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# ‘Un Català Mundial’: The early works of Roberto Gerhard

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## ABSTRACT

In the evaluation of the Catalan-born composer’s total oeuvre, the early works of Roberto Gerhard reflect the shifting cultural discourse within Catalan nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a means of fostering cultural independence from the rest of Spain, Catalan national sentiment gradually switched to the promotion of modernist ideologies, which were previously fended off in the defense and preservation of traditional culture. During this period under investigation, Gerhard was 'un català mundial' (an international Catalan), longing to participate in the greater musical world of the avant-garde. His musical activities in composition, research, and criticism echoed the shifting cultural discourse within Catalonia—Barcelona in particular. Active in nearly all aspects of musical life in the Catalan capital, Gerhard composed works that exhibited an intricate reconciliation of traditional Catalan elements with modern Central European musical aesthetics. Alongside painter Joan Miró, architect Josep Luís Sert, and arts promoter Joan Prats i Vallès, Gerhard established the Amics de l’Art Nou (ADLAN), promoting Catalan avant-garde art. Gerhard, with the assistance of cellist and conductor Pau Casals, brought Arnold Schoenberg to Catalonia for multiple performances of the Viennese master’s music. Gerhard further introduced modern music to the Catalan public with the ISCM festival held in Barcelona in 1936. This paper is informed by critical examination of period documents and contextualizes many of his early works within the escalating cultural movement that promoted modernization in the arts as a manifestation of Catalan national sentiment.

## 1. THE EARLY WORKS OF ROBERTO GERHARD

Prior to the premiere of his *Symphony no. 1* in 1955 - even before immigrating to England in 1939 following the Republican defeat by the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War - Roberto Gerhard had already gained international accolades for such works as his overtly Catalan *L’Alta Naixença del Rei en Jaume* (1932), a modernist cantata which won first prize at the 1933 International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) festival celebrated in Amsterdam [1]. Nonetheless, the *oeuvre* of the Catalan composer predating the close of the Spanish Civil War remains among the least appreciated body of his works by musicians, public, and scholars alike due largely to circumstances of war: Gerhard’s initial music study was cut short by World War I, the Spanish Civil war forced the composer to flee from Spain, and British nationalistic sentiments during and immediately after World War II drastically delayed due recognition of the composer in favour of British-born composers.

In the evaluation of the Catalan-born composer’s total *oeuvre*, the early works of Gerhard reflect the shifting cultural discourse within Catalan nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a means of fostering cultural independence from the rest of Spain, Catalan national sentiment gradually switched to the promotion of modernist ideologies, which were previously fended off in the defense and preservation of traditional culture. During this period, Gerhard was 'un català mundial,' longing to participate in the greater musical world of the avant-garde [2]. His musical activities in composition, research, and criticism echoed the shifting cultural discourse within Catalonia - Barcelona in particular - were unfortunately cut short as a result of the Spanish Civil War.

Robert[o] Gerhard i Ottenwaelder was born on 25 September 1896 in Valls, (Catalonia) Spain to Swiss-born Robert Gerhard and Alsatian-born Maria Ottenwaelder, who operated a wine business

in this small Catalan town. Roberto, the eldest of three siblings, briefly studied commerce in Switzerland before dedicating himself to music; Carles, the middle child, later served in the Catalan autonomous administration of the Monastery of Montserrat during the Spanish Civil War, before being exiled to Mexico, and the youngest, Ferran, continued with the family business in Valls.

The earliest extant composition by Gerhard is a solitary German lied [*Still! Mitternacht, ein losgelaßner Wind*]. Likely composed while the young composer was in Lucerne, Switzerland, Gerhard presumably penned the work between 1913 and 1914 [3]. Generically titled Lied by Gerhard, the work exists only in manuscript and appears to be in the later stages of composition. The manuscript contains errors in notation, most notably in notating rhythm. Further peculiarities with the manuscript include awkward notation of extreme upper ranges of the piano. While no author was attributed with the text, indications suggest that Gerhard might have also authored the poetry for the lied. The fourth line of the poem contains a mistake that in all probability would not have been made by a native German author. In place of 'und klopft an meine Fenster', Gerhard incorrectly wrote 'und klopft an meinen Fenster'.

Roberto Gerhard's earliest musical studies in Switzerland and Germany were interrupted by the outbreak of World War I - foreshadowing the impact of subsequent European conflicts upon the life and career of the Catalan composer. Returning to Spain in 1914, Gerhard began his study of composition in 1916 with Felipe Pedrell, an influential Catalan composer, scholar and teacher [4]. During this period, Gerhard composed a series of piano trios and Catalan art songs, publishing the song cycle *L'infantament meravellós de Shahrazada* (1918) and *Trio* (1918) [5]. In addition to composition, Gerhard studied piano with Enrique Granados, and eventually with Frank Marshall after Granados' premature death when the Germans torpedoed the passenger ship *Sussex*.

Gerhard also played a vital role in the study of traditional Catalan music, and his contributions marked a striking paradigm shift in the investigation of folk songs in Catalonia. In 1915, Tomàs Carreras i Artau founded the *Arxiu d'Etnografia i Folklore de Catalunya* (Archive of Ethnography and Folklore of Catalonia) for the purpose of conducting ethnographic research on the collective psychology of Catalans. The project endeavored to surpass the efforts of previous folklorists by applying scientific procedures to the study and collection of Catalan culture. In part, the goal of the *Arxiu d'Etnografia i Folklore de Catalunya* was to demonstrate that a distinctive Catalan culture existed, separate from the rest of Spain. Both scholars and amateurs participated in the anthropological research of the project - major figures in Catalan folklore scholarship included Rossend Serra i Pagès, Sebastià Farnés, Aureli Capmany, and Felipe Pedrell. The collection and study of folk songs developed as one of the primary activities of the organization. In 1916, Carreras selected Gerhard to oversee the section on Catalan folk songs. Playing an important part, Gerhard prepared the questionnaire on the subject of Catalan folk songs and organized the transcriptions submitted by correspondents from throughout Catalonia [6]. The *Arxiu d'Etnografia i Folklore de Catalunya* distributed a significant number of the questionnaires to all parts of Catalonia [7]. Focusing on the significance of both text and music, the questionnaire prepared by Gerhard demonstrates his awareness of contemporary European folk music scholarship. No longer privileging the documentation of text over music, the *Arxiu d'Etnografia i Folklore de Catalunya* represented a scientific and holistic approach to the study of culture. Gerhard emphasized diplomatic documentation of folk songs, instructing researchers not to tamper with the dictated folk songs and to insure that outside influences did not take place during their transcription. In addition, Gerhard contributed a bibliography of Catalan folk song research [8].

At the beginning of the 1920s, secluded in his hometown of Valls, Gerhard composed *Dos apunts* (1921-22) and *Sept haiku* (1923). Gerhard's *Dos apunts* bears a resemblance to the piano miniatures of Schoenberg's Op. 19. Completed in the months of December 1921 and March 1922, Gerhard's *Dos apunts* are diminutive in length and consist each of fourteen measures, and comprise primarily of slow tempos and soft dynamics. Creating an impression of atonality, the miniatures are highly chromatic and use non-traditional harmonies within sparse textures. The works display tight formal compression, and Gerhard's piano miniatures arise organically through rhythmic and melodic development. He utilized all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale in the two

piano miniatures; however, Gerhard employed tonal references in the work. Of organic design, he developed motives and constructed thematic unity throughout each movement. The *Sept haiku* reflect the influences of Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg upon the young Gerhard searching for a modernist voice. Direct contrasts occur between the vocal and instrumental sections consisting of flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, and piano, the instrumental portions framing the text as well as musically embodying the haiku. Gerhard selected seven haiku from a larger collection of the Catalan poet Josep Maria Junoy's *Amour et Paysage* (1920). The haiku are in French; however, the title page of *Amour et Paysage* claims that the poems were 'traduit du catalan'. No evidence exists that the haiku were indeed translated from Catalan to French; however, it implies a certain importance for Gerhard that the poems were originally conceived in Catalan. Primarily set syllabically, the vocal parts are also generally narrow in range and non-lyrical. Sketches of the first, second, third, and sixth haiku vocal melodies survive, and demonstrate how Gerhard initially conceived the melodies [9]. Gerhard maintained all the pitches of the sketches in the final versions, choosing instead to alter their rhythms. In general, the rhythms became more complex in the final versions. None of the movements are atonal, although highly chromatic at moments.

Frustrated with his musical development, Gerhard composed an anguished letter on 21 October 1923 to Schoenberg, requesting to become his pupil. In the letter, Gerhard mentioned his despair as well as his tentativeness in writing to the Austrian master. In addition to the letter, Gerhard sent the two recent works *Dos apunts* and *Sept haiku*. Gerhard was eventually accepted as a pupil by Arnold Schoenberg and studied with the Viennese master from 1923 to 1928.

The promising young Catalan composer returned to Barcelona after his five-year study with Schoenberg in both Vienna and Berlin, culminating in a much anticipated all-Gerhard concert in 1929 [10]. Newspapers throughout Catalonia promoted the concert, organizers predicted repeat performances throughout the region, and residents of the composer's birthplace of Valls made special arrangements to facilitate travel to attend the event in Barcelona. However, instead of a triumphant success, Gerhard faced almost unmitigated disapproval of his music, leading to a passionate debate on the direction of Catalan concert music - a concern of many Catalan nationalists. The Catalan press harshly and overwhelmingly criticized the concert for the composer's avant-garde approach; however, it was a review by Lluís Millet that most affected Gerhard, causing the modernist composer to respond in his column from the journal *El Mirador* [11]. Gerhard's music and Millet's review of the controversial concert sparked a debate on the course of Catalan concert music between the two Catalan musicians. The elder and conservative Millet, founder and conductor of the acclaimed *Orfeó Català*, attacked the music of Gerhard for its modernist qualities, arguing that atonal music had no theoretical framework and was therefore unworthy of use in musical composition. The young Gerhard, the most prominent avant-garde composer and advocate working in Catalonia or Spain, defended his music against Millet's criticisms. In the late evening of Sunday 22 December 1929, Gerhard premiered six works to a full and attentive audience. The controversial concert took place at the symbolic Palau de la Música Catalana, a prominent Catalan music hall, and consisted of highly chromatic as well as atonal compositions, and works related to traditional Catalan music. The program included his *Concertino* (1927-28), *Sept haiku* (1923), *Wind Quintet* (1928), eight songs from *Cançons populars catalanes* (1928), and two *sardanes* (1928-29). Initially conceived as a string quartet, Gerhard arranged *Concertino* for string orchestra. In a lyrical and contrapuntal manner, Gerhard employed total chromaticism in all three movements with the formal structure of fast-slow-fast. The *Wind Quintet*, the most controversial work on the program, displayed the most direct influence of Schoenberg. However, unlike his former teacher, Gerhard employed only a seven-note tone row. Resembling the formal four-movement structure of the classical period, the quintet followed the organization of sonata form, slow movement, scherzo, and rondo [12]. Gerhard selected eight songs from his arrangement of fourteen Catalan folk songs. Not altering the melodies of the traditional Catalan songs ('*La comtessa de Floris*,' '*L'Escolta*,' '*La Calàndria*,' '*Cançó de lladre*,' '*Enemic de les dones*,' '*La Mort i la Donzella*,' '*El petit vailet*,' and '*Els Ballaires dins d'un sac*'), he preferred instead to support the tonal or modal melodies with more dissonant piano accompaniment. The *sardanes* were the most conservative, in the use of tonality and regular rhythm, of the all-Gerhard program. The *sardana*, functioning as the national dance of Catalonia, also included the requisite Catalan double reed instruments, *tible* and *tenora*. In the second *sardana*, Gerhard included the use

of the saxophone, offending traditionalists within the audience. Numerous Catalan and Spanish language newspapers covered the all-Gerhard concert, and most remarked on the difficulty in comprehending the new music. Writing for *Las Noticias*, Jaume Pahissa argued for the need to hear repeated performances in order to appreciate fully Gerhard's new musical style [13]. The concert reviewer of *La Nau* stated that some of the audience thought the musical works might have been a joke [14]. Nearly all reviewers stated that the new music of Gerhard consisted of too much dissonance and irregular rhythms. Francesc Trabal wrote that the public chattered, slept, and joked; however, the audience was not brave enough to put a stop to the concert [15].

In Barcelona during the early 1930s, eight Catalan composers known as *el Grup dels Vuit*, (or more properly, as the *Compositors Independents de Catalunya*) representing an array of modern musical practices, organized themselves as a unified collective with the overriding objective of presenting modern music as a representation of Catalan culture to the greater public [16]. Unified in their acceptance of modern approaches to music, Gerhard, along with the composers Frederic Mompou, Agustí Grau, Joan Gibert-Camins, Eduard Toldrà, Manuel Blancafort, Baltasar Samper, and Ricard Lamote de Grignon remained nonetheless heterogeneous in their personal compositional styles [17]. The composers Blancafort, Toldrà, Mompou, Samper, and Gerhard - friends united in a desire for a new universal Catalan music - met at the home of Gibert-Camins on Fridays, with the exception of summers [18]. By the prompting of Gerhard, in June of 1931, the association of the C.I.C. was formally created by the eight Catalan composers - Grau and Lamote de Grignon the most recent additions [19]. Many of the members of the C.I.C. contributed writings addressing the direction of Catalan music to the local press; however, as a unified group, no manifesto was ever produced. Instead, Jean Cocteau's *Le coq et l'arlequin*, was read by all of the C.I.C. and served as their ad hoc manifesto [20].

Among the C.I.C., Manuel Blancafort served as one of the most boisterous advocates of a new Catalan music. He contended that Catalan composers should not exploit traditional music; instead, he advocated employing a universal vocabulary:

Our music has to be Catalan, but it is essential to avoid Catalan folk vestiges such as folk festivals and the *porron*. Nowadays in Catalonia, there exists more than shepherds and peasants. Abroad, a Catalan should not be a picturesque and exotic person, like that of the comedies of the past century. Our music has to be something more than a *sardana* and a traditional song; it has to speak of Catalan things in a European language [21].

Addressing previous Catalan works, he claimed that both Albéniz and Granados did not compose Catalan music [22]. The works of Mompou, his good friend, were too brief and almost exclusively for piano, leaving a void and need for other Catalan composers to explore other genres [23]. Without identifying further individuals, Blancafort stated that too many Catalan composers relied upon inflammatory patriotic text, claiming that without such text, those works would never receive an audience [24]. Lastly, he addressed nationalism, suggesting that nationalism was too often confused with populism [25].

The first, and last, concert of the association of Catalan composers took place on 25 June 1931 in the Sala Mozart in Barcelona, with many of the composers also performing. Organized in three parts, the concert opened with a *Trio* (1918) by Gerhard that appears markedly influenced by Ravel. Vicents Ma. de Gibert years earlier, requested listeners to observe the universality of Gerhard's *Trio*:

...look especially at the second movement...an articulation so loose and so complete in significance, of real personal inspiration while at the same time with aspects that evoke our folk songs. Are we not able to say in praise of Gerhard—linking two terms perhaps paradoxical—that he is a “cosmopolitan” Catalan? [26]

Piano works by Lamote, Blancafort, Samper, Mompou, Grau, and Toldrà followed the three-movement trio. The concert closed with Gerhard's *Sept Haiku*.

Alongside painter Joan Miró, architect Josep Lluís Sert, and arts promoter Joan Prats i Vallès, Gerhard participated in the establishment of the *Amics de l'Art Nou* (ADLAN), an operational organization from 1932 to 1936 that promoted Catalan avant-garde art. Associating themselves with the cultural elite, the organization avoided populism; instead, as a group ADLAN strove to develop an avant-garde archetype while at the same time maintaining the distinction of Catalan culture [27].

Plans for the 1936 ISCM festival in Barcelona began at the 1933 festival in Amsterdam, with the Catalan members (Gerhard included) of the Spanish delegate advocating for the Catalan capital [28]. Throughout the selection process Catalan national sentiment emerged, the Catalan delegates aspiring for the city of Barcelona to elevate to the same musical status as other European cities and for the likelihood of an increased number of subsequent performances of Catalan music [29]. Gerhard's concert suite *Ariel* (1934), based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, premiered at the 1936 ISCM festival.

In 1939, with the end of the Spanish Civil War, Gerhard was one of the many who were forced to leave Spain. Briefly exiled in France, he ultimately settled in Cambridge, England, in part through the generosity of the musicologist and Cambridge professor, Edward Dent. Gerhard's reputation as a composer in Britain developed slowly because of British nationalistic sentiments during and immediately after World War II, which prompted institutions such as the BBC and London orchestras to put much of their energy into the promotion of native composers, culminating in the Festival of Britain (1951). But a return of prosperity in the late 1950s brought with it a more international outlook. His presence in Britain and readiness to assume British nationality were properly appreciated in the late 1950s. In the September 1956 issue of *The Score*, celebrating Gerhard's sixtieth birthday, William Glock addressed the problematic British reception of Gerhard's music with remarks that lamented:

For whatever reasons, his works have been almost entirely ignored, with the result that twentieth-century music has been robbed of the impact of one of its most vital representatives...only four, comparatively minor, works of Roberto Gerhard have ever been printed...many first performances have also been the last; and that, as far as England is concerned, only two or three of his major works have ever been heard in public. Nor does he receive any consideration in critical writings on contemporary music. [30]

Observing that the music of Gerhard did not belong to the Franco-Hispanic style, Glock partially explained the grounds for the difficulties of the British public, claiming that Gerhard 'refuses to fit into any convenient category; for even his Spanish qualities are not of the familiar kind' [31]. Like the surrealist Joan Miró, Gerhard sought international acceptance, breaking away from the Iberian periphery. While the Catalan composer employed elements of traditional Catalan music, as in the case of the *Cançons populars catalanes* or *sardanes*—albeit never in a conventional manner, Gerhard instead expressed his *catalanitat* through the privileging of modernist ideologies over traditional culture. Furthermore, as in the subject matter of *L'Alta Naixença del Rei en Jaume* and the scenario of *Soirées de Barcelone*, he frequently employed meaningful Catalan imaginary reconciled with modern musical aesthetics. With the exception of a German lied and French Haiku, his vocal works during this period utilized Catalan texts by noteworthy Catalan poets such as Josep Maria López-Picó, Josep Carner, Pere Serafi, and Ventura Gassol. Ultimately, Gerhard gained international recognition in the 1930s; however, the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War quickly ended his career in Barcelona as well as his Catalan-influenced works, leading to a new compositional phase and delayed recognition in his new life in Cambridge, England.

## 2. REFERENCES

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