
‘I am in tune with Camus’. Roberto Gerhard and Camus: A synergy against totalitarianism ^[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of Albert Camus’s thought and works on the music of Robert Gerhard. Gerhard’s responsibilities in the Republican and Catalan governments during the 1930s led him into exile. His output would subsequently reflect both the uprooting and reappraisal of a lost culture, and a clear stance against fascism. This can be seen in works such as the ballet *Pandora*. The works of Camus, an intellectual with a strong, leftist political commitment, thus represented a very rich source of inspiration for his compositions. This occurred in the incidental radio music for *L’Étranger* (1954), and *Calígula* (1961), as well as in the case of *La Peste*, a cantata composed in 1964 for narrator, choir and orchestra. The critical nature of Camus’s literature and declarations were echoed in Gerhard’s attitude to life, with doubt and constant search at the basis of all of his sincere creations. The composer’s correspondence and works, as well as related bibliography, will be used to clear up some of the questions surrounding the relationship between these two figures.

1. GERHARD AND CAMUS

This year, 2010, marks the celebration of two anniversaries: fifty years since the death of the writer Albert Camus and the fortieth anniversary of the death of the composer Robert Gerhard. It is thus an appropriate time to begin researching the relationship between these two artists and examine the influence of the writer’s output on Gerhard’s works, as well as his ethical and aesthetic thought.

Albert Camus’s writings are the weapon the writer used in the face of totalitarianism and the confirmation of his commitment to the left, sustained from a critical stance. In fact, Camus converted his output into a declaration of the absurdity of life, which only makes sense with an attitude of rebelliousness and by exercising one’s individual freedom. His political commitment materialised in his steadfast support for the Spanish Republican government, both during, and after the Civil War. Defending this stance are both ethical and sentimental arguments, associated with his Spanish roots [2]. In 1935, the writer and journalist had travelled to Catalan, the land of his origins, and he always held on to the idea of Spain as a utopian spiritual and cultural refuge. His passion for Spanish literature can be seen in his adaptations of Lope de Vega’s and Calderón de la Barca’s works, as well as his admiration for Unamuno, Maragall and Cervantes. Camus drew parallels between the injustice done to the Algerian and the Spanish people. Thus, his *L’état de siège* is set in Cádiz, and he took part in the creation of *Révolte dans les Asturies*, a collective essay based on the 1934 mining rebellion. Rosa de Diego asserts that ‘Camus a toujours suivi, avec engagement et passion, les événements dans l’Espagne franquista, appelant de ses multiples écrits la chute de Franco. D’ailleurs, son oeuvre fut longtemps interdite chez nous, en Espagne, et donc un véritable modèle pour les écrivains et militants espagnols hostiles au régime franquista’ [3]. His stance is clearly manifest in the speech ‘L’Espagne et la culture’ [4], given in 1952 in response to Spain becoming a Member State of UNESCO, a speech that was praised by Pau Casals [5], among others, as a symbol of the resistance to the Franco regime. In 1958, when the musical avant-garde began to regenerate in Spain, with the formation of groups such as Nueva Música, Camus celebrated his award of the Nobel Prize surrounded by Spanish exiles.

Robert Gerhard's implication in both the Government of the Generalitat and the Republican government during the convulsive and passionate 1930s are well known. The proclamation of the Republic in 1931 led to the passing of legislation devolving powers to the autonomous region of Catalonia, which took place in the midst of a climate of intensification of the Catalonian spirit and a thriving cultural activity. Gerhard became extremely active, participating in concerts, conferences, contributing to journals and assisting in the organisation of various groups whose objective was to stimulate Catalonian culture, such as the *Asociació Obrera de Concerts* (an independent society giving the working class access to music education and concerts) founded by Pau Casals. Gerhard was an admirer of Francesc Macià, the first president of the Generalitat, and a personal friend of the arts councillor Ventura Gassol; all this led him to become fully involved in the new government, holding numerous positions in the Music Department of the Conselleria de Cultura (Arts Department), and carrying out duties relating to music organisation: he worked on the internal regulations of the Generalitat's Publishing Commission of Catalonian Music, as well as the publication of *El cançoner escolar català*. Gerhard's interest in traditional music continued to grow and became a symbol of freedom and defence in his music during the Civil War. This is the spirit behind works such as *Soirées de Barcelone* and *Albada, Interludi i Dansa*. Gerhard, a member of the Central Council of Music for the Government of the Republic, also became a delegate of the International Society for Contemporary Music, which held its XIV Festival in Barcelona in 1936. Two years later, the ISCM Festival in London paid homage to Spain and its delegation, represented by Julián Bautista and Robert Gerhard. In their report, Bautista and Gerhard emphasised the solidarity and friendliness of the other ISCM delegates and the friendliness of English intellectuals 'towards the musicians who came from a loyal Spain tortured by fascist shrapnel' [6].

Whether as a consequence of his radio work on the BBC's Spanish-language programs, or the open wounds of his uprooting, the use of natationalist elements in Gerhard's music intensified after his exile. No less significant was his dedication to the ballet *Don Quixote*, for Camus a character who 'se bat et ne se résigne jamais'. For the writer, during this period, 'Don Quichotte est jeté en prison et son Espagne hors de l'Espagne' [7]. The military climate of World War II increased the feeling of loss and impotence, which is suggested in some of Gerhard's works: this is the case with the ballet *Pandora*, in which music emanating from popular material is set against 'war-like' melodies, or his *Symphony no. 1* (1952), which, as Julian White shows [8], owes much of its general lines and development to André Malraux's *L'espoir*, based on events from the beginning of the Spanish Civil War.

In light of so many coincidences and their common political and ethical interests, it is somewhat surprising that the personal careers of these two men barely converge in common life experiences. According to the evidence, as we shall see, they were only in temporal contact, by letter, between 1954 and 1955. Yet Albert Camus's literature was clearly an important centre of interest for the composer and one of the sources of inspiration for his output. Among the books in his personal library, currently held at the Roberto Gerhard Archive at the Cambridge University Library, apart from studies of Camus's output by Hourdin (1960), Lebesque (1960 and 1963), Luppe (1954) and Thody (1961), there are a large number of the French-Algerian writer's works: the *Chroniques 1944-1948* and *1948-1953*, *Carnets: mai 1935-février 1942*, *La chute*, *Discours de Suède*, *L'envers et l'endroit*, *L'état de siège*, *L'exil et le royaume*, *L'homme révolté*, *Les justes*, *Lettres à un ami allemand*, *Le malentendu*, *Caligula*, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, *Noces* and various editions of *The Plague* (Livre de Poche, 1962, Rowohlt, 1967 and 1968), including Stuart Gilbert's translation (Penguin Books, 1960).

Gerhard's catalogue contains three works relating to texts by Albert Camus. The first is incidental music for the BBC radio broadcast of *L'étranger*, which took place in 1954 and was based on Sasha Moorsom's version. It is scored for an instrumental ensemble consisting of flute, two oboes, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, timpani and percussion with accordion [9]. The second is once again music for a radio broadcast of one of Camus's works: *Caligula*, based on Stuart Gilbert's English adaptation, composed in 1961. The work consists of approximately 15 minutes of music for three flutes, three trumpets, three trombones, mandolin, percussion and electronic tape

[10]. And, finally, came the culmination of the stimulus of Camus's thought, the cantata *The Plague*, completed in 1964 on commission from the BBC, which will be referred to below.

But another project based on Camus's text exists, referred to in various documents, and the subject of much of this article, as it gave rise to what was probably the only personal contact between the writer and the composer: a stage version of *L'étranger*, which would have been Gerhard's second opera.

On 22 September 1954 Gerhard wrote to Camus from his home in Cambridge, confessing that he had had the project to compose an opera on *L'étranger* in mind for several months. He asked for his permission to begin work on this project and to submit it to him in detail. Gerhard alluded to the incidental music he composed for the radio adaptation of *L'étranger*, describing his contribution as 'brevés illustrations en cul-de-lampe, pour ainsi dire' [11]. Despite the composer's modesty, these musical illustrations were excellently received, as Geoffrey Bridson, Assistant Head of Features of the BBC, conveyed in a letter to the composer [12], also revealing that they were trying to send the music to the BBC office in Paris for over a month so that Camus could listen to it, and that Sasha Moorsom was taking care of this.

In his letter to Camus, Gerhard underlined the manner in which his contact with *L'étranger* had allowed him to confirm his empathy with the main character and his intention to give him greater importance in the opera: 'le caractère de Meursault fait appel à des aspects de moi-même par une de ces sympathies profondes dont on s'assure qu'elles peuvent faire naître une œuvre.' What were these affinities? Gerhard underlines the "obsession with sincerity" Camus ascribes to Meursault, which was reflected in his unique character, consolidated during his early years of training in Barcelona, and influenced by Noucentista ideas pursuing clarity and concision, coherence, seriousness and, in sum, creative sincerity. A survey of the composer's career reveals the importance of these ideals in his concept of composition, as well as in his perception of the artist as an eminent figure involved in society. While, through Meursault, Camus denounced the society that overlooks the individual, on various occasions Gerhard expressed his stance with respect to depersonalisation in favour of a (national, trade-union) collective of any nature. For example, in 1945, when asked to express his opinion about English musical life, he declared: 'Still, one often wishes to exclaim with Swift: 'I have hated all nations, professions and communities, and all my love is for individuals'' [13].

In his letter to Camus, Gerhard points out the peculiarities of the work's adaptation to the stage:

C'est par le soliloque, principalement, que le caractère de Meursault s'étalait dans l'imagination du lecteur ou de l'auditeur à la radio. Il me semble qu'il serait extrêmement important de conserver le soliloque autant que possible. Ce qui serait peut-être impraticable au théâtre parlé me paraît certainement possible dans le drame lyrique fondé, comme vous savez, sur un ensemble de conventions qui en réalité font part de sa technique propre.

J'envisage même la possibilité de donner au soliloque (que j'imagine parlé et non chanté) une fonction structurelle comparable au récitatif *secco* de l'opéra ancien; non pas comme un simple essai de résurrection, car il faut avouer qu'il est bien mort, mais comme le rétablissement d'une fonction formelle que le drame wagnérien a aboli sans lui trouver de substitut.

Gerhard was experienced in the composition of opera. Seven years earlier he had premiered his only opera: *La Duenna* (1947), in which, despite the predominance of the bel-canto style, the variety of vocal emissions (speech, recitative, song) made for a very rich vocal part. On that occasion, the work represented the culmination of the use of Spanish musical references, employing a series of numbers directly derived from Spanish dances or songs. From that time, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, Gerhard considered revising his language towards a more atonal and abstract style, and it can be sensed that the use of the voice would have to undergo similar revision, which probably involved expressionist procedures. In *Histoire de l'opéra*, Leibowitz states that "recitative is often a weak point in opera", and includes the testimony of Alban Berg, who was believed to have resolved this deficiency "replacing recitative with the 'rhythmic declamation' Schoenberg invented" [14]. It must be remembered that the use of

sprechstimme can be found in the incidental music Gerhard composed in 1947 for *Romeo and Juliet*. But, in any case, the influence of the radio, with which Gerhard became increasingly more familiar, probably influenced his decision to use speech, as would later occur in *The Plague*.

Camus responded positively on 4 October that year [15], and promised to reflect 'en homme de théâtre seulement puisque je ne suis pas musicien' on the projected opera, once the composer had outlined the general lines of the adaptation, without subsequently influencing his work.

Thirteen days later [16], Gerhard enthusiastically thanked Camus for approving of his project, and was eager to discuss the main lines of the stage adaptation. Gerhard provisionally attached a "simple squelette d'un scénario", representing the starting point of the work, which he planned to revise in a fortnight, "lorsque j'espère avoir terminé un travail urgent qui m'occupe en ce moment". The script of this adaptation consists of 11 scenes spread over two acts: five in the first and six in the second, referring to the pages of the 1953 Gallimard edition of Camus's text for the dialogues. Apart from Meursault, the following characters are included: the caretaker, the asylum director, the nurse, Thomas Perez, the priest, the master of ceremonies, Marie, Salamano, Raymond and his lover, the judge, the forensic scientist, the lawyer, the chaplain, and the funeral service employees, as well as the elderly, local inhabitants, prisoners and visitors. Act one, scene I corresponds to the asylum director's office in Marengo, scene II to the night vigil, scene III to the cemetery, scene IV to the apartment block in Algiers and scene V, the beach. Act two, scene I is set in the judge's office, scene II in the visiting rooms, scene III in the cell, scene IV corresponds to the trial, scene V to the chaplain's visit and scene VI, Meursault's final speech. Gerhard already suggests the possibility of extending the dialogue for the cemetery scene.

On 22 November the writer and composer both exchanged letters. Camus [17] apologised for the delay in his response, as he preferred to wait to read the whole adaptation. Gerhard, anxious to know whether or not the writer had received his package, enclosed a sketch of scene five, which he had left blank in the previous script he had sent, thus completing act one. He apologised for the additions made to the text, "c'est le ciment brut dont j'ai du me servir pour joindre les fragments du dialogue original dans l'ordre qu'il fallait", and hoped, upon the writer's approval, that the latter could write the additional text.

Je suppose que, telle quelle, ma scène serait à peu près inconcevable au théâtre parlé. Je ne dis pas qu'il ne soit possible de la tourner cent fois mieux pour le théâtre lyrique, mais je veux dire simplement que, pour le musicien, elle est fondamentalement possible telle quelle. A la lecture, comme vous savez, un livret d'opéra doit nécessairement avoir quelque chose de squelettique. [...]

En ce moment j'ai quelques mois d'une liberté relative devant moi; je souhaite ardemment que nous puissions arriver bientôt à un accord, à fin que je puisse dédier cette liberté à la composition de 'L'ÉTRANGER' dont je sens que la musique commence à germer vigoureusement.

This scene is one of the most dramatic [18], and marks a true climax considering it is only the act one of an opera. Gerhard faithfully respects Camus's original temporal and spatial distribution, as well as most of the dialogues.

By 30 December [19] Gerhard had already sent Camus the libretto to *L'étranger*, except one scene from act two (*La Cour d'Assises*), which in his view posed certain difficulties that had to be studied carefully. He insisted on the provisional nature of the text, which he intended the writer correct. However, he already seemed to have various suggestions for the music in mind: "je commence à entrevoir les lignes musicales d'ensemble et de plus en plus de rapports entre les scènes."

On 28 January 1955 [20] Camus responded to Gerhard, giving his consent to the adaptation. He claimed to have corrected the whole text and promised to send a new typed version he could work on without fear. Respectfully, he also informed Gerhard that he awaited his own criticisms and suggestions. This revised libretto was sent on 9 February 1955 [21], and is probably the adaptation held at the Centre Albert Camus today [22]. It follows the plan that took shape in Gerhard's

previous outline, with some modifications: a change of characters in act one, scene IV, changes in the order of scenes II and III of act two, etc. Various additions can be seen upon comparing this complete adaptation with the earlier development of act one, scene V, as well as certain changes to improve and make the writing more direct and less superfluous and correct some of the typographical and spelling mistakes. In any case, clearly Gerhard didn't ignore the musical suggestions already implicit in Camus's text, and which were reflected in the libretto: the elderly women's litany during the night vigil, in a fast tempo and sung *mezzo voce*, to which the men reply "with a monotonous ballad, based on two or three of the bass voice's lowest notes, in the form of an 'ostinato'", or the act-two asylum scene, in which "the voiceless murmuring of the Arabs forms a *basso continuo* of conversations intertwining over their heads".

The beginning of the complete adaptation is cited below, effectively including the use of speech:

ACTE I

SCENE I

Bureau du directeur d l'Asile de Vieillards à Marengo

CONCIERGE

Vite, il faut les enterrer, vite, parce que dans ce pays, il faut chaud, surtout dans la plaine. A Paris on reste avec le mort trois, quatre jours quelquefois. Ici on n'a pas le temps, on ne s'est pas fait à l'idée que déjà il faut courir derrière le corbillard... Mais je vous demande pardon, monsieur, je ne devrais pas vous dire ces choses.

MEURSAULT

Mais non. Je trouve ce que vous dites intéressant et juste.

CONCIERGE

Je me sauve. Monsieur le Directeur ne peut plus tarder à présent.

Le concierge sort.

MEURSAULT (seul)

Parlé.

Avant-hier ou hier? Je ne sais pas.

Il sort le télégramme de sa poche.

"Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués". Cela ne veut rien dire. C'était peut-être hier.

Entre le Directeur.

[ETC]

The project began to materialise with the collaboration of the theatre director Peter Brook, following whom Gerhard had written incidental music to accompany Brook's 1947 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In April 1955 Brook [23] maintained that he had read *L'étranger* very carefully: "I think it is absolutely thrilling. I do congratulate you on the arrangement of the scenes which is excellent – very terse and dramatic. I completely understand why the subject has captivated you so much; in fact it is just the sort of libretto I have always hoped you would have and I am sure that the result will be very exciting".

After explaining the pros and cons of the French and English options of the opera adaptation, Peter Brook goes on to clarify some of the details of the adaptation:

It seemed to me very uneconomical to have three scenes to cover the death of the mother. If all this is a sort of prologue, I wouldn't have thought the actual scene of the burial contributes much that hasn't been expressed already in the morgue. Anyway, stage burials are always in danger of looking a bit comic. I was very sorry to miss the trial scenes which I am sure will be thrilling. I can't say I like the

idea of an apotheosis at the end – I think that the style is far too realistic for this to be possible in the same convention. Surely music can make the same effect. I can find nothing really to criticise at this stage because the idea seems fine and the execution of the libretto completely stageworthy. I am sure it will be a remarkable work and I look forward to hearing more of it. (I am sure, if I guess rightly at the style in which you are going to write it, it would make a quite extraordinary sung film. Perhaps you should really aim it for the French television. It would be wonderful for that form).

These specifications were unlikely to have discouraged the composer, and Gerhard is acknowledged to have made an effort to carry out his objectives [24]. Then what caused the opera *L'étranger* to be thwarted? In his study of the composer [25], Joaquim Homs includes a conversation with Gerhard in which the latter confessed that he was unable to secure enough financial support to compose the work. The following letter from the composer to Geoffrey Bridson [26] summarises the circumstances that impeded the project from being concluded:

I have, alas, no idea when 'L'Etranger' will be finished. I should of course be delighted and honoured to have a first performance in the Third if it is suitable when it is ready – if it ever does [get finished] [added by hand] The trouble is that so many things keep breaking in, which – for the blessed pro pane lucrando - have to take priority. And all our financial calculations have gone wrong. The main one – Boosey & Hawkes, about which I believe I told you something - utterly so. All our friends have advised us not to sue them, especially on account of the ordeal of the thing, let alone the uncertainty of the result. But it has meant about 9 months work for which I have nothing to show (except a larger overdraft). Still, Poldi keeps on making amazing approximations in the Vernon's pool and her stars for 1956 are very good. Jupiter himself is for nearly the whole year in her constellation (Leo), starting under the lion's paw, moving up to its breast, and so on and so forth. And the first thing she would do, if she wins any money, would be to commission me to write 'L'Etranger'. I suppose there is no likelihood that the BBC would consider giving me a commission for the work. Honestly my faith in the BBC is stronger than in the stars. But then, as Lam in tune with Camus, I have no hope but neither do I despair [sic].

Homs mentions [27] a letter Gerhard sent him in 1966, in which he confessed that, for the first time in his life, the commissions he received allowed him to say no to all types of “commercial” works. At the time he was nearly 70. And this appears to be the reason for this failed project: serious financial problems, much of which were caused by his relationship with his publisher at that time, requiring him to meet more urgent commissions, instead of concluding the opera.

Camus died in 1960, and this seems to have encouraged Gerhard to go back to his texts. In 1961 he composed the music for the radio version of *Caligula*. But his great “Camus” project came to fruition with the composition of *The Plague* in 1964. While *L'étranger* provided confirmation of a lone rebellion, here the author examines a community forced to share the fight. Apparently, the story refers to the outbreak of plague epidemic in the city of Oran during the 1940s, although Camus himself explained the meaning of the text: “La peste, dont j'ai voulu qu'elle se lise sur plusieurs portées, a cependant comme contenu évident la lutte européenne contre le nazisme. La preuve en est que cet ennemi qui n'est pas nommé, tout le monde l'a reconnu, et dans tous les pays d'Europe” [28]. It is reasonable to conclude that the wealth of suggestions and the ethical and political content of the text were among the elements that completely captured the composer's attention:

Camus's novel took my imagination by storm when I first read it some years ago and I immediately decided to use it as the subject of a composition, if I could think of extracting a libretto from the book and find a musical form to fit it. The script proved the longer and more arduous task, in fact. It began to take shape as I realized that the various characters in the novel were merely distinct facets of the story-teller himself. [29]

In the original novel, a narrator tells the story in the third person, using the grammatical code of the neutral account, marking his presence, nevertheless, with the use of certain possessive pronouns and local references. As we shall see, Gerhard considers the narrator the centre of the whole work, and hence, in his version, translates this into the form of a melodrama, in which the storyteller maintains a predominantly objective tone, which, nonetheless, is expressively illustrated by the choir and orchestra. Notwithstanding, the composer's version [30] seems to comprehend the novel

as a whole and acknowledge that in the epilogue the narrator is Doctor Bernard Rieux, who is fully involved in the events being described, and that he appears at the end to add veracity to the story; for this reason, in the musical version, while still maintaining a neutral tone, the storyteller uses the first person. This is just one example of the work's thought-provoking ambiguity between symbolic abstraction and concreteness.

For this reason, Camus begins the novel with a quote from the preface to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not". The composer, conscious of the importance of this reference, insists, in a letter to Christopher Morris [31] of Oxford University Press, on the importance of the typographical location of the Defoe quote: "which as you know was Camus' own choice and is the key to the work's symbolism and, also what I took for my text in the 'Composer's Note'". Gerhard bases his idea on Camus's concept of *The Plague* as a "parable" or "conte philosophique", as well as his own "as a straightforward story, as the factual account of an imaginary outbreak of plague supposed to have afflicted the town of Oran sometime in the 1940s. It is not only possible, it is perhaps inescapable to read it thus. And this is, I suggest, how it should be read. This is how I have composed it" [32].

Indeed, this ambiguity is reflected in the use of various musical processes whose semiotic implications allude to various levels. Firstly, Gerhard veers away from metaphorical abstraction by using numerous descriptive elements that are of a completely structural nature, forming part of the musical development. "The factual, almost clinically detached narrative aims at complete make-believe. This has been my own aim, too. I conceived the role of the musical setting as an attempt at aiding and abetting in this task of making the listener believe in the reality of the fictional events recounted" [33]. Thus, for example, in episode 3, a complex and descriptive orchestral background, representing the plague's unstoppable advance, accompanies the narrator: "On the fourth day, the rats began to come out and die in batches. From basements, cellars and sewers they emerged in long wavering files into the light of day, swayed helplessly, then did a sort of pirouette and fell dead at the feet of the horrified onlookers". This revolting sight was represented in the orchestra using various instrumental techniques (bouncing bow, thumb-nail arpeggios, harmonics, *col legno*, tap with left hand finger-tip on table, *sul ponticello*...), the strings playing irregular groups of semiquavers over *glissandi* (see Figure 1).

Other descriptive elements on a more objective level of the story are found in the recreation of the sight of the rat in episode 1 (bb. 58-66) using *portato*, ascending and descending movements and the *sul ponticello* in *glissando* in the violas, as well as in the choral passage in episode 2 (rehearsal numbers 13-16) in *poco più agitato* tempo, in speech, and even shouted, rhythmically disorganised, taking on the role of the locals, disconcerted by the cruel and unforeseen events. These elements combine to create the impression of a documentary, with live action from the streets being recorded and subsequently broadcast on radio. The effectiveness of this passage stems from the composer's familiarity with broadcast media. In the final episode, episode 9, with the disappearance of the disease, the jubilation signalled by the bells (glockenspiel, vibraphone, xylophone and marimba in the percussion) is endorsed by the locals' burst of joy. The sound of a band even seems to be heard in the distance.

The image shows a page of a musical score for 'The Plague', pages 26 and 27. The score includes parts for Accordion (Acc.), Percussion (Perc.), Piano (Pt.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Db.). The narrator's text is: "NARRATOR: On the fourth day they began to come out and die in balches. Dès le quatrième jour les rats commencèrent à sortir pour mourir en groupes." The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including sustained clusters and various percussive effects like 'tap on table' and 'tap on bellows'.

Figure 1. *The Plague*, bb. 137-140 (detail). Oxford University Press, 1967.

A second, more abstract level of representation exists in the work. One example is the convention used to associate the plague with a sustained cluster (consisting of six notes in bar 1 between F sharp and B), which is clearly associated with the accordion, a wind instrument, throughout the work as a semiotic element linked to the disease which is transmitted through air (see Figure 1, in which it is used between F and C flat, reinforced by the piano). The sense of perception of this invisible presence is reinforced by the use of various phonetic sounds in certain choral passages. In episode 1, for example, the voice describes the crackling of the leaves, in speech, using the sound of the phoneme *s*, the word *sky*, or the *toneless whisper* indications (bb. 26-36). This type of choral writing and the use of clusters, together with certain passages for the strings and percussion, as well as the narrator's intervention, pertain to the indefinite pitch and rhythmic systems of the "two systems" (the other definite) Gerhard employs in the work. In this case, the influence of procedures taken from electronic composition, which Gerhard used from the mid 1950s is clear. The composer seizes on the possibility of extending his creative language: "the future of electronic music and the opening up of a wider musical domain lie probably in the fusion which separate these two systems. With the composition of *Collages*, I gained some experience in this field which I was able to put to a novel use in *The Plague*" [34].

Finally, the composer employs certain musical means to suggest a third level of symbolic representation, associated with the story's significance as a fable. As Gerhard explains:

The transition from the fictional to the symbolical level is indicated, never emphasized. The moral, political, and metaphysical preoccupations which we associate with Camus' *oeuvre* inform the tale, without ever being allowed to reduce it to a mere allegory peopled with abstractions. In particular, reminders of Camus' war-time experiences in the resistance movement are just below the surface. It is important, however, that our interpretation of the symbolic aspect of the work should range freely over temporal as well as over national boundaries. Surely, in an age that has witnessed the most fearsome outbreak of man's bestiality to man, no person old enough to have memories of suffering and disaster can fail to respond out of his or her own experience to the meaning conveyed by symbolism. [35]

At times, the choir thus takes on a tone of universality, for example at the end of episode 3 ("We fancy ourselves free and no one will ever be free as long as there are pestilences"). In the

relationship between the music and a text, an image or an idea, everything is, in fact, linked to the terrain of abstraction and symbols, metaphorical conventions. According to Gerhard,

Camus alludes to contemporary realities, symbolized in the fictional events, as a poet would: metaphorically. In a similar way, a musical image that may have started, say, in an objective or even descriptive vein, is sometimes given a metaphorical turn that makes allusion to the reality behind the symbol, as – to quote a simple example – when the climax of the rat-invasion turns into a sound-image that may well recall an air-raid warning. The music's technique of allusion is constantly employed to this end, sometimes by gradual metamorphosis, sometimes by a violent clash of images. [36]

Thus, from episode 2 onwards (bb. 39-40), a strikingly traditional motive can be heard in the trumpet (A-B-D#), which appears in various forms throughout the work. It is of a martial nature, like that of the percussion (mainly the side drum), whose military reminiscences can be associated with the plague motives (bb. 146-166). These procedures accumulate, leading to the suggestion of the air-raid siren Gerard refers to, using ascending and descending chromatic movement in the woodwinds and brass (bb. 165-175. See Figure 2). This connection dispels any doubts: lying behind the story are war and the crushing of reason by the arbitrary powers.

The image shows a detailed musical score for the percussion section of 'The Plague' (bb. 166-167). The score is written for a large ensemble, including Flutes (Fl. 1, 2), Piccolo (Picc.), Clarinets (Cl. 1, 2, 3), Bassoons (Bsn. 1, 2, 3), Horns (4 Hns.), Trumpets (4 Trs.), and Percussion (1, 2, 3, 4). The percussion part is particularly prominent, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *p*, *ff*, and *sfz*. A section labeled 'PERCUSSION CADENZA' is marked with 'III' and includes the instruction 'Players 1-4 improvise freely, starting no *p*'. The score is written in a standard musical notation with various articulations and phrasing marks.

Figure 2. *The Plague*, bb. 166-167 (detail).

Thus, like Camus's novel, Gerhard's work constantly oscillates between concrete and abstract references. Like other formal procedures in a work, these elements should be combined in the right proportions, and here, Camus is once again the reference:

It could be said that achieving the 'right' proportion is like having won half the battle. Nevertheless, it is true that the right proportion is cold, and the other half of the battle, the tougher one, means 'to find a disproportion in proportion' as Camus rightly claims. It is necessary to win both halves, since half a victory is not a victory. Valid coins have heads and tails! [37]

The works Gerhard composed during the 1960s, which were markedly abstract in style, provide an example of semantic definition, whose circumstances, in this case, go beyond technical language.

It is only rarely that music, with its intrinsic lack of semantic definition, allows us to guess at the motives which may have prompted the composer's work, and the evidence is seldom more than circumstantial or anecdotal. The musical medium itself is often thought of as "timeless", in the sense of being ineffably remote from any concrete, time-bound concern, as though the composer lived, thought and worked outside historical time altogether. It came, therefore, as a welcome relief to me to have been able, just for once, to break out of this "timelessness", and to give expression to a passionately felt concern with one of the most oppressive tragedies of our time. [38]

Camus, who saw how the Franco dictatorship silenced the right of the Republicans to express their opinion, in *The Plague*, also endowed Gerhard, a victim of exile and separation, with a voice: “Exile! Irrational longing to hark-back to the past or else to speed up the march of time, keen shafts of remembrance that sting like fire. We have come to know the bitter sorrow of all the prisoners and exiles –to live with a memory that serves no purpose”. A poetic, political and spiritual reference, Camus’s work stimulated and benefited Robert Gerhard’s musical creation. Although they were never to meet in person, this did not prevent a truly creative, complete and felicitous meeting from occurring.

2. REFERENCES

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- [3] DIEGO, R. de. “L’Espagne sur le coeur”, *Albert Camus et l’Espagne*, pp. 19-32.
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4. APPENDIX: ACT I, SCENE V FROM ROBERT GERHARD'S SKETCH OF THE LIBRETTO TO *L'ÉTRANGER*, BY ALBERT CAMUS.

SCENE V

Plateau encadré de rochers, tout juste au dessus de la plage. Le rocher à droite plus haut, praticable, projetant son ombre sur la scene. Au fond la mer; a distance: un cap somnolent et massif.

MEURSAULT et MARIE en maillots

MARIE

Ils sont vraiment gentils les Massons. Et tu dis que tu ne les connaissais pas avant?

MEURSAULT

Non; c'est des amis a Raymond. Il m'a téléphoné [sic] hier au bureau. Il m'a dit que Masson –il lui avait parlé de moi- m'invitait à passer la journée de dimanche dans son cabanon. J'ai répondu que je voulais bien mais que j'avais promis ma journée à une amie. Raymon [sic] m'a tout de suite déclaré qu'il t'invitait aussi. La femme de son ami serait contente de ne pas etre seule au milieu d'un groupe d'hommes. [parece haber errores de ortografia]

MARIE

Comme il a l'air préoccupé Raymond, ce matin. Tu crois que c'est à cause de ces arabes à l'arrêt de l'autobus, tout à l'heure? Qu'est-ce qu'ils peuvent bien lui vouloir?

MEURSAULT

L'un d'eux était le type avec qui Raymond a eu une bagarre, l'autre jour.

MARIE

Une bagarre? A propos de quoi.

MEURSAULT

L'arabe, c'est le frere de son ancienne maitresse.

MARIE

Ah, mais je commence à comprendre alors.
Après avoir battu cette pauvre fille comme il l'a battue l'autre jour, tu sais, ça ne m'étonnerait pas que Raymond ait encore des embêtements avec son arabe.

MEURSAULT

Mais non. C'est une histoire finie maintenant.

MARIE

D'ailleurs, tu ne m'as pas dit si on t'a convoqué au commissariat à propos de cette histoire.

MEURSAULT

Oui, j'ai été convoqué. J'ai témoigné que la fille avait manqué à Raymond. Il en a été quitte pour un avertissement. C'est tout.

MARIE

Tu ne m'as pas embrassée depuis ce matin.

MEURSAULT

C'est vrai; pourtant ce n'est pas par manque d'envie.

MARIE

Viens dans l'eau... (Exit)

MEURSAULT se leve pour la suivre lorsque RAYMOND et MASSON (en maillots) arrivent.

RAYMOND

Ecoute, vieux, tu sais ce qu'on disait avec Masson? – qu'il faut venir passer ensemble le mois d'aout à la plage à frais communs.

MASSON

Vous etes d'accord?

MEURSAULT

Je trouve ça une excellente idée

RAYMOND

Attention!

MASSON

Quoi? – Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?

RAYMOND

Ces deux types en bleu de chauffe...

MASSON

Oui... et alors?

RAYMOND

Celui à gauche...: c'est lui. – Je me demande comment ils ont pu nous suivre à la plage.

S'il y a de la bagarre, toi, Masson, tu prendras le deuxième. Moi, je me charge de mon type.

Toi, Meursault, s'il en arrive un autre, il est pour toi.

(Les deux arabes s'arrêtent à quelques pas de distance)

RAYMOND

Salaud, je t'ai dit de me foutre la paix., Tu vas attraper quelque chose à me courir après...

(Raymond s'avance tout droit vers l'arabe; ils se battent; Masson descend le deuxième arabe de quelques coups frappés avec tout son poids...)

RAYMOND

(se retournant vers Meursault)

Tu vas voir ce qu'il va prendre...

MEURSAULT

Attention!, il a un couteau!

(Raymond est frappé par l'arabe; il a le bras ouvert et la bouche tailladée. L'arabe que Masson avait abattu se relève et se place derrière celui qui est armé. Le groupe reste immobilisé pendant un instant. Puis, sans cesser de tenir l'adversaire en respect avec le couteau, les arabes commencent à se retirer; quand ils ont assez de champ ils s'emfuient vite.)

MASSON

Heureusement qu'il y a un docteur qui vient passer les dimanches à la plage. Il a son cabanon tout pres d'ici. Je vais t'y conduire.

RAYMOND

Ce n'est rien. La blessure au bras est superficielle. Et ceci (signalant la bouche) n'est qu'une égratignure.

MASSON

Il faut tout de même les désinfecter et bander ton bras. Amène-toi que je te conduise chez le docteur.

Exeunt RAYMOND et MASSON

MARIE

(sortant de l'eau)

Pourquoi tu n'est pas venu? – Est-ce qu'il est arrivé quelque chose?

MEURSAULT

Rien de grave. L'arabe de Raymond s'est amené ici avec un autre type. Il y a eu des coups et Raymond a reçu une blessure au bras sans importance.

MARIE

Le cœur me le disait. La vilaine affaire! Ah, la vilaine, la vilaine affaire. Tu n'as pas idée ce que j'ai horreur de t'y voir mêlé.

MEURSAULT

Mais je n'y ai rien à voir, moi. C'est une affaire qui ne me regarde le moins du monde.

MARIE

Suis-je donc idiote: regarde comme je tremble. Veux-tu qu'on rentre?

Exeunt MARIE et MEURSAULT

INTERLUDE (Dumb Show) Les deux arabes reviennent et s'installent à l'ombre du rocher, à droite, comme pour faire la sieste; le deuxième joue tout le temps de sa petite flûte.

MEURSAULT et RAYMOND, habillés; Raymond, son bras bandé, du sparadrap sur la bouche.- Ils s'arrêtent brusquement en apercevant les arabes, qui ne bougent pas. Celui qui avait frappé Raymond le regarde sans rien dire. L'autre continue de souffler dans son roseau.)

RAYMOND

(en portant la main à sa poche revolver)

Je le descends?

MEURSAULT

Il ne t'a pas encore parlé. Il ferait vilain de tirer comme-ça.

RAYMOND

Alors je vais l'insulter et quand il répondra, je le descendrai.

MEURSAULT

C'est ça. – Mais s'il ne sort pas son couteau, tu ne peux pas tirer.-

Ecoute, prends-le d'homme à homme et donne-moi ton revolver. Si l'autre intervient, ou s'il tire son couteau, je le descendrai.

RAYMOND

C'est entendu (Il donne son revolver à Meursault)

(Tout à coup les arabes se glissent derriere le rocher et disparaissent.)

RAYMOND (en riant)

Tu les a vu filer! Il a eu son compte, mon type, pas d'erreur. Je ne crois pas qu'il ait envie d'y revenir.

MEURSAULT

En tout cas, ça vaut mieux comme-ça.

RAYMOND

Alors, est-ce qu'on rejoint les autres? Il faudra bientôt penser à l'autobus de retour.

MEURSAULT

Vas-y. Je vous rejoins tout à l'heure. J'ai envie de me coucher un peu à l'ombre de ce rocher. J'ai mal à la tete. J'ai eu trop de soleil.

RAYMOND

Alors on t'attend au cabanon

Exit Raymond

MEURSAULT

Il y a deux heures que la tournée n'avance plus. Il y a deux heures qu'elle a jeté son ancre dans un océan de métal bouillant.

(Meursault fait un pas vers le rocher et s'arrete interdit en s'apercevant qu'à l'instant l'arabe vient de s'y glisser, à la place qu'il occupait avant, nonchalemment adossé au rocher, les bras croisés sous la nuque.- Meursault a un geste comme pour rappeler Raymond mais, fatigué, se ravise.- Il fait encore un pas-presque en chancellant-; à ce moment l'arabe lui presente son couteau au soleil, la lumiere gliclant [sic] sur l'acier. La main de Meursault s'est crispée sur le revolver. L'orchestre –devenu protagonista maintenant- atteint rapidement au deployment maximum de sa puissance sonore, coupée net par le premier coup de feu. Dans le bref silence qui suit Meursault tire encore quatre fois sur le corps inerte de l'arabe. Immédiatement l'orchestre reprend au fff pour couvrir la chute rapide du rideau.

Fin du premier acte.