

## Alfred Schnittke: Music for Violin and Piano • Roman Mints

The first time I heard Alfred Schnittke's music was at children's music school: it was his *Suite in the Old Style*, a fairly easy piece to play and understand, notably the Minuet. I remember that one of the teachers, hearing me play the Minuet, said: "See, he *can* write normal music!" At that time I didn't know what he meant, but a few years later, when I began to take an interest in any dissonant music, the Soviet record label Melodiya started to release LPs of Schnittke's symphonies conducted by Gennady Rozhdestvensky. I bought these records, my mother bought them, and I was also given them as birthday presents by my schoolmates. It never occurred to them that, as someone interested in this music, I might already have them. So I wound up with several copies of each record, and in turn gave them to my friends. People began to believe that Schnittke was my favourite composer. And even though that isn't exactly true, I do still have a particular connexion to his music. Although I stopped buying records of his music long ago, I have always found it easy to play: for me it is simple and clear, and it speaks my language.

Coming to London in 1994, I quite coincidentally discovered a fellow spirit in my professor, Felix Andriyevsky, who had liked Schnittke's music from his youth and was one of the first (besides its dedicatee Mark Lubotsky) to play his Sonata No.1. I studied all three sonatas, among other works, in Andriyevsky's class. I had read some studies of Schnittke as well as a couple of books of conversations where he discussed his music. But these were mostly about structural and other technical details, while Andriyevsky was teaching me to think in terms of imagery. Unlike many other composers' music, Schnittke's brings to mind very definite images, a result I think of how much work he did for cinema. Naturally I got much more out of my lessons with Andriyevsky than all the theoretical tomes I read, and I learned to hear the simple, graspable emotions in this music.

In 1999 I recorded my first disc on the Black Box label, and suggested making a record of all Schnittke's sonatas, as a second. I did a lot of preparation, but two weeks before the recording I developed a serious and long-term condition in my arm, and it never happened. When the condition passed, I was told we had missed the boat. I believe now that was all for the best.

As the years went by, Schnittke remained in my repertoire and one day, planning a concert in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, I decided I would perform all the music Schnittke had written for violin and piano. Working on the programme, I realised some things I'd previously only suspected – or rather, I became able to put them into words. First, his works for violin and piano cover every period of his creative life, and could even be an ideal guide to Schnittke's world. From the dodecaphony of the first part of the Sonata No.1 via the polystylistic No.2 to the flayed, dry, deathly late style of No.3: it's all there – the film music of *Suite in the Old Style*, the stylized *Gratulations Rondo*, the characteristic Schnittkean distortions of other people's music in *Stille Nacht* and the well-known polka from *The Census List*. These few pieces contain his entire artistic trajectory, his whole life.

Secondly, I began to understand why I felt so close to him, even though he was perhaps not as a "perfect" as some other composers. Sometimes his music

illustrates even too accurately the life we lived back then. For anyone who didn't live in the Soviet Union this might be hard to understand, but for me, this music is precisely about us, about that life, those pains, those joys, about the things you couldn't say out loud but which you could whisper in the ear, and so on. Hearing or playing it conjures up the films his music was written for (Schnittke would often use the cinema as a creative laboratory – for instance, every section of *Suite in the Old Style* is taken from his film music). That's why he was so popular, that's why admirers and detractors of both composers call him direct heir of Shostakovich. And that made it simpler and easier for me to play this music – it was as if it was about me, too.

Putting together the programme for that concert, I realised that playing everything in chronological order – ie, with Sonata No.3 at the end – would probably drive some of the audience to kill themselves, so oppressively leaden and cheerless is this music. After mulling it over I decided it would be best to play the sonatas in reverse order – going from death to life rather than the other way round; and between the sonatas I would scatter the other pieces. Happily, I came across the score of a rare arrangement of *Suite in the Old Style* for viola d'amore, harpsichord and percussion. Made (under the watchful eye of the composer) by the well-known Russian violist Igor Boguslavsky, this version sounded like the soundtrack to one of the fairy-tale films I watched as a child. So I taught myself to play the viola d'amore, and went on to perform other pieces on this instrument. That concert was a few years ago; and then last year I decided to finally finish what I had been unable to do before and record these pieces, in the same order as at the concert.

Shortly after that I suddenly discovered that in the meantime another sonata for violin and piano had come to light, a product of Schnittke's youthful years. I listened to it, spoke to various people who knew Schnittke personally, and decided against recording it. I believe it was a mistake to publish this early, not very successful work. The composer didn't include it in his own list of works, didn't assign it a number, and it feels right to follow his wishes. His Opus 1 – the only work he gave an opus number to – was written after this sonata. It's not really Schnittke, or rather: it isn't yet Schnittke. And that's why it isn't on this album of Schnittke's music for violin and piano.

Now that I have finished this record, it feels as though one more chapter of my life is over – could this be the mid-life crisis? – and my relationship with this music became clear to me. Now I am more interested in Brahms.

Roman Mints, 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2016

Translated by Robert Thicknesse

“My musical development took a course similar to that of some friends and colleagues, across piano concerto romanticism, neoclassic academicism, and attempts at eclectic synthesis... and took cognizance also of the unavoidable proofs of masculinity in serial self-denial. Having arrived at the final station, I decided to get off the already crowded train. Since then I have tried to proceed on foot.”

Born to German-speaking parents in what is now Latvia, Schnittke grew up in Russia speaking German. Schnittke began his musical studies in Vienna when his father began working for a Soviet newspaper there in 1946. This was a highly unusual route for a Soviet composer, and the resultant exposure to Austro-German styles had a lasting impact which contributed to Schnittke’s unique “musical development”: “I felt every moment there to be a link of the historical chain: all was multi-dimensional; the past represented a world of ever-present ghosts, and I was not a barbarian without any connections, but the conscious bearer of the task in my life.”

On the family’s return to Russia in 1948, Schnittke studied at the Music College of the October Revolution, which has since been renamed in his honour, and then at the Moscow Conservatory, graduating in 1961. From 1962, he taught instrumentation at the Conservatory and worked as a freelance composer. Schnittke’s relationship with the Soviet regime was mixed: his freedom to travel outside the Union was severely restricted, and though for a time he received numerous official commissions, ultimately Schnittke’s music was deemed too experimental, and he fell out of favour.

During the Khrushchev era, Schnittke was able to view hitherto forbidden Western scores, including works by Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Nono, Ligeti, Webern, Schoenberg and Berg. The impact of these scores on Schnittke was profound. Ultimately, he would abandon serialism in his own music – alighting from “the already crowded train” – but he retained a deep respect for its musical proponents.

Schnittke’s self-coined “polystylistics” embraced medieval plainchant, Renaissance polyphony, Baroque figuration, the Classical sonata, the Viennese waltz, late-Romantic orchestration, 12-tone principles, aleatory methods, and pop. Yet his ironic commentary on Romanticism evolved into a shadowing of Romanticism, even exploring the myth of Faust via Thomas Mann’s novel, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, Told by a Friend*, charting a composer’s inspiration through madness, which Schnittke said “had an incredible influence on me”. A passage from the book is illustrative:

“Adrian’s capacity for mocking imitation, which was rooted deep in the melancholy of his being, became creative here in the parody of the different musical styles in which the insipid wantonness of hell indulges: French

impressionism is burlesqued, along with bourgeois drawing-room music, Tchaikovsky, music-hall, the syncopations and rhythmic somersaults of jazz – like a tilting-ring it goes round and round, gaily glittering, above the fundamental utterance of the main orchestra, which, grave, sombre and complex, asserts with radical severity the intellectual level of the work as a whole.”

Written in 1994, the Violin Sonata No.3 was one of Schnittke’s last major pieces of chamber music. In common with his later symphonic works, the sonata exhibits greater textural translucency than many earlier pieces. Yet in terms of form, Schnittke echoes that of his Violin Sonata No.1, using the Baroque ‘sonata da chiesa’ structure: slow-fast-slow-fast. By this time, Schnittke had suffered a number of severe strokes (the first in 1985), causing him partial paralysis and rendering composition a physical and emotional struggle. The score to the Third Violin Sonata is, as a result, extremely bare, leaving the performers substantial freedom of interpretation.

In the first movement, the violin’s ascending lines and astringent quarter-tones are punctuated by the piano’s dissonant chords. The second movement is characterized by precise, brief note-values, and constitutes a kind of *danse macabre*. A greater sense of dialogue is established in the lyrical third movement, but the fourth is marked *Senza tempo* or *tempo libre*, lending the movement an eerie, unmoored quality.

The Sonata No.3 was premiered on 10 October 1994 by violinist Mark Lubotsky, who consistently championed Schnittke’s music, with Irina Schnittke at the piano. Lubotsky praised Schnittke’s “remarkable knowledge of the violin”, and the fact that the composer “had evolved his original violin style, which is inseparable from his ideas as a composer and which became one of the elements forming the organic part of his musical world.”

Both the humorously Mozartian *Congratulatory Rondo* (or *Gratulationsrondo*) of 1974, and *Stille Nacht* (1978) were written by Schnittke as gifts, the former as a birthday present for Rostislav Dubinsky, the founder and first violin of the Borodin Quartet. *Stille Nacht* was arranged as a Christmas greeting for Gidon Kremer, who performed it regularly in public, causing controversy in Austria especially, where this nightmarish, de-tuned version of Gruber’s carol was greeted with horror. Schnittke’s corrosive effect on the original can be summed up by his telling words to violinist Oleh Krysa: “I set down a beautiful chord on paper – and suddenly it rusts.” The *Polka* of 1980, which ends this collection, is a less unhinged take on an established style, albeit infiltrated by Schnittke’s quirky mannerisms. The work’s grotesque quality stems from its origins as part of the score to Moscow’s Taganka Theatre play

*Census*, after Gogol. The version for violin and piano was arranged for the violinist Sasha Rozhdestvensky.

Written in 1968, the Second Violin Sonata is entitled, 'Quasi una Sonata', a reference to Beethoven, whose two Op.27 Piano Sonatas include the instruction, 'Quasi una fantasia'. This was the first work composed by Schnittke after his decisive break with 12-tone techniques. The work, which exhibits a sense of futility, even nihilism, is "a borderline case of sonata form"; what Schnittke called, "a report on the impossibility of a sonata in the form of a sonata."

Schnittke was partly inspired by similar non-starts in Fellini's *8 1/2* – in which a film director struggles to complete or even begin his task. This could be deemed a reflection on modern distraction and perfectionism, artists obstructed from being prolific by their own inability to get things finished. Yet it also reflects the challenges of constructing a piece without the structural crutches that had hitherto been relied upon, in this case 12-tone procedures. Thus, Schnittke contrasts aleatory and structured processes, and tonal and atonal elements, answering the piano's forceful G minor chords (marked *fff*) with dissonance from the violin. There are also references to Wagner and Brahms, a quotation from Beethoven himself, and the use of the 'B–A–C–H' motto (B-flat–A–C–B-natural), a favourite device of Schnittke's which, to this deeply religious composer, was akin to invoking the eternal, alluding to God's presence in everything. The work, with its many references, is one of the earliest examples of Schnittke's "polystylism".

The piece unfolds seamlessly but in distinct parts: a sonata movement, a slow central section, and a form of rondo, Schnittke drawing from the two instruments a startling array of textures and sonorities. The work's lengthy pauses, particularly at the beginning of the sonata, were inspired by a staging of a Shakespeare play by Solomon Mikhoels, in which climactic moments were punctuated with pauses, when the action stopped and everyone stood still. Schnittke dubbed this effect, "screaming silence", a concept which became so associated with him that his grave stone is inscribed with a bar rest, underneath which is the dynamic marking *fff*.

Fellow composer Dmitri Smirnov recalls hearing the Violin Sonata No.2 performed by Mark Lubotsky with pianist Lubov Edlina at an underground concert. Smirnov relates how the publication of the work was fraught during the volatile political atmosphere of the 1970s; Schnittke had already fallen out of favour with the Soviet and Community Party regime for his use of "Western" 12-tone techniques. So when Schnittke had wanted to dedicate the work to Lubotsky and Edlina, who had just emigrated to the West, the editor Evgeny Barankin was certain that such a dedication would be forbidden. He and Schnittke decided to avoid controversy by issuing 1000 copies tactfully "Dedicated to Luba and Mark".

On the subject of advising Schnittke, Mark Lubotsky recalled: "Later the questions he put to me about the violin part in the works he composed were directed not at the problem of 'un-violin-ness' but at the creation of some timbral effect", as well as "indications of tempo or details of dynamics" in the *Suite in the Old Style* (1972). Schnittke's work as a freelance composer included writing numerous film scores; he drew together pastiche pieces from different films to create this Suite, which is a collection of Baroque-style movements. Movements one, two and five come from a film about a dentist, whereas the melancholy Minuet and the Fugue are from a film about sport. Often heard for violin and piano or harpsichord, the work is heard here arranged for viola d'amore, harpsichord and percussion by well-known Russian viola player, Igor Boguslavsky.

Mark Lubotsky also premiered Schnittke's Violin Sonata No.1, on 28 April 1964 in the concert hall of the Gnessin Institute, alongside Nikolai Karetnikov's dodecaphonic sonata. The work was then performed again in July 1965 by Lubotsky and Vsevolod Petrushansky at a music festival in the Finnish city of Jyväskylä, provoking a highly enthusiastic response from the audience and from the festival organiser, composer and critic Seppo Nummi.

The Violin Sonata No.1, written when Schnittke was still immersed in 12-tone serialism, is concise, acerbic and elegant. The overall four-movement structure alludes to the sonata's origins in the Italian Baroque, particularly the works of Corelli, although, also in common with the Sonata No.3, the second movement is a scherzo, which references more recent symphonic works and pieces such as Shostakovich's Piano Trio No.2

For motivic structure, Schnittke looked to the Violin Concerto of Alban Berg. Both works use 12-tone rows harmonised at the third, creating a strange sense of tonality from an atonal process. The influences of Bartók and Shostakovich may also be discerned in the rhetorical juxtapositions of pathos and bathos: moments of sincere poignancy rubbing alongside vulgarity and flippant humour. Schnittke had been particularly taken with Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto, premiered in 1955, with its dramatic contrasts and conflicts between soloist and orchestra.

The opening *Adagio* begins with a brief violin soliloquy built on a 12-tone row, joined by staccato piano writing using the same row. The music builds from these beginnings to hysterical expressionism, a hymn-like chorale, followed by violin playing sustained E-flat and C in its shrill upper register and the tone-row played in retrograde in the bass. In the sardonic second movement, the two instruments resolutely refuse to collaborate, consistently at odds with one another, as though Schnittke has taken Ravel's interest in exploring the incompatibility of violin and piano to new extremes.

The second movement moves *attacca* into the third, a noble passacaglia which, along with the final movement, also bears the influence of the last two movements of Shostakovich's Piano Trio No.2. It is in this passacaglia that Schnittke first made use of the 'B-A-C-H' motto which would pervade a number of his works (and those of his contemporaries: in 1964, the following year, Arvo Pärt produced his *Collage on the Theme BACH*). In this case, the motif has been transposed up a whole tone to become C-B-D-C-sharp in the piano, while the violin plays a sustained low G. Schnittke calls for the violin to be played without vibrato, and for the use of harmonics at the end of the movement – a macabre passage in which he quotes the Russian folk song 'Barynya'.

The B-A-C-H motif appears again in the jaunty finale, offering contrast with the more base musical elements, which include satirical serialism used to lampoon themes from the second and third movements. The first movement's opening theme is quoted, answered by four chords on the piano, the upper line of which is the transposed 'B-A-C-H' motif. This is followed by the violin playing pizzicato – three times – the finale's theme. The main theme of the finale is based on a quotation of the catchy rhythm of the famous Spanish-Mexican song, *La Cucaracha*, which repeats many times. Indeed, the work's mixture of musical elements anticipates Schnittke's polystylism long before his polystylistic period.

As Roman Mints describes in his notes on this CD, he has chosen to order this disc in such a way as to chart a hopeful trajectory through Schnittke's music. Schnittke, whilst arguing that life does not always provide us with this pattern, acknowledged our need for it:

"No development from worse to better has ever been observed in all of mankind. But there would be no life without some hope for the better."

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