

## MUSIC

# *MUSIC; Schnittke, an Iconoclast, Becomes an Icon*

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IN a just world, Alfred Schnittke would not have been condemned to the purgatory of the Soviet Union for the first 56 years of his life. He would not have suffered a series of increasingly debilitating strokes at the outset of his most productive years. Nor would he have been taken from us last August at 63.

Still, there is a plausible consolation: a just world would never have produced an Alfred Schnittke, and certainly would have no need of one.

It is hard to appreciate the extent of Schnittke's musical triumph when the infinite horrors inflicted by the Soviet system on its own people are recalled in the United States as background images to sell competing cable television services. In less than 20 years, entirely on the strength of his extraordinary imagination, Schnittke has been transformed from an eclectic composer little known outside the Russian intelligentsia to one of the most widely performed composers of our time. Not only has most of his prolific output been recorded, but multiple versions of many works also appear on dozens of labels readily available in America, like Chandos, Bis, Deutsche Grammophon and Ondine.

Yet despite several recent Schnittke tributes by chamber groups in New York, including the beautifully proportioned Second String Quartet, with its violent energy and painful distortion, most major presentations of his works this season, in particular a recent performance of the Eighth Symphony here at the Concertgebouw, have taken place outside the United States.

The three composers who have emerged most triumphantly from the Soviet Union -- Arvo Part, Sofia Gubaidulina and Schnittke -- have all described themselves as spiritually driven. Over the last dozen years, Mr. Part has turned increasingly to the depiction of divine spirituality, and Ms. Gubaidulina to the interaction between humanity and the divine. But Schnittke remained, as it were, among the people. He embraced the obvious truth that we live in a polystylistic environment, a world in which the sacred and the profane, the miraculous and the mundane, the rational and the absurd, coexist at every moment.

If you could survive it, there was perhaps no better laboratory in which to experience such twin realities than Moscow during Schnittke's lifetime. And despite the mind-numbing hardships of daily life, it was a place of extraordinary intellectual ferment. Schnittke's interests and influences extended from Russian literature to yoga; his friends and collaborators included choreographers, theater directors and filmmakers. (Schnittke also scored more than 60 films.)

Still, it remains difficult to account fully for the development of his imagination. One can conjecture that his polystylistic approach derived from a sense of crisscross identity: he was born to a German Jewish father and Christian mother in Engels, then an autonomous German Republic in the Soviet Union.

In our modern environment of an endless array of coexisting styles and ground rules, most composers determine their horizons prudently, in part for the sake of career development. But Schnittke went for broke. For one thing, as he made clear to me during a long afternoon at his Moscow apartment in 1978, a serious composer in the Soviet Union could hardly have a career to worry about. Sitting squarely in the path of artistic progress was Tikhon Khrennikov, the general secretary of the Soviet Composers Union.

It is hard to exaggerate the calamitous consequences a man of Khrennikov's disposition could produce. Appointed in 1948 and improbably surviving in power until the end of the Soviet Union itself, he blocked performances, careers, travel and the flow of information. His personal tastes effectively became state policy. (Expatriates have suggested that had an individual with Khrennikov's connections to political power had the opposite musical tastes, he might well have persuaded the political authorities to accept the very composers he sought to deter.)

If you couldn't come to terms with those who ran the show, why limit your imagination? Bolstered by a philosophical faith that all periods of music coexist in the present, Schnittke simply chose to work from an enormous palette. The iconoclasm of his music, together with official efforts to block him at every turn, quickly attracted an enthusiastic audience, giving him confidence to persist in his individual vision. Essential to his ascent, too, was the relentless advocacy of compatriot performers like Gidon Kremer, Mstislav Rostropovich, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Natalia Gutman and Oleh Krysa as well as a growing pool of non-Soviet artists in other disciplines with whom Schnittke collaborated.

MONTHS after suffering a serious stroke in 1985, Schnittke recovered his intellectual capabilities and began the most productive and musically successful period of his life. Symphonies, concertos, operas and the ballet "Peer Gynt" followed one after another. Polystylism receded as the composer synthesized all that had come before into some of the most exuberant music of his life. The Concerto Grosso No. 5 (1991) may be heard in a live recording from Deutsche Grammophon, in which the seemingly effortless virtuosity of Mr. Kremer, as violin soloist, contributes to the work's playfulness. The Cello Concerto No. 2 (1989), recorded by Sony Classical with Mr. Rostropovich and the London Symphony conducted by Seiji Ozawa, is less lighthearted but no less enthralled with life. It builds slowly over the course of four movements, with the real drama characteristically saved for the fifth.

Schnittke suffered another stroke in 1991, shortly after he had emigrated to Hamburg, Germany, and now his work turned sober. His Eighth Symphony, from 1994, is almost shockingly transparent. It awaits its American premiere but was

performed here by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra led by Mr. Rozhdestvensky, who has also recorded the work for Chandos with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic.

The bassoon player who at the premiere of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" pronounced the opening solo unplayable would surely decline reincarnation as the horn player assigned the opening of Schnittke's Eighth Symphony. The first horn plays a tortured eight-bar line with wild leaps covering the complete range of the instrument. The underlying chromaticism gives the listener little choice but to hear the line almost as a parody, as if the horn were struggling to maintain its dignity. The line is then restated by the first violins; by the third iteration it dawns on the listener that the theme is not going away.

But neither is this "Bolero." Each change of orchestration projects an intensely different emotion. What had moments before been slightly ludicrous is now portentous. The horns return, sustaining triads at the top of their register, sounding like human voices. Protagonist against background is a constant texture, but as King Lear discovered about his fool, this background is no background. Intensity grows and dissipates and returns ever stronger.

The third movement is the emotional heart of the work. It opens with a theme reminiscent of a Mahler slow movement; without invoking similar orchestrational complexity, it attains comparable emotional drama. The fifth movement, little more than a sustained ascending scale that ends disproportionately soon, makes painfully clear that the work is obsessed with depicting mortality.

Shortly after the Eighth Symphony was completed, Schnittke suffered a third, far more devastating stroke. Yet in 1998 he managed to write a Ninth Symphony. Parts of the manuscript, which I saw at the home of his widow, Irina, are indecipherable: the composer, right-handed but now paralyzed on his right side, painstakingly wrote with his left hand. Like the Eighth Symphony, the Ninth is nearly devoid of articulation or phrasing indications, and sustained by simple rhythms and scale passages.

The Ninth was presented in Moscow last year, in a version by Mr. Rozhdestvensky that interpolated quotes from other composers' works. But there is no indication in the manuscript of any intention other than a stylistically consistent, through-composed work. Mr. Rozhdestvensky's rendering seems to turn Schnittke into a commodity: the composer is best known for mixing styles, so let's give listeners what they expect.

Schnittke was too ill to attend the performance; those close to him report that when he heard a tape, he was livid at the corruption. Some 10 days later, he suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. The Ninth Symphony was originally scheduled for the same Concertgebouw concerts as the Eighth, but performances of this version are now forbidden by the estate.

Schnittke's music is both welcomed and condemned for its accessibility. In the current lexicon, accessibility means easy listening: music that does not demand too much, because it conforms to what a listener already knows. But with Schnittke, accessibility is altogether different; he achieves it by design, on his own terms. A signature opening is a single line, a cell of a few notes immediately transformed by an obvious transposition or reordering. Guided in gently, we sign up for the ride. Then all hell breaks loose. But we don't turn away; the motifs and their connections reside too strongly in our memory.

SUCH technique doubtless derived from Schnittke's urgent sense of affinity with Classical form. What may mystify American listeners is the composer's delight in playing with one's emotions (typically, when things get too hot, the harpsichord or celesta is deployed like a splash of cold water), or in deconstructing our expectations of nontonal music: suddenly, the most forbidding techniques seem easily decipherable.

We may wonder, too, whether the fluency of connecting things that don't quite belong together, the irreverent approaches to constructive techniques that shock us by their blatancy, may in fact have resulted from a kind of sensory deprivation that was inevitable for composers in the Soviet Union. It is breathtaking, after all,

to consider how much they did not have available, with performances, recordings, scores and opportunities to teach, learn and travel severely restricted if not forbidden.

So characteristics of Schnittke's music may strike American audiences as naive. Western composers routinely subdivide the beat to create rhythmic pulses or patterns that define a tempo in contrast to the prevailing one; Schnittke never goes further than subdividing a beat into equal parts. Accelerandos are crudely effected, with beats successively divided into smaller parts. The results should sound silly, but in Schnittke the technique is consistent with his vernacular approach.

True, not all of Schnittke's music is at the same level of achievement. His grasp of instrumental possibilities seems uneven. His string writing is sublime, yet he often approaches the piano with as much subtlety and insight into its expressive potential as a 5-year-old boy whose favorite occupation is squashing bugs.

But for Schnittke, simplicity was the path to the profound. The stylistic diversity that devolved to his particular language is supported by harmonic structures of clarity and consistency. And between the dazzling stylistic virtuosity and the harmonic underpinnings typically lies a logic in the handling of motifs that is sometimes even easier to follow than that of composers writing 200 years ago.

A winnowing inevitably takes place after the death of a composer. It seems reasonable to surmise that the polystylistic works of Schnittke's earlier years will fade in comparison with the later, more rarefied compositions. These works belong front and center in the new-music repertory of American institutions. The operas "Gesualdo" and "Life With an Idiot" should be produced by major companies, the late symphonies performed by major orchestras. The evening-length ballet "Peer Gynt" deserves especially to appear in America, for it represents Schnittke at his theatrical best, with lush, intricate orchestration and powerful sonorities.

ALFRED SCHNITTKE was a master at playing the hand he was dealt. When the enemy was Soviet totalitarianism, he wrote music that integrated the profound and the absurd. When the enemy was his failing health, he wrote with increasing fervor.

Against the threat of his growing fame, he enforced on himself a modesty that kept him focused on the task of writing music that confounded expectation.

What is irresistible about his music is the tangible personal struggle that appears to be embedded in each piece, to a degree one hardly feels apart from the music of Beethoven or Schoenberg. We may grieve that fate was so unkind as to deprive him of a fair measure of life and health and circumstances, yet fate was also merciful to us in giving him the inner strength to resist and fight back to a point of unqualified victory.

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