



Ortiz-de-Urbina, Paloma (ed.), *Arnold Schoenberg and Roberto Gerhard: Correspondence* (Generalitat de Catalunya & Biblioteca de Catalunya, 2020), 209 pp. ISBN 978-84-18199-07-3.

In a letter to the Catalan soprano Conxita Badia d'Agusti, Roberto Gerhard observed presciently that 'if the future of technology ever gets to simplify long distance communications, until the point where people lose the appetite to write letters, the disappearance of the epistolary genre would mean an important loss for civilisation'.¹ Fifty years after the composer's

death this prediction has become a reality. Scholars of the future researching today's digital age composers will be, in my view, seriously disadvantaged as a result, denied what is so often, as is the case here in the written exchanges between one of Catalonia's most important creative voices and one of the most influential twentieth century composers, a vital and rich source of information.

On 21 October 1923, the troubled twenty-seven-year-old Gerhard wrote a long and desperate letter to Arnold Schoenberg seeking his help. It is a remarkable document, the *crisis de couer* of a young composer who's early promise had already made him the toast of the town in Barcelonian musical circles but who, far from being blinded by the local success achieved in early works such as the song cycle *L'infantament meravellós de Schahrazada* (1917–18) and the Second Piano Trio (1918), was extremely clear sighted regarding his deficient musical education to date, his technical limitations, and what was required for him to develop as a composer: 'to receive classical discipline and the deepest meditation upon and understanding of the Classics at the hands of the purest traditional source' (40). Once accepted as a pupil,

Gerhard knew that his studies in Vienna and later Berlin with Schoenberg would be, as he wrote to his future teacher on 12 November 1923, ‘decisive for my life’ (43).

So began an epistolary exchange between the two composers and their wives Poldi and Gertrud, whose shared Viennese roots no doubt contributed to their deep friendship, which continued for over forty years. First published in German by Peter Lang in 2019 and now made available in both Catalan and English, the volume includes the contents of eighty-two letters, postcards and telegrams written in German mostly but also in English, French and Catalan between 1923 and 1964, including a number written between the Gerhards and Schoenberg’s widow following her husband’s death in 1951. The editor Paloma Ortiz-de-Urbina deserves huge credit for tracking down this rich corpus of letters, housed in various archives in America, Spain, England, Germany and Austria, and for bringing the important project to fruition. Whilst some of the letters have appeared in print before, either complete or as quoted extracts, the great majority are published here for the first time. They have been transcribed, translated, and annotated with impressive scholarly expertise and the volume is beautifully supplemented with facsimiles and photographs.

A particularly fascinating aspect of the letters is what they reveal about the relationship between the two men which evolved beyond that of reverential pupil and venerated teacher to one of mutual respect and deepening friendship. Gerhard was a fluent and innately gifted letter writer whose letters, invariably addressed (effusively) ‘Most revered master’, are warm in tone, detailed in information, occasionally gossipy and dryly humorous. By contrast those of Schoenberg, who loathed writing letters, communicated mainly when he needed something and who’s lack of levity made normal relationships difficult (as Gerhard recalled in his article ‘Schoenberg Reminiscences’), are more reticent, business-like and pragmatic. But if Schoenberg had a notoriously domineering personality which at times comes across as self-important and demanding – not least when admonishing Gerhard for not responding promptly to his own letters or for not writing more frequently – the predominant tone is one of cordiality and affection. There is also a genuine pride in his pupil’s achievements, even if his congratulations could be couched in the form of a reproach, as in this letter of 8 June 1949: ‘I have heard of your great success recently. All the world is writing to me about it. So, you have

finally become a great composer and I am too small to be honoured again with a letter of yours. Why is that?’(160).

Inevitably, many of the letters deal with material matters: the arrangements needed to facilitate Schoenberg’s ninth month stay in Barcelona for health reasons between October 1931 and June 1932, a period which he would later recall as being one of the happiest times of his life and which saw the birth of his daughter Núria as well as the composition of the *Klavierstücke* No. 2 op. 33b and the second act of his opera *Moses und Aron*; cultivating contacts with Catalan musicians notably Pau Casals (whom Schoenberg hoped would premiere his new Cello Concerto, a free adaptation of the Harpsichord Concerto in D by M.G. Monn); securing conducting opportunities for Schoenberg and organising performances of his music; enquiries about health, employment and the challenges of achieving financial security during a time of acute economic depression. But several letters include important background information on Gerhard’s works, notably the cantata *L’Alta Naixença del Rei en Jaume* (1932), a projected ballet called ‘Sardanas’ which never came to fruition, and the ballet *Ariel* (1934) composed, as revealed in letter of 4 September 1934, in a context of growing political tension in Spain, ‘with the peasant armament, “para-military” formations, the war-like atmosphere etc.’ (146) Gerhard’s dismissal of these events as ‘soap bubbles compared to the clouds over other European horizons’ (146) proved naively optimistic given the events of the Spanish Civil War two years later and one of the most fascinating aspects of these letters is the way in which they chronicle the deteriorating political situation in Europe. The rise of Hitler and the persecution of the Jews resulted in Schoenberg being summarily dismissed from his post at the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, information relayed to Gerhard in a letter sent from Paris dated 27 May 1933. In another heart-rending letter written on 20 July 1933, Schoenberg implores Gerhard to find refuge in Spain for his son Georg, his wife and four-year-old daughter: ‘It is a sad time and one should be happy to be amongst those who are approached to help and not those who have to ask for it!’ (123-4).

The impact that these cataclysmic events had on both Gerhard and Schoenberg culminated in the exile of the two composers in England and the USA respectively. But whilst geographically separated and never to meet in person again – although Gerhard did, at Schoenberg’s prompting, provided a detailed update on his autobiography in a fascinating letter

of 8 December 1944 which includes important details about a number of his works – Schoenberg continued to look over Gerhard’s shoulder from afar, not just metaphorically but literally in the form of the celebrated Man Ray photograph of the composer which Gerhard placed strategically on a wall overlooking his piano in his Cambridge home. Small wonder then that, just as he had done in 1923, it was to Schoenberg’s example that Gerhard turned in the late 1940’s when, devastated by the critical failure of his opera *The Duenna* (1945-47), he found himself once more at a creative crossroads. A long and revealing letter to Schoenberg dated 16 December 1950 testifies that, having exhausted the stylistic vein mined during his eclectic, middle-period works of the 1930’s and 1940’s, of which *The Duenna* stands as a kind of *opus summa*, it was through an intensive study of Schoenberg’s most recent works, notably the Piano Concerto Op.42 (1942), that Gerhard found a way forward. The initial fruits of this re-engagement with twelve-note techniques, and with the kind of hexachordal combinatorial and permutational processes utilised by Schoenberg in the Piano Concerto and other works, were initially experimented with by Gerhard in small-scale essays such as the Capriccio for Solo Flute (1949) and the Three Impromptus for Piano (1950). In the letter, which delves into arcane theoretical territory, Gerhard sought Schoenberg’s confirmation of the validity of these techniques, before applying them to large scale works. In the event Schoenberg was too ill to give more than the briefest of responses but, undeterred, Gerhard continued to exploit similar techniques in his Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra (1951) and the Symphony No.1 (1953).

This edition of the Schoenberg/Gerhard correspondence, following on from the publication in 2015 of the written exchanges between Gerhard and his pupil and friend Joaquim Homs edited by Ramón Ribé and Pietat Homs, is a vitally important addition to the growing scholarship on Gerhard which will provide an indispensable springboard for new research. It contains a wealth of valuable information about the personal and professional life of the two composers whilst providing a unique insight into the remarkable historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they lived.

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¹ Agustí Badia, Mariona, (2014). ‘Memories of the Relationship between Roberto Gerhard and Conxita Badia’, in *Perspectives on Gerhard: Proceedings of the 2nd and 3rd International Conferences*. Huddersfield, University of Huddersfield Press, pp. 104.