliner Festwochen, the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, the Paris Biennale, the Pompidou Centre and Carnegie Hall. The list of his performers reads like a Who’s Who of New Music: Michael Gielen, Bruno Maderna, Heinz Holliger, Peter Eötvös, and the Melos Quartet, to name just a few.

But back to his early work. Ligeti’s reaction to the score of his unknown young colleague is not hard to understand. *Concentrazione* is an artistic bullseye, a startlingly brilliant piece of modern music, already characterised by astonishing maturity and certainty in handling compositional materials, a piece in which (matching the title) the sonic events are compressed into the narrowest of spaces, speeding around in kaleidoscopic alternation.

It's the same with the *Sinfonia No. 1 op. 1*. In it, an uninterruptedly vital musical will surges forward, bursting with energy and enthusiasm. The clearly shaped themes of Wittinger's symphonic firstborn, the constructivist logic of the intertwining motives, and not least the exuberant sound of the music already unmistakably display the its creator's personal signature.

After this early work, the series of Wittinger symphonies only resumed in 1980, after a long pause, with his Second, which the composer calls his "Opera for Orchestra". Secretly, it turns out, this symphonist is also a dramatist, whose orchestral pieces often seem like sonic dramas. Their great theatrical potential is, moreover, made all the more credible by the numerous choreographic aspects of not only the second but also the first and third symphonies, as well as the early orchestral piece *Om*.

There is a clear sense of dramatic impulse in the wildly lurching scherzo (third movement) of the *Sinfonia No. 2 op. 35*, with its steely motoric pulse reminiscent of Stravinsky, its hard-edged rhythms and shifts of accent. There could be no more striking contrast to this musical act of violence than the fantasy world of the bizarre trio, whose playful sonic gestures, pastoral moods, and solo and chamber-music inlays rank among the composer's most ingenious inspirations. The stirring scherzo is surrounded by two slow movements: the very introverted, soulful Andante lamentoso, which, typical of Wittinger's (and Mahler's) way of writing, comprises a great, contrapuntally formed cantabile (second movement), and the delicate "Largo per Laura" composed on the birth of his first daughter; his first symphonic movement with a vocal part (female choir). He has had recourse again to vocal parts (this time mixed choir) in the two slow movements of his new seventh symphony.

Wittinger calls the Third Symphony, the next chapter in his engagement with the genre, „his most romantic piece“, and not without reason. The much more subjective tone, and the emphatically emotional outlook of the work, can be explained by the circumstances in which it was written: the *Sinfonia funebre* (no. 3) op. 37 (*Symphony of Mourning*) was written in memory of Wittinger's friend and teacher Rudolf Maros. What actually seems most striking is the intractable strictness of the formal shaping which compositionally underpins the highly emotive gestures, the accents of profoundly sad lament and the wildly painful outbursts. What is meant here is the highly complex architectonic ordering, and the highly skilful polyphonic constructions. The structural bases of the harmony and melody are Wittinger's fourth+tritone rows (consisting of alternating sequences of the two intervals, as in the pattern C-F-B-E-B flat-E flat-A etc., or C-F sharp-B-F-B flat-E-A etc.).

It was already deployed in the *Sinfonia No. 2*, and then even more so in the *Concerto per due pianoforti e orchestra op. 36*, which is one of the highlights of Wittinger's output, and a sparkling, multifaceted, spirited sonic creation of breathtaking expressive force, with a wealth of thematic-motivic relationships. "At last, Bartók has found a worthy successor" – such was the response of prominent Hungarian critic György Kroó after the Budapest premiere of this fulminating compositional tour de force. The fourth+tritone series likewise came into play in the *Concerto Grosso No. 1 op. 38*, a work composed at almost exactly the same time as the *Sinfonia funebre* that adapts baroque forms in virtuoso fashion; they also play an important role in later works.

At the forefront of Wittinger's understanding of music is his varied relationship to tradition. Two of his most recent works address it directly: *Messaggio* [Message] op. 66, a refined

modern paraphrase of the slow introduction to the first movement of Mozart's *Dissonance Quartet* commissioned by South West German Radio for the Mozart Year 2006, and most especially *Venerazione* [Venerations] op. 64, a symphonic reworking of Beethoven's C minor piano sonata (*Pathétique*). Wittinger talks of "an orchestral interpretation or – perhaps better expressed – elucidation of the sonata", with allusions to the orchestral language of Mahler and Bartók, to Schoenberg's *Pelléas und Mélisande* and *Farben*, the third of his *Five Pieces for Orchestra* op. 16, as well as Stravinsky's *Petrushka* and *Sacre du Printemps*. Using a decidedly contemporary palette, the very strikingly imaginative yet discreet orchestration expounds the forward-looking aspects of a classic that "ranks among the composer's most symphonic pieces".

Questions of style and technique, tonality, twelve-tone technique or serial organisation are not central categories in Wittinger's ars poetica. What really counts for him is the musical dramaturgy. "The sonic material", he says "is limited by nature, and cannot be developed infinitely. In the 20th century, I think, limits were reached. Everything was already there. On the other hand, one can always expand the contexts and constellations. There, new things can be said. Work on this is at the core of my composing, and I believe one can trace a line of development in my music. But the material is not a primary concern for me. I am absolutely prepared to reach back to older strata of musical languages, but on the other hand I also have no qualms about using radical avant-garde elements. Both happen, but always on new sets of assumptions."

The composer's uninhibited approach to the options of musical language is proven by the broad stylistic spectrum of his work (which should not be confused with postmodernist non-committal). One should remember the undisguised avant-garde attitude of two timbre-composition: the *Tendenze* for piano, celesta, harpsichord, cello and percussion, and especially the phenomenal Third String Quartet whose bold sonic visions, hard edges and subtly shimmering, unreal play of colours make it a peak work within contemporary chamber music. This is in contrast to the more serene, tradition-orientated sound of Wittinger's more recent works. However, even in early works such as the stylistically rather radical orchestral piece *Concentrazione* one can detect tonal harmonies, while the latest work, the *Sinfonia No. 7* op. 65, actually ends with a clear E minor triad.

This work will be presented by the Deutsche Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz in two phases. Prior to the complete premiere, on the 18th January the orchestra will baptise the third movement, Scherzo ornamentale, in Ludwigshafen. With its harsh sonic world, its unbridled forward-surfing pulse, the tempo changes, its parallel and contrary motions, and relentlessly hard-edged contrasts, this feverishly animated, tumultuous movement fits seamlessly within its creator's cycle of forceful symphonic scherzi. At the same time, structurally, both its strictness and the intellectual rigour of its formal concept present an irresistible stroke of virtuosity. The formal sequence is: Introduzione – Scherzo – Interludio I - Trio A – Trio B – Trio C – Interludio II – Trio D – Scherzo da capo. Its individual sections and variously subdivided subsections are constantly expanded and reduced through complex processes. In contrast, the final movement – Lento lamentoso – has a primarily lyrical inspiration. It is a movingly soulful song of lamentation that (like the second movement of Sinfonia no. 2), reflects Wittinger's youthful dream that he would "one day write the most beautiful slow movement in the history of music", as well as his glowing admiration for Mahler. Here, though, the sweeping, highly expressive song of the strings is subordinated to a mercilessly consistent polyphonic construction that peaks in a six-part fugue.

Of course Wittinger's oeuvre can't be reduced to his symphonies. His catalogue of works embraces virtually all classical genres. There is an arch from symphonies and instrumental concertos via an extensive output of chamber music and vocal pieces to music for plays and films, as well as two major works that treat the same material in two closely related versions: The *Maldoror-Requiem op. 42* and the music theatre work *Maldoror op. 47*.

Among the most valuable items in this catalogue of works are three compositions linked by the common theme of the violin, or strings, if one likes: *Concerto per violino solo e orchestra op. 43 Riflessioni I*, the *Trio per archi op. 39* and the *Sonata op. 46* for violin and piano. One could even talk about a cycle here, since there are thematic-motivic connections between the individual pieces, as well as analogous – cyclic – structural principles. The three pieces, which all mobilise Wittinger's bravura craftsmanship and polyphonic skill to the full, expound three musico-dramatic situations, in different configurations. In the violin concerto two protagonists, soloist and orchestra, combat one another. The basic situation in the string trio is that of homogeneous ensemble playing, whereas the sonata is determined by the contrast of two instruments with radically opposing sonic characteristics, and the changing dominance of the two unequal partners.

Perhaps a work composed a few years later – the *Sestetto per archi op. 51*, based on an attempt at synthesis between music and the visual arts - could be regarded as an exhilarating expansion of this group of works. This change of perspective was an enormous inspiration to Wittinger's aesthetic vision, leading to exquisite fine-tuning, sculpted themes, and a string sonority of magic beauty. An artistic summary: new chamber music where one could scarcely wish for more.

Wittinger's engagement with the theme of Maldoror marks a particular chapter in his output. The *Songs of Maldoror*, prose poems by Count Lautréamont (the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse, who died in 1870 at the age of 24), are disturbing chains of associations, partly crazy sequences of words and ideas which anticipate both surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd. Lautréamont's puzzling poetic fantasies, this outsider's discontent and desperate protest against everything in this world, and his "well-founded disgust" have preoccupied Wittinger since his earliest beginnings as a composer.

An oratorio begun in the sixties remained a fragment. About two decades later, in 1985/86, came the *Maldoror-Requiem op. 42*, and a little later the music theatre piece of the same name, extended passages of which are identical to it. The latter work, a highly idiosyncratic avant-garde "Gesamtkunstwerk" without a specific plot, attempts a synthesis between opera, stage play, ballet and concert music. The composer has described this loose panoply of hallucinations, depictions of madness, dream sequences and sadomasochistic compulsions as a *Spettacolo in four Acts and 13 Immagini* (Images). The text was assembled from Lautréamont's writings and the liturgical requiem.

Musically both works – compositions of well-nigh classic dimensions – set new standards. Their sonic language is of overwhelming expressive force, and is immediately affecting, whether it is being broodingly meditative – with an epic flow of surging melodies – or placing dramatic accents through exciting climaxes, eruptive instrumental outcries or massive agglomerations of sound. The powerful choral tableaux are enormously effective; and a special event is the hugely meticulously executed three- to eight-part fugue which forms the second part of the Requiem's finale.

Certainly the music theatre *Maldoror* doesn't make things easy for the theatre business or the public; it confronts both of them with an extremely unusual and complex form of theatre. All the same, its artistic substance seems enough to make engagement with this work worthwhile. On the other hand, Róbert Wittinger has never been a man to take the line of least resistance. Intellectual independence has always been the fundamental orientation for a composer who always goes his own way undeterred, showing no interest in fashionable trends and ostentatious radicalism, constantly rejecting dogmas (including those of the avant-garde), and never succumbing to the temptation of currying favour with any kind of comfortable neo-romantic tendency.

English translation: Richard Toop