

KAREL REINER AND HIS MUSIC

A Conversation between Thomas Müller and Sebastian Foron

Herr Müller, we met in 2006 when I played Karel Reiner's Sonata Brevis in the Konzerthaus in Berlin for the organisation musica reanimata – and I'm glad I've stayed in touch, both with you and with musica reanimata. As a composer yourself, you naturally have your own point of view – and as you told me then, you knew Reiner not only as a colleague but also as a friend.

I got to know Karel Reiner in 1975, when I was running a little theatre in the DDR. We were the first German-speaking theatre to present his opera *Das Schustermärchen*, which is an outstanding work. He came to Lutherstadt Eisleben for the preliminary discussions and the rehearsals. A friendship developed that lasted until his death, in 1979.

I sent my compositions to him in Prague, and he would tell me about his work and his first performances. And we had long conversations in Prague. We didn't talk only about music: we also touched on the problems of the world and discussed our outlook on life. I was very impressed by his humane view of the Germans, although he had been interned in several fascist concentration camps.

I can believe that, since I heard the same thing from his wife. I got to know Hana Reinerová shortly before her death. We met at the house of one of her daughters in Prague. She spoke immaculate German with me. I must admit that to begin with I felt rather embarrassed: I didn't know how I, as a German, should approach her. But she was so cordial that the problem was instantly resolved. She told me a lot about Prague before it was occupied by the Nazis, about the lively, multicultural life there, about the intensive exchanges with Vienna. Many concerts in both cities were identical, often with the same artists. Reiner thought a lot of the Second Viennese School and was often in touch with Alban Berg. What were Reiner's early compositions like?

Reiner was the son of a cantor and came into contact with the most important currents of musical modernism of the time through his friend and teacher Alois Hába, who was a member of the international avant garde of the early twentieth century. Reiner had been a student of Josef Suk at the Prague Conservatoire, completing the course in half the normal time before he joined the Hába circle. Hába was known for his system of microtonal tuning, which expanded compositional possibilities with quarter- and sixth-tones. It wasn't just a mathematical-acoustic construct with him: he derived it from the folk-music of his native Moravia. As a young composer under the influence of Hába, Reiner was then writing interesting compositions for quarter-tone piano and for stringed and wind instruments in the quarter- and sixth-tone system.

Later he turned away from thinking and writing in microtones. But the spiritual influence of Hába on Reiner remained potent in another way. Hába drew his creative energy from the anthroposophical teachings of Rudolf Steiner, especially from the three avenues of 'Thinking–Feeling–Willing'. In music Hába turned this idea around to produce 'melody–harmony–rhythm'.

Reiner took inspiration from this realisation and filled it with his subjective experience. Moreover, the 'athematic style' became decisive in his compositions. The concepts of 'athematic' and 'atonal' are tightly interconnected, not in the Schoenbergian sense of 'twelve notes related only to one another' but in the juxtaposition of consonant and dissonant rows of intervals, and permutations thereof, from which the vertical layers of sound are derived.

You can hear the different influences, but he is always recognisable as himself. That's important, I find, and it raises him above many other composers: you always recognise his handwriting. It kept on developing, of course, but his personality can be discerned in his earliest works.

It's remarkable, isn't it? Another structural principle of the 'athematic style' that plays an important role in Reiner's composition is his avoidance of repetition, or variations of melodic-rhythmic elements. The result is the dissolution of traditional musical forms. In their place come musical events that are developed in an epic manner. Reiner's output as a whole encompasses almost all the genres of music. In the canon of twentieth-century music his music attracts our attention through its originality.

The works on this CD – the Concerto for Cello and Orchestra and the compositions for cello and piano – give a very good indication of his artistic evolution, not least because they were written at biographically important points in his life. The many brief motifs seem to me like short, distinct episodes. His abrupt changes are another stylistic means.

Reiner lived at a time that saw many radical shifts in politics, society and culture, and that is clearly reflected in his music. Professor Václav Riedlbauch rightfully drew my attention to the fact that Reiner's music always has a political component. As with Shostakovich, the reception and understanding of Reiner's music require the listener to take account of the circumstances of his life and the politics of the world in which he lived. So I find it all the more astonishing how multi-layered his music is and that it can't be reduced to that political aspect. His style, using conventional compositional techniques, stretches the limits of melody, harmony and rhythm so close to breaking point that it becomes almost avant garde. At the same time Reiner saw his music as belonging to Czech musical tradition.

Yes, that was very important to him. Allow me to say something about the works themselves. The **Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 34**, was written between 1941 and 1943; it was Reiner's last composition before he was deported into the Fascist concentration camp. He left the clean copy of the score behind, with a friend. There's no evidence of a performance after the War, so what we have on this CD is a record of the first performances, on 2 and 3 December 2010, in the Rudolfinum in Prague. The Concerto makes considerable demands of the soloist in terms of being able to carry the sound over a large orchestra.

We decided to present the works on this CD in their order of composition, so as to document Reiner's development as a composer. The Concerto is the earliest work here. Since it is a symphonic work, it naturally is much bigger-boned than the chamber music. Although the Concerto was the only work to be written in the period before his internment in Terezín, it is no early work. At the time it was created, Reiner was around thirty years old. By then he had written widely, in most musical genres. He was also very successful, and played an important role in Prague cultural life as a composer and pianist.

After the occupation of Bohemia, of course, Jews were forbidden to take part in any kind of public music-making, and so Reiner became one of the most active organisers of illicit house-concerts, although they lived in constant fear of denunciation. It became a form of spiritual and cultural resistance. The external dimensions of the Concerto are really imposing. I find it highly noteworthy that he should compose a work of such scope and scored for such large forces in the years 1941–43, a time when the Nazis had built up such an inescapable system. The composition of the Cello Concerto seems absurd, without any perspective of realisation. It strikes me as an act of defiance, a kind of rearing-up. I've allowed myself to play some passages an octave higher than originally notated, since the orchestral scoring is so full that

the soloist wouldn't be audible otherwise.

In the first movement, the *Allegro energico*, emphatically dramatic and rhythmic gestures are incessantly juxtaposed. The frequent correspondence of phrases in the solo cello with constantly varied instrumental groups makes the music both colourful and nervous, although sometimes it also brings relaxation. The return of motivic and rhythmic figures in the solo part, as in the intermediate orchestral passages, endows the movement with a consistency I find convincing.

The first movement begins with a short, energetic orchestral prelude. The cello answers with a rising series of chords, out of which a melody evolves. When you remember that Reiner thought of himself as a composer in the Czech musical tradition, the connection with the series of chords at the beginning of the solo part in Dvořák's B minor Cello Concerto is probably no coincidence. The second movement begins with a cor anglais solo, out of which a duet with the solo cello develops. This beginning is strongly reminiscent of Shostakovich – although it's interesting that Shostakovich wrote his First Cello Concerto only twenty years later. Reiner's wife, Hana Reinerová, told me that her husband thought very highly of Shostakovich and, already in the 1930s, was the first to perform works of his in concert in Prague. Anyway, the harmony in Reiner is more radical. Metrically, the movement is written in 5/4, underlining its flowing character.

I think that the second movement, with its vehement orchestral intensifications and the epic character that you talk about, could be described as the central point of the work. The parallel diatonic and chromatic voice-leading you find here – which is highlighted as the movement progresses, and which contains intervallic leaps and rhythmicised changes of ornamentation of a single pitch – presents a kind of genetic code. That's true also of the first and third movements. The third movement acts as a kind of continuation of the first movement, with the linking passages of the orchestra even more stringent and the cello part even more virtuosic.

The rhythmic elements of the two outer movements have a strong Slavic cast. The third movement has a dancelike character. The stamina of the soloist is sorely tested, since one has to play unusually long passages without any orchestral intervention. The cadenza is interesting. At the beginning and end the solo cello is accompanied by the percussion and, as a further percussive timbre, with a few pizzicati from the cellos and double-basses. The work ends, as so often with Reiner, with a calm passage before the orchestra brings it to an energetic close.

In a very short time at the end of November 1946, shortly after his return to Prague, Reiner wrote the *Sonata brevis*, **Op. 39**, for cello and piano, all three movements of which are very clearly articulated. The first movement uses as foreground motifs that change like a kaleidoscope; you can also hear ostinato elements as part of the mix.

Yes, the first movement begins with the cello and piano together, with the melody at first in the cello part. From the very start Reiner uses the entire range of each instrument. He begins with the lowest note possible on the cello, the open C-string and within a few bars swings up to g", and at the end of the movement it even goes up to a"". The first sentence is highly rhythmic. The way he deploys the rhythm has something in common with Shostakovich. The points of emphasis in the bar shift, as, indeed, do the time-signatures. He uses such extreme changes in the harmony that a harmonic sense is lost. One typical Reiner finger-print is parallel runs of intervals. In the first movement of the Sonata brevis, you find these runs as

sevenths at the more dramatic moments and later, in quieter passages, as fifths.

The most important structural element is the chromatic rise and fall of sounds, often in contrary motion, which often pop up in the other movements and so establish an over-arching connection.

The second movement, in the form of a funeral march, is very visual. The slow, sinking pizzicati have the effect of exhausted steps through bogland. You have to realise that only shortly beforehand Reiner, already weakened by typhus, had survived the death march to the Tegernsee. Then come these tremoli on the bridge, sounding like someone crying out. The third movement is a furious tarantella in the character of a perpetuum mobile, with a complex rhythmic exchange between the piano and the cello. The characters seem exaggerated, almost distorted. It changes between witty, sarcastic, boisterous, despairing and also stubborn.

The two linked works, ***Elegy and Capriccio***, composed in 1957 and 1960, offer an approach to composition that is quite different from the other works presented in this recording.

Definitely: they are expansively conceived and follow the precepts of the Romantic tradition. The work arose after the death of Stalin and before the Soviet invasion, a time of political détente. The Elegy is very stately, rising in tempo and rhythm to a climax, after which it calms down again.

Both works are conceived on a motivic and thematic basis. Following the traditional techniques of variation and development, the composer here turns his back on his own consistent style of writing. In the *Elegy* a syncopated lamenting theme is combined with a chromatic linearity. The elegant *Capriccio*, which is interrupted by metric irritations, draws its musical substance from the *Elegy*. *The Capriccio is very virtuosic and iridescent. I associate it with Mendelssohn's A Midsummer Night's Dream, also because there's a similar rhythmic figure underlying it.*

The ***Verses*** for viola and piano, composed in 1975 and recorded here on cello and piano, bring us to the composer's late period. The cyclic structure is characteristic of Reiner's musical thought, since it satisfies his tendency towards sharp, concentrated contrasts.

In this recording I play everything in the original pitch of the viola, until the very last chord, which I play an octave lower, as a kind of signature, to show it's a cellist who's playing. The four brief movements – two slow and two fast – are each about three minutes long. It sounds like a homage to the Second Viennese School, even though you can always hear that the music is by Reiner. It's the most radical of the three chamber works, with the way of playing or the presentation of a motif constantly changing. It's as if you were observing the work of a sculptor from different perspectives. These are character pieces with an astonishing variety of twists, interpolations and changes. Something new is always happening. The first movement of Verses begins dramatically, followed by sentimental responses, which disappear immediately, like shooting stars. The second movement is lively, with something mischievous in its pleasure in alienation and original details. I always think of Till Eulenspiegel when I play this movement.

In the first and third movements you find the secret of this tension-filled work in the sporadic flashes of very small pulses within the steady continuum of movement.

This third movement is very poetic: it is governed by a meditative mood as if from another world. When I am playing it, I find myself in the role of observer. The changes in sound are like clouds, changing shape and colour as they pull away.

This four-part composition unites several important characteristics of Karel Reiner's music: the declamatory style, in which he plays with the central tones of the melody in the manner of psalmody; rhythmicised repetitions of notes and sound; a fondness for large intervallic leaps; differentiated dynamics and, in opposition, structural elements in extreme registers.

You can see that also in the fourth and last movement C. Like the second, the writing is virtuosic. From the technical point of view, there's a constant changing between arco, pizzicato and, what's more, col legno battuto, which further expands the range of sound. At the same time as Reiner was writing Verses, he also composed some songs with texts by the East German writer Rainer Kunze that were critical of the system. As a protest against the brutal repression of the 'Prague Spring' he handed back his Party card. As a result his music was banned from performance.

I really hope that this recording serves to make the composer Karel Reiner better known. He has certainly earned it.