

## THE SYMPHONIES OF ROBERTO GERHARD

Paul Conway

Roberto Gerhard was born to a French mother and a Catalan father on 25th September 1896 at Valls near Barcelona.

He studied the piano with Granados in Barcelona between 1915 and 1916 and composition with Felipe Pedrell until the latter's death in 1922. Gerhard then travelled to Vienna and on to Berlin, where he was a pupil of Schoenberg between 1923 and 1928 (significantly at a time when Schoenberg was formulating his 12-tone theory).

Franco took over Barcelona in 1938 and Gerhard, staying in Paris at the time, determined not to return to his homeland. In 1939, with the help of his friend Edward Dent, Professor of Music at Cambridge University, Gerhard moved to Cambridge as a researcher and stayed there until his death on 5th January 1970.



His output includes ballet scores such as *Don Quixote* (1940) and *Pandora* (1944) and an opera, *The Duenna* (1947) as well as chamber and choral music. His four symphonies form the pinnacle of his orchestral output, reflecting the influence of his teachers in that they combine Spanish rhythms with serialism and a late-Expressionist use of the orchestra reminiscent of the Second Viennese School. Gerhard's avoidance of traditional "themes" may make his symphonies difficult to comprehend fully on first hearing, but their well-honed beauty and craftsmanship does reveals itself to the listener on closer acquaintance.

### **Symphony 'Homenaje a Pedrell' (1941)**

Though not part of the official Gerhard symphonic cycle, the Symphony 'Homage a Pedrell' makes an excellent introduction to the symphonic writing of Roberto Gerhard. Though the serialism of the later symphonies is absent, there is a brilliance in the orchestration and a dark, eerie use of Spanish rhythms and folksongs which is also to be found in the official canon. Bernard Benoliel lists in the programme notes three reasons why he recommended the work to be recorded as part of the Gerhard series on Chandos (CHAN 9693): the first two movements were preserved as well as the Finale which has been performed as a separate movement entitled "Pedrelliana"; cyclic use of material from the first two movements is made in the Finale; and the second movement's haunting beauty deserves to be heard. A couple more reasons to record the complete work spring to mind: the first two movements are written in such a way as to lead on to the next movement making a single structure out of its three movements. Also, the ending of the symphony is so emphatic and symphonic as to round off something much larger than just the 11-minute Finale. The quality of the music is very high and could certainly win the composer many new admirers, particularly those listeners who don't respond to his later, more avant-garde works. The symphony breathes the same Catalan air as his *Don Quixote* ballet music (1940) yet the influences of Sibelius and Dvorak are to be found in the orchestration.

The opening *Allegro (moderatamente)* is Fantasy-like and is Gerhard's most traditional-sounding symphonic movement. Its attractive themes are taken from his teacher Felipe Pedrell's unperformed opera *La celestina* (1904). Halfway through the movement, a Catalan song appears on oboe which would be quoted in later Gerhard works, most movingly in the Fourth Symphony of 1967.

The second movement is an expertly crafted *Andante (un poco adagio)* which has a Nocturne-like

quality about it. Gerhard's love of early 20th Century French orchestral music is in evidence but the movement also retains a uniquely Spanish flavour.

The Finale (*Allegro giusto*) is the symphony's most ambitious movement, combining elements from the two preceding movements and adding syncopations and complex percussion writing (two distinctive features of the official Gerhard symphonic canon). The work ends darkly, reflecting the death of Pedrell and perhaps also Gerhard's own feelings towards having to leave his homeland and the uncertain future he faced in his adopted home.

Chandos have given the work a splendid recording which does full justice to the wide ranging colours of this score and Mathias Bamert and the BBC Symphony Orchestra are as impressive in this early example of Gerhard's symphonic writing as they are in the later works. Their commitment and understanding of the score means that "Homenaje a Pedrell" emerges as a satisfying achievement in its own right rather than a piece of juvenilia of curiosity value only. The coupling is the acerbic and atmospheric Harpsichord Concerto (1956) which serves to introduce the listener to Gerhard's later style and features the impressive musicianship of harpsichordist Geoffrey Tozer.

### **Symphony no 1 (1952-1953)**

The First Symphony is dedicated to the composer's wife Poldi (1903-1994) and received its first performance at the 1955 ISCM Festival in Baden-Baden by the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra under Hans Rosbaud. It is scored for flute, piccolo, oboe, cor anglais, 2 clarinets in B flat, 2 bassoons, 4 horns in F, 2 trumpets in C, 2 tenor trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, pianoforte and strings. The typically expansive percussion section (which was to increase still further in later symphonies) requires two players and comprises 3 chinese tom-toms (small, medium and large), 2 suspended cymbals (medium and large), side drum and tambourine in the hands of the first percussion player. The second player looks after side drum, bass drum, 2 suspended cymbals (medium and large), tam-tam, xylophone and 2 triangles (medium and small).

The first movement, a volatile eleven-minute *Allegro animato* opens with a six bar introduction which contains a motto-like 12-note series divided into two six note groups. The first group consists of a hushed descending line from high to lower strings whilst the second group features woodwind and brass in an ascending figure from the low register of the clarinet to the high-pitched flute and piccolo, reaching a fortissimo peak. This series creates a "V" shape and it is crucial to the development of the entire symphony, acting as a kind of *idée fixe*. The staggered entry of the partly divided strings results in a six-note held chord: thus, the melodic line is self-harmonising. This preparatory six-bar introduction acts as a huge upbeat launching the work and might even be regarded as a whole exposition section in miniature since the remainder of the first movement forms a realisation of the potential of these opening six bars.

The rest of the movement can be divided into five main sections. The first of these starts at fig 1 of the score with a descending clarinet figure interrupted by brass, percussion and strings before an insistent semiquaver *ostinati* figure in upper strings leads off. The second section begins on flute and piccolo four bars before fig 6 (*poco piu mosso*) and takes the form of a traditional second subject. It is characterised by a certain lyrical sweetness and delicacy reminiscent of the melodies of Schubert. After a slight crescendo, there is a striking passage marked *agitato* (fig 7) whose brooding string chords sound like Bernard Herrman's score for the soundtrack to Hitchcock's "Psycho" before the luckless heroine checks in at the Bates motel. It is clear that something is going to happen and Gerhard screws up the tension still further by reintroducing material from the first section. Fierce tutti passages which sound (and look on the page of the score) as if they might have been penned by Alban Berg soon disintegrate into a disturbing oscillating triplet figure on the violins, eerily supported by harp with its own *ostinato* figure (fig 16). This highly Expressionist passage gives way to the third section marked *scherzando* which lightens the mood. Its grace note and staccato markings create a slightly

skittish feeling although the threat of the previous tutti never seems far away. Another striking passage marked *agitato* features tremolo strings playing at the bridge of their instruments whilst harp and piano punch out accented notes.

The penultimate section (fig 29) is set in motion by *spiccato* first violins with another *ostinato*. It maintains the delicacy of mood introduced by the *scherzando* but introduces a more emotionally detached tone with its slightly academic-sounding fugal writing. The effect is not unlike the “chamber music” sections in a late Mahler symphony as the strings (taking centre stage for the first time in this work) weave their hushed and intricate web of sound. As the woodwinds join the score at this point, the strings set in motion a memorable passage where repeated chords sweep up and down the section like regimented waves. This fanning out of string chords recalls Stravinsky at his most rhythmically dynamic. The passage reaches a Bergian climax with trumpet fanfares and leaping trombone calls before the coda is ushered in on the tuba (four bars before fig 35). The tuba intones a three-note phrase which becomes hypnotic, like a mantra, and is soon taken up by other instruments. Other repeated phrases, including a recurring Hispanic six-note motif assume prominence until the whole orchestra is furiously obsessed with these brief scraps of theme. The movement ends abruptly on a *sforzando fortissimo* chord with a strong sense of a musical argument postponed rather than resolved.

The central *Adagio* is made up of five distinct sections, each with its own character. The outer sections are slow and static whilst the inner three are more lively. The first and last share material, as do the second and fourth. The extended central section is the core of the movement and the whole symphony.

The opening section juxtaposes long-held icy string chords with shorter woodwind motifs. The sense of glacial calm is reminiscent of the opening of the slow movement of George Lloyd’s *Fourth Symphony* (1946). The second section begins at one bar before fig 48 and is introduced by swirling semiquavers in the strings. Playing at the bridge of their instruments, the strings create a deliberately indistinct wash of sound. The central section (beginning at fig 52) is scored mainly for strings with piano and harp and finds Gerhard at his most Webernesque, every instrument’s notes telling in the jewelled orchestration. The chamber textures of this section are emphasised by the concertante use of solo violin, viola and cello set against the rest of the ensemble. The penultimate section (5 bars before fig 58) finds the emotional level cranked up after the detached ruminations of the previous passage. The twirling *ponticello* strings from the second section return briefly. The last section (fig 66) returns to the steady tread of the movement’s opening bars. Two crescendos build up and subside before the *Adagio* closes on a long single line for the double basses. So ends one of the composer’s most profound and personal utterances. It makes a strong case against those who argue that atonal music lacks heart and soul.

The *Allegro spiritoso* Finale is the most substantial of the three movements and continues the involved and involving arguments posited by the opening *Allegro animato*. Its form is a microcosm of the whole symphony: two fast sections encasing a slow hushed central one. The first section starts with a bold introduction followed by a series of episodes which gather momentum as the movement progresses. At fig 70, flutter-tongued flutes remind the listener that Gerhard was a Schoenberg pupil: the nightmarish world of the latter’s *Five Pieces for Orchestra* of 1909 is strongly recalled. A quotation from Beethoven’s “*Grosse Fugue*” adds to the tension with its angular, loping gait. A further *ostinato* on the flute is underpinned by string glissandi (fig 76). More motifs ushered in on woodwind join in the headlong rush (figs 80 and 87). The work becomes increasingly panic-stricken and angry (one passage is marked *furioso* and reaches a crisis point (fig 92). After a massive tutti crash, the piano carries on with an eerie *ostinato* figure over disembodied string tremolos. The disconnected piano writing here recalls John McCabe’s use of otherworldly aleatoric piano figures in his *Concerto for Orchestra* of 1982. Total silence reigns before the calmness of the central section (fig 107) which explores the same psychological terrain as the slow movement. The third section cuts in at fig 118 and powers its way with relentless energy almost to the very end of the symphony. The orchestra catches its breath at fig 151 and a gasping chord leads to a rising woodwind figure over tremolo strings *sul ponticello*. The symphony

ends with a soft single held high harmonic in the solo violin: the logical and moving conclusion to the movement's spent force.

The first symphony was a turning point in the development of Gerhard as a composer, breaking new ground in the development of the genre with its avoidance of traditional "themes". The intense brooding passages of his opera "The Duenna" and the Piano Concerto had pointed the way forward for Gerhard but it is in the symphony that he fully flexes his post-Schoenbergian muscles. It is fascinating to reflect that in Britain in the mid-1950s four ex-pupils of Schoenberg were tackling the symphonic form with completely different results: Hans Gál with his Late-Romantic Symphony no 3 (1952), Gerhard with his serial/atonal Symphony no 1 (1953) and Egon Wellesz with his Brucknerian Symphonies 3 (1951), 4 (1953) and, most Schoenbergian of all, no 5 (1956). Karl Rankl's Symphony no 4 (1953) and 5 (1954) were written in Austria and England, the Fifth Symphony displaying all the fastidious craftsmanship of Schoenberg and occasionally sharing the soundworld of the older composer's early works. Gerhard's First Symphony, for all its Expressionist leanings, also displays its composer's Spanish origins in its hectic dance-like rhythms which are often compressed into relentless *ostinati*. On a personal level, Gerhard was recovering from a severe heart attack and some of the mounting terror and anguish to be found in all three movements and the sense of Destiny knocking at the door in his Symphony no 1 may result from this near fatal experience. Julian White, in a fascinating and cogently argued article in the March 1998 edition of *The Musical Times* draws attention to the links between the Symphony and André Malraux's novel about the Spanish Civil War, "L'Espoir". However, Gerhard himself was always at pains to avoid any direct references to his inspirations in this Symphony: "the music must be allowed to speak for itself", he wrote in the sleeve insert to the Dorati recording. As purely objective music the piece retains its power and originality unaided by any programmatic elements.

The work received its recording debut with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Antal Dorati on a 1965 EMI LP (Stereo ASD 613/ Mono ALP 2063). This performance is in many ways the best way to get to know the symphony - Dorati brings the same understanding of the genre which he showed in his recordings of the Second Viennese School released on the Mercury label. His grasp of the work's highly original and organised structure is second to none. The BBC Symphony Orchestra plays superbly and sounds very well rehearsed. Unfortunately this LP, which also contained dances from Gerhard's Don Quixote ballet music, is no longer available and has not been released on CD (unaccountably).

The Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife under Víctor Pablo Pérez on the Auvidis Valois Montaigne label (MO782103 coupled with symphony 3) present a more straightforward reading of the work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Spanish elements in the symphony are brought out in this version like no other and there is a freshness and spontaneity about the performance which brings much pleasure. However, the standard of orchestral playing is no match for either the BBCSO under Dorati or the same orchestra 32 years later under Matthias Bamert on Chandos (CHAN 9599). The strings are particularly vulnerable on the Valois disc, sounding thin and emaciated beside the BBC players: in such important passages as the opening of the central Adagio this makes for a disappointing loss in atmosphere.

The Chandos disc provides a luxurious and detailed performance which carries all before it. The many difficulties in the score are surmounted with graceful ease by the BBC players, allowing the listener to concentrate purely on the music: surely what the composer himself would have wanted. There is surprisingly little difference between the interpretations or in the timings (perhaps the composer's markings are so precise and well judged that there is little room for conductors to impose their "personalities" too much on the music). The Valois performance is slightly quicker than the Chandos in the first two movements. However, the tempi are well judged by Bamert, so that the many different sections of the three movements are given space to establish their own unique atmosphere. The warm and full recording allows every marking on this eventful and intricate score to tell. The couplings are significant: on Valois, the Third Symphony brings the disc to a slightly meagre 59 minutes, whilst the Chandos CD includes a beautifully realised account of the Gerhard Violin Concerto

bringing the disc up to over 75 minutes playing time. I have no hesitation in recommending the Chandos disc but the Valois has its own merits (the orchestral fallibility does give the performance an appropriately edgy quality). The Dorati LP, should you come upon it in a second hand shop, should be snapped up. It represents the conductor at his considerable best and acts as a reminder that the BBCSO was always a virtuoso band with an innate understanding of new and challenging scores. All three versions are worth acquiring, but if pressed for a single choice, the Chandos would be the one to have: Matthias Bamert displays a clear empathy with the score and never allows any point-making to interfere with the architectural logic of the symphony. His BBC players are poised and alert to the score's many felicities and the sumptuous recording by Chandos is a pleasure in itself.

### **Symphony no 2 (1959)**

The original version of the Second Symphony was written between February 1957 and the summer of 1959. It was commissioned by the BBC and dedicated to the memory of the Catalan music patron Rafael Paxtot i Jubert. The symphony was first performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Rudolf Schwartz at the Royal Festival Hall on 28th October 1959.

In 1967, following completion of his Fourth Symphony, Gerhard began a major revision of his Second Symphony (which he now called "Metamorphosis") on October 16th. The new version follows the same ground plan as the original but involves a significant expansion of the orchestral forces involved. It is scored for 2 piccolos, 2 flutes, 3 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, clarinet doubling bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contra bassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, accordion, harp and strings. The percussion section (which is distributed amongst no less than seven players) consists of: marimba, vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel, small antique cymbals, 3 suspended cymbals, tambourine, claves, castanets, bass drum, side drum, large tam-tam, 3 Chinese tom-toms, 7 wood blocks, 5 Korean temple blocks, Latin American Timbales and a wooden scraper with jingles.

By the end of January 1968 the composer had reached the last movement. After writing 120 bars of this, he broke off to fulfil other commissions: the two chamber works *Libra* and *Leo* and a Fifth Symphony. He did not resume work on the revised score of the Second Symphony before his death on 5th January 1970. Alan Boustead prepared a performing version and this was first performed in 1973 with the title "Metemorphosis". Alan Boustead's version only includes the first 22 bars of the Finale and then proceeds with the original 1959 version, leaving the listener to guess Gerhard's final intentions for the ending of "Metamorphosis".

An important work in the development of the composer's late style, the original version of the Second Symphony was his first major piece to incorporate a 12-note pitch series with a time-series controlling the work's duration and entire structure. If, as a result of this attention to detail, the work may strike some listeners as occasionally arid and lacking emotional involvement, there is recompense to be had in the miraculous scoring and craftsmanship in evidence.

The Symphony begins with a *Poco sostenuto* introduction which sets out the 12-tone row each lasting for a different note value: the 12 values on which the rest of the work is based. This introduction leads to a substantial and driving *Allegro assai* which launches the main section of the movement. The tempo is slowed down twice in the course of the movement. The first slower passage, featuring all the percussion players, begins at fig 16 (Track 15 on the Valois CD). The second slower passage is characterised by brass and percussion (fig 23). This leads to a faster section marked *Poco piu animato* at fig 36 (Track 16). The first violins have a Psycho-like stabbing passage at fig 39 which grabs the attention and the way is prepared for a decisive climax in rhythmic *stretto* at fig 44.

The second part of the Symphony begins *Lento* at fig 49 (Track 17) with the thrilling sound of twelve clicking wood-blocks played by all percussionists sounding like a plague of giant crickets. This extraordinary sound was inspired by noises from a field whilst the composer was waiting for a bus on

holiday in Majorca. There is a Scherzo-like Comodamente interlude at fig 72 (Track 18) whose easy-going mood lightens the mood of the work. Somewhere past its midway point (fig 84), the wood-blocks fade out to leave the more lyrical material to form a bridge passage to the Finale. The *molto vivace* final span begins at fig 90 (Track 19) with the sound of seven cymbals and continues in the form of a sparsely-scored nightmarish waltz in the spirit if not the manner of a middle movement of a late Mahler symphony. A passage of *spiccato* writing catches the ear (five bars after fig 106) and the actual mid-point of the finale occurs at fig 108 (Track 20) with two bars of tom-tom. The waltz is cast in the form of a palindrome and so the movement retraces its steps and thus the last sounds of the symphony are of the glimmering cymbals with which the finale began.

The original Second Symphony is an impressive achievement, although it is hard not to see it as a transitional work between the superior First and Third Symphonies. It seems almost regrettable that the composer should have deemed it necessary to tamper with it eight years after its first performance. This is certainly the view of Bernard Benoliel, who, in his programme notes to the Chandos release of the 1959 work, makes a very eloquent case for the original version to take precedence over “Metamorphosis”. The Chandos performance also adds weight to this argument as the textures are much cleaner than in the Valois recording, though the performance of the revised Second Symphony is one of the finest in the Auvidis Valois cycle. Both versions are worth acquiring not only for the quality of the performances but also because they are in essence two different works, the additional instruments in “Metamorphosis” changing the character of the symphony quite significantly.

The Chandos release (CHAN 9694) featuring the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Matthias Bamert couples the original version of Symphony no 2 with the magnificent Concerto for Orchestra: a full-blooded late work in Gerhard’s most extrovert and confident vein, whilst the Auvidis Valois CD (MONTAIGNE MO 782102) with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife under Víctor Pablo Pérez couples Metamorphosis with Gerhard’s “New York” Symphony (no 4).

It must be said that the Second is the most problematic of the Gerhard symphonies and I find it occasionally guilty of a passionless anonymity not to be found elsewhere in the cycle. It is certainly not the place to start an investigation of this composer’s symphonic output.

### **Symphony No 3 (Collages) (1960)**

The Third Symphony was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky. It received its first performance on 8 February 1961 at the Royal Festival Hall by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Rudolph Schwartz. The BBC SO also recorded the work for EMI with the conductor Frederik Prausnitz on a long-deleted LP (ASD 2427). The work is scored for 2 flutes (doubling piccolos), piccolo, 3 oboes (3rd doubling cor anglais), 3 clarinets in A (3rd doubling bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, double bassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets in C, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, harp, piano, electronic tape, strings and an enormous percussion section: large suspended cymbal, 3 Chinese tomtoms (large, medium, small), large antique cymbal, maracas, side drum, wood blocks (large and small) (player one); tam tam, bass drum (player two); xylo-rimba, glockenspiel (player three); vibraphone (player four); marimba (player five).

The work encompasses the span of one day from dawn to the dead of night and is cast in seven continuous sections which contrast in design, texture, tempo and mood. The subtitle “Collages” refers to the prominent role given to electronic tape which sounds alongside the “musical” sounds of the orchestra. The sounds of the tape are indeterminate and vary in pitch, producing a unique combination of music and controlled “noise” which, according to the composer, was “a gamble, a real adventure into the unknown”. The original idea for the work occurred to Gerhard whilst he was on a return flight from America and flying at about 30,000 feet over the Irish coast, he saw the sun rise “like the blast of 10,000 trumpets”. This fantastic image sparked the composer’s imagination and the idea of travelling in a jet-plane suggested the use of electronic tape (the first sounds from the tape at the start of the symphony actually sound like a jet).

The first movement is an *Allegro moderato* which describes the image of the rising sun by the use of an opening blast of three unison trumpets. A series of built up chords from individual notes spread throughout the large orchestra creates a feeling of expectancy and opens up wide vistas in the manner of Copland's "outdoor" style. Wide leaps in the strings are echoed in the woodwind and the section dies away on a triple piano chord.

The following *Lento* suggests the landing of the jet or coming down to earth, though not as literally as in the conclusion of Ian Parrott's *Second Symphony* (1960), also inspired by airplane travel. The section also represents the world of plant life in all its variety. It begins on a fortissimo arpeggiated figure for first violins over a loud chord from the piano. Soon an ostinato figure is set up on marimba, joined by piano, xylo-rimba and first violins. The score becomes Webernesque with spare harmonics dotted about the page and telling col legno taps from the double basses. A marimba ostinato leads directly to the next section.

The *Allegro con brio* is the most extended section in the symphony. It represents the "world of man, with the darkness at noon, with his despair, his rage, his pity, his defeat". The nature of the music is violent and restless with crashing harmonic rolls on the timpani, metallic strokes from the glockenspiel and piano and furious pizzicati from the strings. A quieter section at fig 11 recalls the mood of the opening of the symphony but it is interrupted and a huge climax ensues. After this, a passage marked "steady" initiates a machine-like sequence in which pizzicato strings, staccato woodwind, brass, percussion and piano exhaust themselves in a grotesque doll-like procession. After another pause and a further machine-like sequence, a series of crescendos presages the central *Moderato* section.

This section is the only one to avoid the use of electronic tape. It is meant to represent what goes on in the mind of someone who has lost consciousness. Beginning with a cluster on the piano, the section consists of a series of delicate chords built up from widely spaced notes throughout the orchestral palette. Building on Schoenberg's "Klangfarbenmelodie" (or endless melody) where the theme is endlessly shared between different instruments producing a kaleidoscopically changing series of colours, this passage is hypnotic and beautiful, providing a welcome still centre to the symphony.

The following *Vivace* is a sort of "coming to" from an anaesthetic with a woozy feeling this induces as an after-effect. Underlying this section is the ghost or memory of a Spanish dance rhythm much as the ghost of a Viennese waltz haunts Ravel's "La Valse". It is perhaps not too fanciful to imagine the unconsciousness of the previous movement to represent the composer's own artistic block when he came to England as an exile. The "coming to" might be regarded as nostalgia for his homeland (the first piece he began working on when he settled in Britain was "Don Quixote", one of his most overtly "Spanish" compositions). In any event the use of Latin rhythms in a work which is otherwise so abstract is very striking and gives this section a uniquely recuperative flavour after the stasis of the previous *Moderato*.

The ensuing *Allegretto* recalls the music and events of the *Lento* second section. Gerhard here imagined lights turning on in distant cities and there is a "winding down" feeling to the section. In its centre, it includes a sort of "cadenza" for electronic tape which has always sounded together with the orchestra up to this point. Gradually the orchestra reassembles and prepares for the concluding *Calmo*.

This last section conveys the stillness at dead of night. The objective mood of much of the work grows into something more subjective. The composer has said that the closing bars, which are very moving indeed, were written very much "in the first person singular".

Monumental in a Sibelian way, this is perhaps Gerhard's "Pastoral" Symphony with its allusions to Nature. It is also a hymn of praise and is related to Psalm 113 verse 3: "From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same may the Lord's name be praised". The work also relates to the different times of the day and the colours of the spectrum (thus the third section is a reference to "Darkness at

Noon” by Arthur Koestler. The use of electronic tape goes one further than Varèse, who juxtaposed tape and orchestral textures in his *Déserts* of 1954: getting the balance right between tape and orchestra in “Collages” is just one of the many difficulties facing the conductor of this epic and challenging work.

There are currently two CD versions available of this work. One features the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife under Víctor Pablo Pérez on Auvidis Valois Montaigne (MO782103 coupled with symphony 1) in a 1993 recording and the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Matthias Bamert on Chandos (CHAN 9556) in a reading set down in early 1997. The original LP version with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Frederik Prausnitz on EMI (ASD 2427) is also worth getting hold of via second hand dealers - the playing of the BBC orchestra is astonishingly good but the contribution of the tape is very intrusive and at times unintentionally comic. The BBC Radiophonic Workshop contributed the sounds for the original tape and at times on the EMI LP one is inescapably reminded of the soundtrack to an early Doctor Who episode or Quatermass and the Pit, both productions for whom the BBC Radiophonic Workshop provided atmospheric soundtracks.

The Auvidis Valois CD is also rather generous in its use of the tape, occasionally drowning out the rest of the ensemble. The strings are very thin in places (a problem with this Gerhard Symphony series generally) ie the arpeggio figure initiating the Lento section scored for first violins sounds suspiciously like a solo violin and the staccatissimo passage for divided strings before the Allegretto section sounds more like a string quartet! Otherwise, the reading sounds well prepared and the “Spanish” rhythms of the Vivace sound crisply authentic. This is very much a performance in the cold light of day with not too much light and shade or inner landscape about it. For that one must turn to the Chandos version.

Again, the Chandos reading has the edge on its rivals with phenomenally accurate orchestral playing allied to a genuine interpretation on the part of Bamert. The subtle use of the tape (which today sounds stubbornly rooted in the early 1960s) enhances the score, adding extra depth to the palette rather than talking over the symphony completely as it threatens to do in the Auvidis Valois performance and does in the EMI version. Couplings are important too with a work which lasts only 20 minutes: Chandos give us the premiere recording of the Gerhard Piano Concerto followed by a splendid performance of the great late orchestral work “Epithalmion”, whilst the Valois disc is coupled with the Symphony no 1. In sum, the Chandos is the version to have but the EMI LP is certainly of more than mere curiosity value if you can put up with the gurglings of the closely-miked electronic tape.

#### *Symphony no 4 “New York” (1967)*

The Fourth Symphony was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for its 125th Anniversary. It received its world première on 14th December 1967 in New York given by the NYPO conducted by William Steinberg. The European première took place on 27th October 1968 by the Stockholm PO under Antal Dorati and the English première was on 4th December 1968 at the Royal Festival Hall with Colin Davis conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra at a concert of the Royal Philharmonic Society.

The symphony is one its composer’s most massive statements and calls for a huge orchestra: 4 flutes (3rd and 4th doubling piccolos), 4 oboes, 4 clarinets in A, 3 bassoons, 1 double bassoon, 6 horns in F, 4 trumpets in C, 3 tenor trombones, 1 bass trombone, 1 tuba, 2 harps, celeste, piano, 4 pedal-timpani, percussion and strings. The percussion section is huge even by Gerhard’s standards:

Player one: glockenspiel, 2 suspended cymbals, 2 Chinese wood-blocks, 2 tambourines, 1 pair of antique cymbals

Player two: vibraphone, 2 suspended cymbals, Latin-American Timbale, Latin American Timbale

and snareless Caisse Claire, 2 tambourines, triangle, 2 Chinese wood-blocks, large Chinese tom-tom, side drum

Player three: xylophone, 2 suspended cymbals, 3 chinese tom-toms, tambourine, Chinese wood-block, claves, 1 tubular bell

Player four: marimba, 2 suspended cymbals, large tam-tam, set of 11 tubular bells, 2 korean temple-blocks, tambourine, Chinese wood-block, bass drum

Gerhard's Symphony no 4 is a powerful one-movement structure which arguably carries on from where the composer's Concerto for Orchestra of 1965 left off: in many ways the Fourth is itself a concerto for orchestra and the score contains one of highest levels of virtuosity demanded by any symphonic work. The work begins with a series of chord clusters which are dragged upwards by the clarinets (fig 1 and Track 1 of the Valois CD). A section with spiky, angular string writing follows (fig 4) and this is succeeded by a remarkable passage with Spanish fanfares and guitar-like strumming (fig 5). Here Gerhard remembers his Catalan roots but the Latin motifs are refracted through the avant-garde sounds of the 1960s as if memory has distorted something once familiar. Echoing clusters of string harmonics appear at fig 10 before a striking section begun by a loping percussion figure initiated by the marimba (fig 11, Track 2). A scherzando episode lightens the atmosphere (*molto vivace, con impeto*: 2 bars before fig 21, Track 3). A ghost of a slow movement appears 8 bars before fig 25 (Track 4) as a deliberate series of resonating chords which anchor the piece to the pitch E. This leads to a rich passage for divided strings that provides the work's slowly-beating heart (fig 28). An Allegro section bursts in at 1 bar before before fig 32 (Track 5), building to a piano cadenza which begins 1 bar before fig 38, leading to a brief moment of stasis at fig 39. A new episode, fantastic and fleet of foot, begins at fig 40 (Track 6), marked *flessibile* and a series of bell-like chimes appears at fig 46 (Track 7). An important de Falla-like trumpet fanfare motif cuts in at fig 52 (Track 8) and starts to dominate the texture. Timpani glissandi (fig 68, Track 9) lead to a passage where the oboes have a poignant duet on an ancient Catalan folksong (the same folksong which appeared in the first movement of Gerhard's "Homenaje a Pedrell" Symphony) (fig 70). Faster music begins (*deciso* at fig 73, Track 10). The tempo reaches an Allegro con moto (Track 11) and the symphony's expressive culmination takes place at fig 92 (Track 12) before the work proceeds smartly to a vehement conclusion (1 bar before fig 106, Track 13).

The Fourth Symphony was first recorded by Sir Colin Davis and the BBC Symphony orchestra on the Argo label for Decca (ZRG 701) on a now-deleted LP in 1972. To my ears there is a surprising lack of feeling and empathy with the music in this reading considering the forces involved had given the English premiere of the work. The quicker sections seem rushed and harried whilst the more reflective episodes do not dig deep

enough under the surface of this music as the Chandos version with Matthias Bamert and the BBC Symphony Orchestra do so splendidly (CHAN 9651). The Auvidis Montaigne CD version (Montaigne MO 782102) with the Orquesta Sinfónica de Tenerife is not so far behind in terms of interpretation, conductor Víctor Pablo Pérez turning in his most impressive reading of a Gerhard symphony with the Fourth. However, the limitations of the Tenerife orchestra are revealed even more in such a virtuosic work, the strings in particular seeming paper thin in comparison with the lush BBC section. Matthias Bamert reserves his most penetrating conducting for this very moving work and the superbly played Pandora Suite makes a delightful, if not over-generous, coupling.

In sum, the Chandos Gerhard Symphony series is almost self-recommending. The BBC Symphony Orchestra is perhaps a key to the success of the enterprise: the orchestra's involvement with Roberto Gerhard goes back to the first performances and recordings of many of the works on these CDs and Matthias Bamert makes a sympathetic and at times inspired conductor of these brilliantly orchestrated symphonies. The Auvidis Montaigne CDs are less polished and the playing is not in the same league

as the BBC players for Chandos and yet there are occasional insights to be gained from the Tenerife versions of the works, not least an authentically Spanish flavour to the readings. Of the LPs, Antal Dorati's recording of Symphony no 1 is well worth tracking down from second hand shops: it exudes the excitement of new discovery and has the advantage of a world class conductor bringing all his intellect and flair to bear on the piece.

Chandos are to be congratulated on their excellent Gerhard Symphonies Edition and I hope they will bring their attention to other émigré symphonists such as Wellesz, Rankl, Gál, Joubert, Williamson and Panufnik in the near future.

As a cheaper alternative symphonies 1-4 are available on a 2CD set on Auvidis Montaigne MO782113 £12.50

---

© COPYRIGHT Paul Conway renewed 2011. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.