
Roberto Gerhard, the human side

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ROBERT GERHARD, THE HUMAN SIDE

It is by accident that our lives begin and end, and the whole span of our personal history is closely related to circumstantial and fortuitous events. My relationship with composer Robert [sic] Gerhard was possible only through a series of unusual and fortunate episodes which I intend to explain briefly here. I should probably clarify first that I started learning music when I was eight, prompted by my father, a doctor by profession but also an amateur musician himself. In 1922 I received my high school diploma while simultaneously graduating as a cello teacher. Making a living out of music was even more difficult then than it is today and, since I was also fond of science, I decided to embark on a university career in engineering and to combine it with my cello practice and the self-study of piano and composition. I graduated in 1929 and it was at the end of that year that the *Associació de Música "da Camera"* organized a Gerhard-monographic concert in the Palau de la Música on his return to Barcelona after a stay in Vienna and Berlin, where he studied with Schoenberg, a stay that had started in 1923. His works made not only a deep impression on me, they also made me crave for his teaching.

In 1930 I had the good fortune to meet the violinist Eugènia Domènech. We played together and through her I learned that Gerhard was about to marry her former Viennese student Poldi Feichtegger and that the couple planned on living in Barcelona. Eugènia Domènech had been a friend and colleague of Gerhard when they were both studying with Pedrell. She knew my work as a composer and offered to introduce me to Gerhard, so that I could find out for myself whether he would be willing to take me on as his student. After having examined some of my scores and tested my listening appreciation capacities he then warned me that he did not believe he possessed the necessary pedagogical aptitude for the job. In spite of this belief, he agreed to have me as a student and said he would do his best to pass on to me the teachings he had received from Schoenberg, a great pedagogue himself. All doubts vanished completely after the first day. For me, his lessons were as exciting as the reading of any of the best pages written by Valéry, Proust or any of the other great authors. In his analyses he would go deep into the roots of a composition and manage to give you the feeling that you were about to discover the most marvelous secrets. The length of these encounters started growing and soon they led to a deep friendship that lasted a lifetime and that was later extended to my wife Pietat Fornesa, a painter herself and very sensitive to all forms of art.

Unfortunately, this relationship was interrupted for a period of almost ten years, as the Gerhard family had to go into exile in 1939, first to Paris and then to Cambridge, and did not return to Spain until 1948, and then only for short vacation spells. His next to last trip, at the beginning of May 1967, coincided with the death of my own wife, and the last one, a year later, was plagued with trouble resulting from Gerhard's decision to end the contract he had signed with a Catalan publisher who would not guarantee that Gerhard's book 'Escrips i apunts d'un compositor' (Writings and notes of a composer) would appear on his seventieth birthday as had been first agreed.

In the introduction to this book, Gerhard confessed that 'though an avid and passionate reader of biographies, he would never write his own memories, for the simple reason that the "self" wears me out and I soon lose patience with it. (...) Its insatiable greed for self-contemplation becomes unbearable to me.' He was convinced that 'there was nothing adventurous or spectacular in his life. On the contrary, it had been a fairly orderly, dull and secluded life of the kind that suits a composer

best. In fact, I do not have a biography (he said), though there is one anecdote and a couple of memories from my childhood that I would like to preserve.'

It happened when he was only two or maybe three, and of course he had no recollection of the event - the anecdote was originally told by his mother. One day he vanished from home and all searches that had been organized to find him were fruitless until by chance the village doctor caught sight of him. He was sitting by the road, outside town, and was crying bitterly. Only later was the mystery of his escapade solved. Apparently, the boy had been fascinated with the sounds of a travelling hand piano that had gone by the house and, as if pulled physically by the piano's brilliant sound, followed it until they left town.

The first of his two memories goes back to the days when he still played with his toy lead soldiers. One day, while picking up one of the little figures and placing it upon one of the square flagstones of the balcony, he was overcome by such an intense feeling of satisfaction that from that day on he would never forget the experience. In that instant, of course, he could not fathom it out, but many years later he identified this episode with absolute certainty as an instance of inspiration brought about by the conjunction of an abstract concept, such as the idea of proportion, and an element of pure sensory perception.

The second memory is from his days as a school child in Valls. The writing lesson involved the reading of a short story or an essay that had to be later summarized by the students on paper. One day, rather than writing the title of the composition in italics, as he had always done before, he decided to draw it in capital fantasy letters, consisting mostly of curved lines enmeshed in delicate decorations from obvious floral inspiration. The resulting overall effect astonished and at the same time intrigued him, as it had an appearance that impressed him as being both exotic and familiar at the same time. This latter impression was soon revealed. The sign that read 'Ultramarinos' on the shop window of the biggest grocer's shop in his street had been recently commissioned by a painter who was probably *à la page* in his trade. He had done the sign in an obvious 'modernista' (art-déco) lettering style. This term had no special meaning for the young student yet. There were no art magazines available and he had not been to Barcelona yet, where this art movement was revealing itself in all its glory. The fact, though, is that the shop-sign painter and the school child Gerhard, then eight or nine years old, introduced art-déco in Valls.

These three anecdotes from Gerhard's childhood revealed how his life would develop from then on. The first one, as an expression of the difficulties he would have to face in order to make a living out of music in the middle of such unfavourable circumstances as those posed by two World Wars, a Civil War, and two dictatorships in his native country. The second anecdote reveals those innate powers of reflection and analysis that he so fully developed in the exercise of art, the third one, his never-ending striving for exploration and innovation.

Throughout his life, the faculties revealed by these anecdotes, gave impulse to the analysis, reflection and very personal assimilation and development of the great variety of tendencies and art movements that at a very fast pace have come into the scene in this century in arts, sciences, and technology. It is interesting to notice how his way of looking at things matched exactly the most advanced perspectives in these fields, those that tend to relate phenomena from physics, biology, art and even social sciences, along the lines drawn by the physics scientist Prigogine among others. He confided to me that during his thirty years of residence in Cambridge he had maintained a closer relationship with scientists from the university than with other composers. He was an insatiable reader of good literature, philosophy and sciences, especially biology, because of its close relationship with the creative act and evolution. This concept of evolution, which is inextricably linked with time, is precisely the one that is furthest removed from the classical conception based on the 'being'. In exactly this spirit, Gerhard also asserted that those who love tradition must not restrict themselves to copying it, but should rather endeavor to transform it.

He was also a great conversationalist who could draw substance from the most varied themes, using a mixture of logic, brilliant instant improvisations, and memorable insights on music and its problems nowadays. In an emotive obituary article, William Glock, editor of the music journal *The*

Score, reminiscences about the long visits he had paid to the Gerhards in Cambridge, not just because there one felt immersed in a splendid atmosphere of warmth and happiness created by the truly poetic devotion Gerhard publicly showed towards his wife, an adoration which she returned with the same intensity, but also because of all that one could learn during those visits and of the scope the fields of shared interest offered you. My wife and I had similar experiences whenever we visited them in the UK and also when they lived with us in our country during their holiday stays. What's more, we also had the privilege of experiencing their unfailing friendship, their love for nature and for the arts, and their constant enjoyment and zest for life.

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