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Wolfgang von Schweinitz

When sufficient time has passed for assessments of music since 1950 to be independent of the personalities, the cultural politics and the media publicity to our own day, the world premiere of Wolfgang von Schweinitz's "Azione musicale" *Patmos* at the Munich Biennale on 28 April 1990 may or may not be seen as an important and even historic event. If it is not so seen, it will be a reflection on the state of music at that future date; if on the other hand the event is at least recognized for what it was, there can only be astonishment at the original reception in the German press.

In review after review – with only a handful of exceptions – Schweinitz's two outstanding achievements were reduced to their lowest common denominators: instead of appreciation of the structural strength and genuine complexity of a large-scale form in which every detail is functional, there were glib and often exaggerated references to duration (about 140 minutes); and instead of tributes to the assurance and consistency of a musical language whose originality derives from a highly personal synthesis of post-Boulez modernism with a "North German" tradition that stretches back to Brahms and Bach and, in a sense fundamentally, to Schütz, there were reach-me-down references to "influences".

The text of *Patmos* is the entire *Revelation of St John the Devine*, set in Luther's German (with the King James version as an English alternative), and arranged for the stage by the Hölderlin pioneer D. E. Sattler, who has taken more than the title from Hölderlin's poem "Patmos". The figure of John is divided into two distinct roles, while the communities he is addressing, together with his spiritual and symbolic adversaries on the one hand and the heavenly host on the other, are sung, acted, danced and mimed.

As for the music, the composer himself maintained, with characteristic modesty, that it is from first to last subservient to “the word”. But that is true only in the sense that it is composed as a “reading” of the text, almost in the natural speech tempo. It therefore denies itself the luxury of (post-)Romantic expression: never is there any lingering for conventionally contemplative effect, and hardly ever does the orchestra offer a commentary of its own. Yet the massive interlocking of many-faceted tonal, modal and non-tonal forms is compellingly dramatic in its progress towards the seventh and last of the “Acts”, a Utopian vision achieved in the teeth of the work’s profound disquiet about the world we live in, and the future of mankind.

Patmos is the culmination of Schweinitz’s slow and painstaking progress since he emerged as one of the key figures in the generation of composers that first attracted attention in West Germany during the latter half of the 1970s. Together with Wolfgang Rihm, Detlev Müller-Siemens, and Hans-Jürgen von Bose, he was misleadingly identified in the musical press with neo-Romanticism, and either praised or blamed for rejecting the so-called avant-garde. In truth there has been no such rejection, either on his part or on that of his colleagues, although his continuing debt to modernism is as different from theirs (in kind and in musical effect) as is his relation to tradition.

How close Schweinitz remains to his teacher György Ligeti and yet how firmly he occupies his own ground, is perhaps most apparent in those recent works where there are generic similarities – notably the *Mass*, which post-dates Ligeti’s *Requiem*, and the *Drei Etüden* for piano, which pre-date Ligeti’s piano studies. But the orchestral Mozart Variations, which made his name in 1977, already inhabit a highly personal sound-world, where post-Ligetian microtonal and clustered harmony, together with related rhythmic and melodic structures, act upon and react to the Mozart of the *Masonic Funeral Music* K.477 in such a way as to suggest (in the composer’s own words) that “if new expressive possibilities are to be derived from our experience of Classical tonality, it could only be on the understanding that any return to the tonal paradise itself is illusory”.

That such a work has found a place in the non-specialist repertory of his native Germany testifies to the ideals of communication which Schweinitz has always cherished, and which are no less influential in the more obviously modernist Kafka setting, *Die Brücke*, which followed soon after the Mozart Variations. The manner in which it too seeks to “bridge” our schizoid culture without response to Expressionist cliché is already so distinctive that it might well be regarded as *the* quintessential Schweinitz composition. With its doubled protagonist it is clearly a forebear of *Patmos*, and hence a milestone in the development of one of Germany’s most important yet least celebrated living composers.