

Ulysses: Matyas Seiber's Cantata for Tenor Solo, Chorus and Orchestra

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In 1950, a young Australian composer, recently arrived in England, asked Arthur Benjamin, then one of the best-known of Australian expatriate musicians working in London, to suggest a composition teacher with whom he might study. Benjamin directed the 27-year old Don Banks towards Matyas Seiber. Banks knew nothing of Seiber but, following Benjamin's advice, made a point of trying to hear some of Seiber's music. Soon afterwards he heard *Ulysses*, and in later life often recounted how this experience made such a deep impression on him that it prompted him to act on Benjamin's advice. Banks became one of Seiber's longest-serving pupils and, subsequently, a close friend for the last decade of Seiber's life, as well as a great enthusiast for *Ulysses*.

Perhaps we cannot quite relive Banks's experience half a century later, but certainly it was typical of the reactions of other young composers who worked with Seiber at that time: Peter Racine Fricker, who later emigrated to the United States, was another to whom *Ulysses* seemed to be the work of a major figure in British music. The reception of this work in its own time prompts me to begin this survey of Seiber's music with a 'close reading' of this major choral work. In subsequent chapters, I will consider Seiber's work in the usual chronological and categorical ways, but I shall begin by trying to give a sense of 'how Seiber's music goes', to give an account of one particular major work, *Ulysses*, written at the height of its composer's powers, to say why I like it and find it a significant piece, and to convey at least one listener's impression of how *Ulysses* relates to other music of its time and to other British music in particular.

The first thing to say is that *Ulysses* is not quite a typical British choral work, and is not absolutely typical of Seiber's *oeuvre* as a whole either. Taking the text from James Joyce's celebrated novel, one of the landmarks of innovative, experimental twentieth-century literature, places it rather uncomfortably alongside works of the populist British tradition from *The Dream of Gerontius* to *Belshazzar's Feast* to *A Child of Our Time* to the *War Requiem* and beyond, and *Ulysses* has not found the place in the repertoire of the typical British choral society that it deserves. Seiber wrote many other choral works, but many of them are collections of small pieces: often settings of folk or folk-like poems. Quite a number of these have remained in the repertoire of choral groups everywhere for all of the 50 or 60 years since they were written: the *Hungarian Folk Songs*, the *Yugoslav Folksongs* and many others. But Seiber's most typical work probably lies in his concertos and chamber music. Consequently, the character of *Ulysses* is *sui generis* in more than one way.

The text which Seiber selected from James Joyce's novel is the famous passage in the form of a parody of a catechism: five questions with model answers. The structure of the text thus prompts the structure of the music, which consists of five movements, each beginning with a short introduction (the question) followed by a more substantial principal section (the model answer). However, the length and character of each introduction is, by and large, different from those of the other four, as is the musical treatment of the text which Seiber deploys.

* Movement 1 ('The Heaventree'). This is a substantial introduction of 40 bars, with a *misterioso* character. The

character is effected by sparse two-part counterpoint for strings in contrasting high and low registers beginning before the entry of the words sung by the tenor soloist, and reinforced by the solemn trombone chords which then accompany his first phrase (a rhetorical gesture recalling the mysterious solemnity of Sarastro's music in the second act of *The Magic Flute*, perhaps, and designed to 'set the scene' in a similar way). The two-part string counterpoint then re-enters to accompany the soloist's second phrase and provide a concluding codeatta after his last word.

* Movement 2 ('Meditations on Evolution Increasingly Vaster'): a shorter, more dramatic introduction of 17 bars, beginning with an arresting *tutti* fanfare. The tenor then sings his question in expressive *recitativo* style, with several extensive melismas on important words ('meditations', 'demonstrations', 'constellations'). Underneath the latter part of this recitative, a phrase from the *misterioso* string introduction to the first movement's introduction re-enters, in the deep bass register (cellos and basses). This *misterioso* material is recalled in several other places in *Ulysses*, as we shall see.

* Movement 3 ('Obverse Meditations of Involution.....'): a variation upon the introduction to the second movement, again consisting of fanfare, *recitativo* and deep string bass *misterioso*, but now shortened to 10 bars and differently shaped (with, for example, the fanfare falling from high register to low, rather than rising up out of the bass into the treble, as in the second movement's introduction).

* Movement 4 (*Nocturne – Internezzo*): a still shorter introduction, of a mere 5 bars, consisting of a choral *recitativo* (altos and tenors in unison), over a series of seven 3-note chords.

Lento ♩ = **MM circa 84**



Example 1

These chords comprise a quotation (modified) from a well-known piano piece by Schoenberg (number 6 of that composer's *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke* Op 19), and they subsequently become the basis for much of the rest of the fourth movement, which Seiber designates in a footnote to the score as an *Hommage à Schoenberg*. Schoenberg's original Op 19 No 6 is quoted in Example 2, opposite.

The first two of Seiber's chords (let us call them 'W' and 'X') in bars 1–2 comprise a quotation of (the pitchclasses of) the initial pair of 3-note chords which begin Schoenberg's Op19 No 6, voiced in close harmonic position: B, A and F# followed by C, G and F. In bar 3, Seiber follows up this initial pair of chords with two more (D, A and E, followed by E, B and D) which are also derived from Schoenberg's piece: let us call them 'Y' and 'Z'. Chord Y (D, A and E) is an inversion or transposition of the pitchclass content of the 3-note chord heard in Schoenberg's bars 5–6, right hand (B, F and C), while chord Z (E, B and D) is a transposition or inversion of the pitchclass content of the 3-note chord heard in Schoenberg's bar bars 5–6, left hand (G#, D and E).

Clearly, chords W and X quote the pitchclasses of Schoenberg's first two chords at their original transposition levels, whereas chords Y and Z quote Schonberg's third and fourth chords in transformed versions (inversion or transposition). In Seiber's fourth and fifth bars, chords Y, W and X are then re-stated, in that order. It will also be

VI.

Sehr langsam (♩)

pp *p* *pppp*

p *pp* *ppp* *ppp*

p *pp* *ppp*

mit sehr zartem Ausdruck *genau im Takt* *wie ein Hauch*

rit. *

U. E. 5069

Example 2

noticed that Seiber's treatment of Schoenberg's material creates a structural characteristic which is *not* present in Op19 No 6: an aggregate of all twelve tones. One may deduce that this modification of Schoenberg's material was introduced specifically to create such an aggregate, inasmuch as aggregate structure then becomes the basis of much that is to follow in the movement which is based on this 5-bar introduction.

The main section of this fourth movement which follows, beginning in bar 6, opens with a quote of chords W and X, adopting not only Schoenberg's pitchclass levels, but also the *particular registers* in which they occur in Op 19 No 6:

Molto Calmo ♩ = MM circa 48

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, in common time (C). The tempo is 'Molto Calmo' with a metronome marking of ♩ = MM circa 48. The score begins at bar 6. Bars 6-9 show chords with a sharp sign (W and X). Bars 10-12 show chords with a flat sign. The notation includes various chord symbols and clefs.

Example 2

* Movement 5 ('Epilogue'): an extended 40-bar development of the *misterioso* two-part string counterpoint and the solemn trombone chords from the first movement's introduction, together with other material from later passages of the first movement. In fact, as we shall see, the fifth movement as a whole is practically entirely a re-working of material from the first movement.

Although *Ulysses* is infused with chromatic melodic and harmonic materials, and even various twelve-tone elements – such as the four chords mentioned above in relation to the *Hommage à Schoenberg* movement – the work is also tonal, in the sense that each movement has a tone centre to which it refers and upon which it settles at its final cadence. That centre is E in the odd-numbered movements, balanced by A (on the 'flat side') in the second movement and by B (on the 'sharp side') in the fourth.

Seiber in Context

Arnold Schoenberg once suggested to an enthusiastic champion who had been asked to write a journal article about him, that he should not be too technical, but should try to convey to his readers why he liked Schoenberg's music. Without following Schoenberg's advice to avoid technicalities absolutely literally, I have sought, in beginning this account of Seiber's music with a discussion of *Ulysses*, to give a sense of why I like it, and why I attribute to it an important place in the history of twentieth-century British music. Nevertheless, although *Ulysses* – written in 1947, when Seiber was at the height of his powers and at the beginning of period which saw the composition of most of his major works – is an achievement of the first rank, it is not completely typical in one particular sense, for if one had to identify the genres most typical of Seiber, one would probably want first of all to nominate the concertos and chamber music. *Ulysses* is really his only large choral/orchestral essay.

The fact that the tenth anniversary of Seiber's death was marked by a substantial series of tributes in *The Musical Times* is indicative of the importance which was accorded him at that time, and not only in Britain: the central set of values which some saw as embodied in Seiber's work was articulated by Milton Babbitt in his tribute in the following terms:

Two years later [1954], in London, I saw Matyas in the full range of his extraordinary musical activity, the 'outsider' who, by carrying within him the fully understood and experienced tradition of Central Europe, and particularly that most recent tradition of the decisive and revolutionary twenties, had become the most influential and respected on 'insiders' as teacher, and above all, composer (Babbitt 1970).

The composers of those 'decisive, revolutionary twenties' who most affected Seiber's outlook and development were those of the so-called Second Vienna School, above all that of Alban Berg. In fact, however, there has been hitherto comparatively little reference anywhere in the musicological literature to Seiber's musical relationship to Berg, and certainly no extensive interpretation of the meaning of the relationship, and since it's a crucial fact, I shall return to it again. Nevertheless, the reason for the *lacuna* is not that hard to deduce. It has to do with the external circumstances of Seiber's life, which can easily point the casual listener in the wrong direction. The unsettled nature of this career hints at what Milton Babbitt was getting at when he referred to 'the full range of his extraordinary musical activity'. One can deduce it just by listing a few elements of this activity:

- * He collaborated with the celebrated sociologist and musicologist (and composer) Theodor Adorno;
- * He taught, composed and published on jazz, and wrote what were probably the earliest pieces to synthesise elements of jazz with elements of twelve-tone composition (in 1929);
- * He collaborated with the famous folk-music collector Alan Lomax – whose collections are now housed in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington – and with Don Banks (his Australian student) on the volume *Folk Songs of North America*;
- * He wrote the music for Britain's first major animated feature film: Halas and Batchelor's *Animal Farm*, based on the famous novel by George Orwell;
- * He arranged countless folksongs from many countries for the Morley College choir, arrangements which are still in the repertoire of many choral societies all over the world;
- * He also wrote the music for the well-known British-Australian war movie of the 1950s, *A Town Like Alice*, starring Peter Finch and Virginia McKenna;
- * He taught the accordion and arranged several pieces for accordion orchestra;
- * He represented Britain at the Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1952 (the year

when the other representatives included Milton Babbitt for the US and Don Banks for Australia);

- * He collaborated with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Johnny Dankworth band to produce a substantial piece of so-called 'third-stream' music, *Improvisations for Jazz Band and Orchestra*, in which jazz and symphonic idioms are blended together;
- *and finally: the list would not be absolutely representative without mention of the pop song *The Fountains of Rome* which reached the pop-music charts in 1956.

The omnivorous attitude to music reflected in this catalogue of activities was mirrored in the musical character embodied in Seiber's compositions, but its significance has often been misinterpreted. In these post-modern times of the early twenty-first century, we might well find Seiber's multifarious activity and his multi-faceted compositional personality as engaging, stimulating and inspiring, as the enthusiasm evident in Milton Babbitt's 1970 *Musical Times* tribute suggests. But it's clear that this was not necessarily always the case, despite the *Musical Times* tribute. Even so perceptive a commentator as Hans Redlich, who was Professor at Manchester University at the time, was misled by these circumstances, when he wrote in the *Music Review*:

It remains the tragedy of the uprooted composer to substitute polyglot versatility for the security of a national tradition.....The violent cross-currents of artistic influences.....may easily result in a creative deadlock or in an encyclopaedic prolixity of style. Seiber manages skilfully to steer clear of both dangers, but only at the expense of musical substance. (Redlich 1954).

To understand these conflicting cross-currents of critical opinion we need to consider the cultural context into which Seiber was casting his 'polyglot versatility': to consider the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, and perhaps the spirit of the place as well. The return of hermeneutics to the musicological discourse in recent decades has been made possible by a stronger realisation that meaning in music is not just a function of the sound of the music, but an interaction between the sonic aspect and the context in which the music is received. To get a handle on that with respect to Seiber, I would like to refer in passing to René Leibowitz, whose books, influential at the time, about the Second Vienna School were published during the years when Seiber was composing *Ulysses* and the *Third String Quartet*.

Leibowitz was a prolific writer, and wrote many other books, but the three I have in mind here are:

- * *What is Twelve-Tone Music ?* (a short book devoted entirely to a discussion of Webern's *Concerto for Nine Instruments*);
- * *Introduction to Twelve-Tone Music* (a rather longer book, devoted principally to a discussion of just one work, Schoenberg's *Variations for Orchestra*, preceded and followed by sections which place the work in theoretical and historical context);
- * *Schoenberg and His School* (a more general book devoted to an overview of the output of all three members of the Second Vienna School).

In *Schoenberg and His School*, Leibowitz heads his sections on Schoenberg, Berg and Webern respectively as: 'Schoenberg: The Origin and Foundations of Contemporary Music', 'Berg: The Awareness of the Past in Contemporary Music', and 'Webern: The Awareness of the Future in Contemporary Music'.

Clearly, however, 50 years on, it's hard to swallow this scenario as merely a summary of the facts of the case. It's at the very least a prediction of the future: a risky undertaking at the best of times. But in the context of the various deconstructive movements in the 50 years since *Schoenberg and His School*, it's hard for us now not to take this way

of reading the significance of Berg's and Webern's work as a way of recruiting it to a particular *banderole*: namely the compositional concerns and ideological priorities of Leibowitz's own time.

Sabine Meine's doctoral thesis on Leibowitz (Meine 2000: 108–114) identifies a sense of the euphoria (the 'Stunde Null') which prevailed in Paris immediately after the war, and the sense that the time was right for a new musical language to emerge which had nothing whatever to do with that of the Nazi era and the war years or, more broadly, with what was seen as stuffy conventionality more generally: as embodied in the work of, for example, the older generation of neo-classicists, including Igor Stravinsky as well as many French composers. Elliott Carter's book of interviews with Enzo Restagno (Carter 1989) recalls the era in very much the same terms. It was not merely that this meant that the hour of the Second Vienna School had come, but that young composers emerging at that time endeavoured to realise its innovations in a more radical way than these 'father figures' themselves, taking as their starting-point the innovations of Webern, who, according to prevailing opinion seemed, in certain ways – in his anti-metrical rhythmic discourse and radical discontinuity of texture and melodic line – more novel than Berg or Schoenberg.

Nevertheless, 60 years of hindsight on this era suggests that a more measured, less contentious reading of the theme of the two sections of Leibowitz's book would prompt headings something like: 'Berg: the awareness of broader musical horizons in relation to the twelve-tone language of contemporary composition', and 'Webern: the movement towards a self-sufficient twelve-tone language in contemporary composition'.

The light cast by this reading of the *zeitgeist* and its ideological preoccupations helps to place *Ulysses* in historical context. It is certainly deeply influenced by twelve-tone thinking, but nevertheless the composer shows himself acutely aware of the way in which those 'broader musical horizons' can be made to impinge on twelve-tone musical language. This awareness may indeed be taken as 'polyglot versatility', as Redlich insists, but in what follows, I shall endeavour to show that musical substance is not thereby endangered.

