

# Alban Berg and Us

## Personal Notes

I have decided to write this short autobiographical piece in the hope of illuminating for Western as well as new Russian audiences certain aspects of the intellectual development of an (in my opinion important) group of Russian (Soviet) musicians of my generation.

I was born in 1944 in Kotchmes in the autonomous Republic of the Komis, in the far north of Russia, where in a penal camp my parents served out sentences as "enemies of the people" (Paragraph 58/10). They were freed one year before my birth, and settled close to the Kotchmes camp, living in what they believed to be "continual exile".

My childhood took place in a tiny village named Predchachtaja (which means "next to the mines"), situated a few kilometres from the town of Vorkouta, from which my parents moved away in 1945. The village comprised of several barracks in the middle of the tundra, close to the mine number two and several zones surrounded by barbed wire. A wretched landscape, marshy and at the same time hilly, not far from a river, covered in summer by moss and small shrubs – a landscape which will haunt me for the rest of my life. In the endless winter everything was white, the snow sometimes even covering our barracks.

Despite the hard day-to-day reality – promiscuity, poverty and the lack of any comforts – I was at that time rather happy. As the "little one" of a family which had over three generations suffered a great deal, I was lovingly protected by my mother, my grandmother and my elder sister. The friends of my parents, most of them also former camp inmates, were very kind towards me and spoiled me. Children were, in this environment, rare.

My life seemed to me completely natural, normal. I had, after all, never known another. Sometimes I was witness to extraordinary acts of cruelty, but the capacity of a child to justify everything is astonishing.

Another life began for me suddenly at the age of 14, when I was fortunate enough to be accepted as a student at the Leningrad Music School. This was the only music college in the Soviet Union which took boarding students. Here, coming into contact with students from the entire country, from the most varied social environments and of the most varied nationalities, I gradually began to understand where I came from and how heavily the burden of my family's fate weighed on me. At this time the topic of penal camps was still taboo. Newspapers, films, literature and official paintings did not speak of it. Censorship was omnipresent. Everyone was afraid, and personal and familial secrets, great and small, were carefully kept silent, despite the beginning of the political thaw...

Only years later did I understand that the fate of my family was no exception. The country had, over decades, undergone a variety of catastrophes, and the suffering of the people was immense: the camps, the murderous wars, the collectivisation, hard daily life and laborious work in the towns. And this suffering was hardly expressed.

Probably it was in music – the art form most difficult to politically control – that the deep pain of the people gradually came to find expression. Music was omnipresent. From the rural folk song, still in existence,

through to the most varied styles, such as jazz "à la russe", shy and naive, and the patriotic song, sometimes particularly expressive in spite of terrible lyrics, all the way to classical music – all of these could serve to express what had been "experienced" – and so express part of the deep soul of the country.

From this viewpoint my musical career is not unusual. In Vorkouta, when I was around ten years old, I suddenly felt the need – despite a seemingly rather quiet life – to "free" myself from something. I played endless intuitive improvisations à la Beethoven, without understanding what I was doing and why. But after such "playing" I felt a sense of relief. I had the feeling of freeing myself from a terrible, indescribable fear.

The next stage was Leningrad. Whilst I was making progress in my demanding studies to become a professional musician, I began to gradually understand that "great music" often developed in this way. At that time I thought that the Romantics expressed fragility and deep, sometimes agonising, pain, that Beethoven expressed tragic outrage, and Bach Christian endurance. They became "my friends"; their souls, "kindred" with mine, resonated within me.

Through the years my horizons began to broaden. My "Shostakovich period" began when I was sixteen. I can still see him in front of me, in the wings of the Philharmony, after the performance of one of his works. Thin, deathly pale, nervous, with shaking hands – he was unable to light his cigarette. His music struck me as brilliant.

At seventeen I discovered Mahler and Stravinsky, then Bartok and Honegger. The symphonies of Shostakovich (especially the Tenth, the Fourth and the Sixth), his Violin Concerto, Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring", Mahler's "Kindertotenlieder" ("Songs of the Dead Children") and his Ninth Symphony, the "Symphonie liturgique" by Honegger, "Trauermusik" ("Music of Mourning") by Hindemith – all of these formed my musical universe at the age of twenty.

In the mid-1960s the USSR gradually liberalised itself, but the ban on the music of the Vienna School continued. And it is these compositions which began to fascinate me more and more. With great excitement I would gather snippets of information on the subject. "Wozzeck", "Lulu", "Moses and Aaron" – these titles held a strange fascination for me. When I would sometimes hear such music (privately, on cassette), it made a rather bewildering impression on me.

The "bomb" struck in 1965 when I bought a Polish recording of Berg's concerto "A la memoire d'un ange" ("In Memory of an Angel"). This piece of music, which on first hearing seemed to me blurred, imprecise and vague, came more and more to conquer my entire being. It produced in me an almost hypnotised state. I listened to this work over and over again.

Why this overwhelming effect? What is so special about this music? The difference seems to me a crucial one. Shostakovich, Honegger and Bartok speak from our world, expressing the greatness and the horror of the twentieth century, but their message often seems disap-

pointing. Mahler is too tonal, sounds "too beautiful", Bartok often ends his compositions with a kind of barely believable popular cheerfulness, Hindemith often hides behind a not very convincing skilfulness. Shostakovich – despite his truly tragic depth – feels compelled to give his great works a 'politically correct' ending. The honest, naive optimism and the grotesque of his early music do not convince me either.

In contrast to all of these, Alban Berg's music leads me nowhere. It does not try to "change" the world, he describes it as it is, in all its ugliness, its anguish, its greatness and also in its humanity. The human is in this century so very small, so vulnerable, and with no rescue in sight, despite a last, totally irrational shimmer of hope. Berg's composition technique also seems to me unusual.

The refusal to provide clarity in phrase and form, the astonishingly opaque instrumentation, the ungraspable and moving harmonic language, the complexity of the writing, and above all the so very deep and generously romantic vigour of his work – all of these corresponded strangely to my own feelings and intuitions. This was it, my music! The adhesion was perfect.

At the beginning of this epoch (at the age of twenty-one) I became a "disciple" of Berg, or "Berguianetz", as my Leningrad friends called it.

The String Quartet Number Three, the Violin Concerto, the chamber opera "Les Deux" ("The Two"), the symphony "Zum Gedächtnis von Alban Berg" ("In Remembrance of Alban Berg") (two works for large orchestra) are the fruit of seven years of my life which I "shared" with the Austrian composer.

At the same time the ban on the music of the three Vienna School composers faded to a formality. Their music began to be played, and photocopies of the scores were passed around the musical "samizdat". Contact with the West increased, and it became more and more easy to access recordings of such music.

Alongside the Violin Concerto, I was particularly struck by "Wozzeck". Still today, thirty years on, a cold shiver runs down my spine when I hear the scene of Marie with the Bible:

"There once was a poor child  
Who had no mother and no father  
Everything was dead  
And there was no one in the world..."

The scenes with Wozzeck in the first act, and above all at the end of the third act – the suffering and endless despair, with the unbearable "hop-hop" of the little girl – that was the final truth! Poor Wozzeck – naive and foolish, Marie – weak and unhappy, the idiotic Drum Major, Herr Doktor and Herr Hauptmann, schizophrenic and sadistic, Andres – all of these figures were for me so full of life! I recognised them, had known them "in flesh and blood" in Vorkouta, in Leningrad and elsewhere, and I began to understand their true significance.

Then came the Russian creation of the chamber concert with Rojdestvensky and his group: music with the same density, but elegant and refined, grand and nostalgic in its melodic style. (It suffices to mention the anagram Arnold SCHörnBERG). The "Suite Lyrique", capricious, enigmatic, with thoroughly original use of the twelve-note system (yet another discovery!), the so very "Schönbergian" "Drei Orchesterstücke" ("Three Orchestral Pieces"), with their startling wanderings through the

depths of the unconscious, the romantic "Sonata for Piano", the "Altenberg Lieder" ("Altenberg Songs"), and the cold greatness and morbid sexuality of the "Lulu Suite", which expresses the unbearable burden carried by the "underclass" of the large cities. (The burden of Leningrad slowly added to my familial wounds).

And finally, "Sieben frühe Lieder" ("Seven Early Songs"), a score still composed tonally by the young Berg, with echoes of Mahler and Wolf rather than of Schönberg. Music borne from brilliant inspiration: fresh, deep, tender.

It is a paradox that, although I listened to the music of both of the other Viennese composers, Schönberg and Webern, with equal enthusiasm, they inspired me far, far less. Intellectually I understood Webern's subtlety, and Schönberg's passionate radicalism, but this music did not move me to the same extent. Perhaps I lacked the means of access. In Berg's music there were more connections to what was familiar to me: a symphonic scale comparable with Mahler and Shostakovich, a melodramatic dimension like Puccini's, a subtlety and a fragile vocal line (again a reference to Mahler and Wolf). But what paradoxically attracted me most was its stylistic and structural incoherence, a kind of fatal eclecticism which makes it all the more human.

It is known that Berg found composition difficult, despite all his attempts to rationalise what was written. The adjustment to twelve-note music at the beginning of the twentieth century, the use of pure classical forms in some of his works, and even his strange "mathematical-mythical" calculations – all of these gave his works neither clarity nor transparency. Rather the opposite is the case. His desperate attempts to structuralise added a note of disconcerting – sometimes esoteric – strangeness to his musical language, so fundamental, chaotic and impulsive.

Put more simply, it can be argued that in the very foundations of this composer's language there exists an irreconcilable rift: between post-romantic, tonal sensibility, still deeply anchored in Christian values, and the terrible revelations of the twentieth century, understood in part with thanks to Schönberg, experienced during the war and expressed in a grim and threatening atonality. The attempt to rationalise this explosive cocktail through the adoption of the twelve-note technique and other approaches was rather a dubious undertaking.

In this musical "blurring" – indefinite and defining, mystical yet without indoctrination, fleeing and powerful at the same time, expressing with prophetic power the vigour and the despair of a Viennese dandy of the twentieth century – I succeeded – I, the son of a former penal camp inmate, born more than half a century later in northern Russia – in finding in my youth the deepest and most multifaceted expression of my personality and my fate.

A third of a century now separates me from the 1960s. I have since become familiar with a great variety of music: primitive music, traditional music, particularly that of India, Russian folk music, that of the orthodox church, rock and roll, other classical and contemporary music, French music (a later discovery). Despairingly and slightly indiscriminately I have sought to finally find my own musical language. There have been interesting encounters, more or less fortunate. Yet unfortunately I have never again in my life experienced such a strong phenomenon, such a strong identification with another composer.

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