

Cultures meet in the music of HERMAN RECHBERGER

Herman Rechberger can with all justification be called a Renaissance figure. His interests reflect a man of many talents: composer, performer on the guitar, recorder and percussion, instrument maker, installation and graphic artist. Languages and cultures have always held a fascination for him, as have different eras combined with a present-day perspective. A typical feature of his compositions is his mixing of archaic and medieval melodies, Renaissance music and, in recent years, Oriental music with a modern contemporary idiom.

"I travel in time," he says. "I may, in one and the same composition, first say something in modern terms, but a moment later some historical idiom may be a more suitable means of expression."

The music of Rechberger usually draws on the contrasting effects of timbres, textures and styles. Of special importance to him is language, or rather languages, and by blending these with different kinds of music he weaves multidimensional, colourful webs that spark off associations and images in the listener.

A pertinent example of Rechberger's rich and lavish style is *Venezia* (Venice, 1985) for orchestra stylising early Venetian masters. The work is like a great carnival watched from many angles: above, below, the side, the middle, near and far. It is as if the composer himself, with all his trappings, is at the centre of the action, a sort of self-portrait. The outside, tourist view of the city fuses with the real Venice in the landscape of bridges and piazzas. Joining in the orchestral parade are a vocal ensemble, street musicians, and ambient sounds on tape.

Venezia was for a long time Rechberger's main orchestral work. Some writers on music even went so far as to conjecture that a composer such as Rechberger who did not go in for established generic titles (such as 'sonata' or 'symphony') would probably never compose a symphony, since he has often created less inhibited genres of his own. But they were wrong. In the space of two years he has composed two symphonies already (*From Dusk to Dawn*, 2001 and *Hawwa – Passionata*, 2002).

The source of inspiration for both symphonies was poetry. *From Dusk to Dawn* is based on Azerbaijani poetry and the idea inherent in Azerbaijani culture that "music cannot live without poetry". There is, however, no text. By contrast, the score of *Hawwa* includes two sopranos and a baritone, who sing Sufic poetry by the Persian philosopher Nesimi and *nawba* poetry from North Africa. The composer explains: "'Hawwa'

is the Arabic-Persian expression for 'passion' or 'passionate'. In Iwriith (Jewish) it means 'Life' and it is also the biblical word for the mother of all mankind ('Eve'). This expression is closely related to the idea of the medieval 'Minne', which again means 'Love' in the sense of unfulfilled, inaccessible love. The expression Minne is probably derived from Arabic 'Muhebb' or from the Turkish word 'Mehebbet', the meaning of which is exactly the same. According to the philosopher **Fazlullah Naimi**, Hawwa and Muhebb cannot exclude each other because they are necessary to the everlasting creation of human life."

Rechberger's most recent orchestral work, *...Vierzehn!* (...Fourteen!, 2002) has just been premiered in Austria in September. It was commissioned by the Brucknerhaus in his native Linz for the opening of the Bruckner Festival, makes use of Austrian folk music and has an element of the number mystery that appeals to this composer.

...NOW AND FOREVER...

Rechberger's penchant for combining widely differing stylistic elements is possibly most pronounced in the half-hour, oratorio-like fresco *...nunc et semper...* (...now and forever..., 1998). Cast in the leading role is the chorus, members of which can also take the solo parts. The work travels back over the centuries in Europe.

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"My work reflects my interest in languages, my love of Latin and Greek, my Catholic upbringing and the Austrian 'musical icons', but also the grim events of 20th century European history that cast their shadow over my post-war childhood," says Rechberger. At times

"I travel in time." the opera goes out into the market place or circus, while at others it is surrounded by the horrors of war. Musically it is a colourful blend of different styles exploiting the potential of a large orchestra.

...nunc et semper... was the first part of an operatic trilogy commissioned from three composers and performed at the Savonlinna Opera Festival in 2000 and 2001. Rechberger embarked on the commission by reshaping the libretto as an oratorio. "The work is in twelve scenes. They form a collection of tableaux – or to put it better, a 'Via dolorosa' or series of 'stagioni' passed by a narrator figure, a sort of pilgrim. He is in fact a genuine historical person, the scribe to the Pontiff of Avignon." The narrator halts before or in each tableau and intones, "et ego fui presens" ("I, too, was there"). The narrator may be regarded as an allegorical modern TV correspondent, reporting and giving a running commentary on the horrifying events he witnesses from the safety of his hotel balcony.

Woven into *...nunc et semper...* are a number of universally familiar musical quotations and allusions to music by Viennese composers. Rechberger in fact was already examining the Clas-

sicism of Mozart from a present-day perspective in *KV 622bis* for clarinet and tape composed in 1978. Written into the solo clarinet part, experimenting with sound, are genuine and fake Mozart quotations, while the tape incorporates Mozart played forwards and in reverse in addition to electronic effects. The 'deformed' Mozart, as Rechberger calls it, represents a nostalgic and mystified, i.e. false, image of the composer fashioned from Classicism; the authentic Mozart understanding and truth; while the new music stands for "the spirit of today".

Moments musicaux (Musical Moments, 1994) for flute or cello and piano is a mosaic-like work. In spirit it ties in with the virtuosity favoured by the Romantics and analyses musical moments bringing together such elements as Chopin, salon music and rag time.

ORIENTAL INFLUENCES

In the 1990s a new element made its appearance in the music of Rechberger: minimalism. This can be detected in the musical texture of, for example, the guitar concerto *Golpe de corazón* (Heartbeat Concerto, 1992), the *Concierto floral* (Flower Concerto, 1993) and the orchestral work *La nave dei pazzi* (The Ship of Fools, 1996). The solo part of the second guitar concerto with its New-Romantic orchestral scoring uses recurring motifs and flamenco technique. *La nave dei pazzi* is the outcome of ideas inspired by the Renaissance Flemish master **Hieronymus Bosch**. Here again, different temporal and timbral planes intersect with late 20th century idiom. The music abounds in energy that drives the events onwards in ritual fashion. The result is concentrated expression rich in timbre.

Rechberger's latest concerto, *Alovlar* (Flames, 2001) is scored for clarinet, concertante string quartet and string orchestra. The third movement also introduces a solo frame drum. *Alovlar*

draws on stylistic features of classical Azerbaijani music and scales that, with their dancing rhythms, fan the musical flames as they smoulder and flare. Once again, the music contains minimalistic elements and recurring melodies. What makes the music so elegant is the close attention to detail and nuance hidden in the musical flow.

Over the past few years Rechberger has been looking increasingly beyond Western culture, chiefly in the direction of Arabian music. One manifestation of this is the desert-like vision called *Assahra'* (Sahara, 1996) for accordion trio: the broad, distant horizon stretches in an unending line, and the listener travels, as it were, from one sand dune to another, towards an ever-repeated and swelling Tunisian folk tune that finally nevertheless scatters into tiny grains of sand in distant contours fashioned by the wind. Was the vision real or a mirage? The idea of reverting to basic elements, such as the pyramids as they slowly crumble, is also at the root of *GIZA* (1998) for two violins and string orchestra.

Also for accordion trio are *Karadeniz* (Black Sea, 1997), a work with strong Turkish-Balkan influences, and *Hagia ikón* (Holy Picture, 2001) with its marked Byzantine flavour. The music of the Black Sea region is spiced in *Karadeniz* with a steady percussion beat. This adds interesting shades to the accordion soundscape, across which flit some unexpected quotations (such as Mozart's *Marcia alla Turca*). The idea here was to imagine how Mozart would have written his Turkish March if he had ever visited Turkey as a tourist. *Karadeniz* is like the waves of the sea itself, always heaving, just as *Assahra'* evokes the constant undulation of the desert sands.

In his compositions Rechberger joins a long chain of narrators familiar from folk poetry: "To me, each composition is a dramaturgical entity. A composition is like a miniature drama in which the story constantly evolves. The musicians are characters whose lines are written for

instruments." A significant example of his musical miniature dramas is *Käärmeenloitsu* (Snake Charm, 1983), in which six singers operate with auxiliary instruments ('sound producers') in a colourful but archaic landscape.

The cello concerto *Kahraba* (Yellow Amber, 1996) commissioned by the Cairo Symphony Orchestra also has ties with Arabic culture. There are Oriental melodies in the virtuoso cello part, and a solo *darabuka* drum playing genuine Oriental rhythms in the chamber orchestra. Whereas the clarinet in the clarinet concerto may be likened to Oriental wind instruments, the cello in the cello concerto carries associations with a spike fiddle. In both concertos the solo instrument makes use of Oriental playing techniques

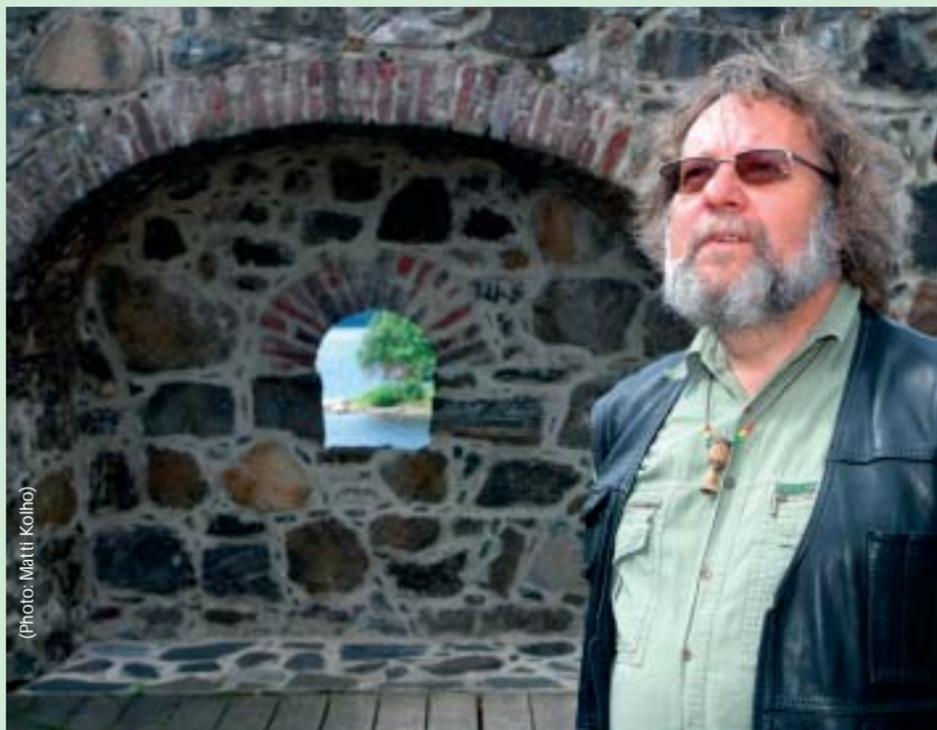
EXPLORER

The period Rechberger spent working at Benin on the west coast of Africa in spring 2003 inspired in him an even greater passion for African music. Since then he has played percussion in an ensemble of African musicians. Active performance is a continuation of his rhythmic studies of Oriental music.

Rechberger could be described as an explorer, a charter of new musical territories. Proof of this is an output amounting to nearly 170 works to date. Whereas he may at times throw himself into the carnival spirit, he also knows how to retreat to his cell and meditate. Although his music is easily accessible, it often has a meditative, conceptual dimension that transcends the sound alone.

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BERTRAND PERSON:
un poco meno mosso

♩ = 84

ff ET E - GO BER-TRAND PER-SON FUI PRE-SENS IN mf

S MA RA-NATHA! MA RA-NA, THA!

A MA RA-NATHA! MA RA-NA THA!

corno 1

f

fig. & bcl.

fig. & bcl.

clar. basso

ff

Herman Rechberger (born in Linz, Austria on 14 February 1947) studied graphic art and the guitar in Linz and continued his guitar studies in Zurich and Brussels. He settled in Finland in 1970 and has been a Finnish citizen since 1974. At the Sibelius Academy he studied composition with **Aulis Sallinen** (diploma 1976), the guitar, the recorder and electronic music, and he has also studied Oriental percussion in Tunis and Azerbaijan. He has played the recorder in Sonores antiqui, an ensemble specialising in early music, been an instrumentalist in the Köyhät ritarit (Poor Knights) vocal ensemble, and played percussion and other instruments in various line-ups. He has been a new music editor at the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) and was Artistic Director of the YLE Experimental Studio 1979-84. Herman Rechberger is nowadays a full-time composer.

Fennica Gehrman and Herman Rechberger have signed a publishing contract covering over 20 works.