

Robert Gerhard's Modernism Techniques, Influences, Receptions, Meanings

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona / Biblioteca de Catalunya

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Conference convenors: Diego Alonso (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) and Rachel Mann (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley), in association with the Biblioteca de Catalunya. The conference is supported by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Investigación.

Keynote speaker: Julian White (independent scholar)

As a lifelong ‘explorer’ of new forms of musical expression, Roberto Gerhard is a key figure in the history of 20th-century musical modernism. His early serial technique owes much to Arnold Schoenberg, the musician who exerted the most long-lasting influence on his music, but also to other early twelve-tone composers, such as Josef Matthias Hauer. During the interwar period, the work of Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Maurice Ravel and Manuel de Falla had a substantial impact on how Gerhard organized rhythm, on his post-tonal treatment of folklore as well as on the prominent interaction of octatonic and diatonic elements in his music. The influence in the pre-exile years of Alexander Scriabin, Frederic Mompou, Juli Garreta, Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith and other major early 20th century modernist composers has yet to be explored in detail.

Like Stravinsky, Falla and many others, Gerhard saw in ballet music a medium with particular potential for artistic prestige and modernist innovation; he composed some of his most compelling interwar works for dance companies, for instance *Ariel* (1934), *Soirées de Barcelona* (1936–1939) and *Don Quixote* (1941). His shift in the 1930s and 1940s towards a more accessible compositional language than that of his non-tonal work of the late 1920s challenges the historiographical narratives that view musical modernism as a series of masterworks in perpetual technical ‘evolution’ and ‘progress’. This teleological understanding of technique and style was one of the main reasons for the cool response to the premiere of his partially ‘folklorist’ opera *The Duenna* at the ISCM Festival in Frankfurt in 1951, and for the generally lesser appreciation of his incidental music for film, television and theatre than of his more ‘abstract’ concert works.

From the late 1940s onwards, Gerhard embarked upon an intense and increasingly more zealous exploration of the twelve-tone technique. Although he was often critical of the compositional techniques of Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and other representatives of the Darmstadt school, these avant-garde composers’ music indirectly shaped Gerhard’s post-war serialism. Of particular significance in his later career was his distinctive interest in re-interpreting and applying scientific theories, especially from biology and mathematics, to organize musical time and space. With his late serial work and his experiments with electronic sound from 1954 onwards, Gerhard made a decisive contribution to harmonic, timbral and textural innovation, becoming an increasingly more respected composer worldwide as well as one of the pioneers of electronic music in England. As in the work by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bruno Maderna, Luciano Berio and others in the 1960s, electronic music had a major impact on his instrumental pieces, such as his Symphony no. 4. The live electronic production

Claustrophilia (1966) for 8 harps, 4 radio sets and 2 monitors evidences how he also understood – and to some extent admired – the chance-controlled music of John Cage and others.

A fundamental feature of Gerhard's modernism throughout his career was the extra-musical meaning generated by quotations, allusions and reworkings of other musical material, mainly folk tunes from Catalonia and other Spanish regions, but also political anthems, medieval and renaissance melodies as well as countless pieces by composers of his time and of the past, including Schoenberg, Pedrell, Berg, Debussy, Ravel, Chabrier, Chapí, Giménez, Mozart and many others. Examples of these intertextual references, which almost always act as cultural or political agents in his music, are the flamenco-like configurations that he often employed with satirical intent, and his allusions to the Catalan song 'L'emigrant' (The Emigrant) in many exile scores. A number of reworkings of pre-existing music, for instance in *Concertino*, *Pedrelliana* and the Violin Concerto, were homages to other composers.

The early reception of his music fluctuated in Spain between the respect of a minority of young intellectuals and composers, and rejection or incomprehension among renowned figures such as Lluís Millet and Adolfo Salazar. During the first years of exile, his music was performed mainly at ISCM festivals and was thus known only to small circles. From the 1950s onwards, English commentators gradually shifted from describing Gerhard as a Spanish 'folklorist' composer in exile, to viewing his work as abstract music at the forefront of international musical avant-garde. His later work was soon considered part of the canon of contemporary musical modernism, although this did not lead to regular performances in England or anywhere else. In Franco's Spain, his oeuvre was virtually ignored by most critics, historians, and politicians. It was not until recent decades that his music began to be more widely acclaimed as part of Catalan and Spanish musical heritage.

This conference is a continuation of the efforts of recent decades to examine the stylistic, aesthetic, cultural and political dimensions of Gerhard's music and thought in relation to the history of 20th century modernism. We will discuss his compositional methods and styles, the influences of other composers, artists, intellectuals and scientists, the cultural and political agency of his references to other music, and historiographical narratives about his work. Suggested themes include, but are not limited to:

- Gerhard and Interwar Modernism: the compositional influence of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók and others.
- Gerhard, the 'Darmstadt School', and Postwar Avant-Garde.
- Electronic music and its impact on his instrumental work.
- Intertextuality as an agent of modernity and identity.
- Gerhard and Catalan/Spanish traditions.
- Relationships with other modernizing trends in dance, literature, visual arts, philosophy, theatre, radio, etc.
- Methods of non-serial harmonic organisation: octatonicism, collectional interactions, symmetry, transpositional combination, etc.
- Serial procedures: treatment of hexachords, combinatoriality, permutation, structural designs, time structures, etc.
- Chance techniques
- The role of science and technology in his music
- Gerhard's influence on other composers
- Historiographical narratives and reception of his music

We invite proposals from scholars exploring these and related questions. Each proposal should include the author's name and organisation, email address, an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short biography of no more than 100 words. The official language of the conference is English.

Please submit proposals to gerhard.modernism@gmail.com by the deadline of 30 May 2023. The programme will be announced in June 2023.