

ALFRED SCHNITTKE'S POLYSTYLISTIC JOURNEY: *THE THIRD STRING QUARTET*

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SUMMARY. Within the extremely eclectic musical manifestations of the 20th century, Alfred Schnittke stands as a key-figure, being one of the most influential composers to have linked the past to the present, creating an original sound world, tormented by violent contrasts and conflicts, confusion, nostalgia, irony and parody. His works often look back at the musical tradition, exploring its potential by means of modern compositional techniques and thus giving it a totally new shape and value. Often associated with the postmodern orientation, Alfred Schnittke is the exponent of the complex concept of *polystylism*, bringing the idea of borrowings of musical material to a superior level. Integrating them into the organic structure of his works and subjecting them to variation up to the loss of their identity, they receive a double significance: on the one hand, they represent testimonies of an ancient world, on the other elements that symbolize the ever changing contemporary musical scenery.

Keywords: Schnittke, polystylism, postmodernism, string quartet, Lasso, Beethoven, Shostakovich

Premises

Considered to be one of the most important composers in post-Shostakovich Russia, Alfred Schnittke provided new perspectives to the 20th century Russian music. Originally influenced by serialism and Ligeti's and Stockhausen's advanced techniques, the composer subsequently assumed the social-realistic principles of Shostakovich (with whom he had not only musical, but spiritual affiliations as well). Schnittke expanded the aesthetic and technical preoccupations from his predecessor's music, leading them to the extreme: without enclosing himself in a limited stylistic area, the sense of irony and alienation became the most prominent feature of his artistic creed.

His music is often based on the dichotomy between illusion and reality, and an eloquent example is the cadence composed to Beethoven's *Violin Concerto*, where Schnittke creates a sensitive balance between the traditional form and the atonal disintegration, citing excerpts from all important concerts

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from Bach to Berg. Displaying profound relations to Mahler's and Shostakovich's music, Schnittke intensified the contrasts of their languages, reaching the extreme polystylism of the late 20th century.

The 1960s were almost exclusively dedicated to the chamber repertoire. Moreover, 1968 represented a turning point in Schnittke's compositional style, first displayed in *Serenade* and *Violin Sonata No. 2, Quasi una sonata*. Borrowing certain Western musical patterns, Schnittke endowed the dramatic dimension of the whole with a special part. Sprinkled with violent contrasts of images, conflicts of style, disjunctive and incongruent elements and paradoxes of logic, as a result of juxtaposing the old and the new, his music combines confused stylistic traits, always set in a balance that does not allow the domination of either of them.

These characteristics opened new doors, building a bridge between totally different musical genres. Waltzes, polkas and tangos are boldly combined with passacaglias, fugues or sonatas in many post-1970 works. But the listener never experiences the feeling of chaos, due to the admirable way in which Schnittke subordinates the contrasts to the homogeneity of his writing.

The most productive period in Schnittke's career coincided with the emergence of the controversial postmodernism, with which the composer has often been associated. Postmodernism ascertained a fact: lack of a predominant, universal language, the inability to create new patterns or to absorb currents of less importance. All these elements, projected into music, have been tightly connected to the concept of tonality which, along a substantial period in the music history, fundamentally contributed to the invention of classical forms, subordinated and absorbed other historical tendencies.

The absence of a universally accepted language will, directly and naturally, influence an agglutination of past, now co-existing musical manifestations (modal, tonal, atonal, serial), clearly describing the musical postmodern times. It is the moment when secondary ideas step in: neo-tonalism, neo-romanticism, the confuse concept of polystylism (proposing an acceptable reconciliation of these languages).

Foreshadowed at the end of the 1970s through key-words such as *Neue Einfachheit*, *Neue Ausdrucksmusik* or *Neue Subjektivität* – expressing an opposition to the philosophical history of *Neue Musik* – the musicological discourse on postmodernism was launched by Jürgen Habermas's speech at receiving the Adorno Prize. He made a clear difference between the cultural and aesthetical modernity, stating the now famous phrase of "the unfinished project" of the modern, with doubtful consequences for a theory on postmodernism. For Habermas, postmodernism is the result of a neo-conservatism, pointing toward the illuminist position defended by modernism.²

² See *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1997, vol. VII, p. 110

Translated in music, these concepts correspond to the following moments: the refuse of rational and rehabilitation of irrational, the traditional aesthetic of feelings, the separation from the too complex poetics, moving off the ideas of a limited avant-garde, the predilection for genres such as the symphony or the string quartet. Thus, we can speak of a traditionalist branch of the musical postmodernism, which runs counter to Adorno's philosophy, oriented toward the avant-garde. Through free associations instead of restorations, the composers are in search of connecting elements belonging to previous musical languages, of mixing different forms of language, of reusing the tonality and its possibilities, of benefiting from their freedom to assume past and present material.

For the German musicologist Wolfgang Welsch, postmodernism is different from the finished modernism of the 20th century and more than a simple "anything goes". If one departs from Welsch's notional reconstruction, two theorems are important: those of Leslie Fiedler and Charles Jencks, of encouraging the *multilingualistics*, respectively *the multiple codification* of an artistic work – especially when mediation between elite art and mass art is intended. "Postmodernism is where pluralism of languages, patterns, types of methods are systematically practiced, not simply in different works, but in one and the same, therefore interferential" (Welsch, 1987).³

Schnittke's polystylistic manifesto

In order to properly understand Schnittke's music, we must necessarily put him into a context that considers both the Russian and Western musical traditions. This requires a careful examination of his most characteristic technique, the so-called *polystylism*.

This became a feature in some musical works beginning with the 20th century, up to this point the borrowings of musical material remaining rather in the sphere of a stylistic pluralism. The beginning of the new century will witness the exploitation of the resource on a much more complex and profound level, especially initiated by Gustav Mahler and, afterwards, Alban Berg and Dmitri Shostakovich. Schnittke will find a special place in Mahler's manner, where using this method brings along the feelings of nostalgia and loss. One experiments the same sensation when one listens to Schnittke's music, which often tries to revive the spirit of past times, but is suddenly brought back into the harsh reality of the contemporary world.

The title of Alfred Schnittke's paper, *Polystilistische Tendenzen in der zeitgenössischen Musik*, presented at a conference in Moscow, in 1971, highlights what the composer understands through this notion. This brings the compositional phenomenon to a unique point. One can differ between three principles of such a

³ *Ibidem*, p. 112

phenomenon: the quotation, the processing and the allusion.⁴ The quotation refers to an ample spectre, which comprises smaller or bigger parts and the so-called *pseudo-quotations*. A tight relation is represented by the processing: the connection between the borrowed musical texts to a composer's own idiom, just as in shaping the borrowed material according to one's own taste. The allusion represents the association to the music of the past. The ambiguous territory between the sentimental nostalgia and the savage irony is embodied by means of direct quotation or conscious stylization of such references.

Shostakovich, Berg, Webern, Stockhausen, Boulez, Ligeti, Berio and Zimmermann are among the roots of contemporary polystylism. Schnittke identifies two arguments for the declared present of polystylism: a technological and a psychological one. As a technological reason, Schnittke names the crisis of the 50s, related to the neo-academism and rigidity of serialism, aleatorism and the composition with sound surfaces. As a psychological reason, the composer invokes the unlimited knitting of all the human domains up to the "polyphonization" of human consciousness.

The first expression of what Schnittke called polystylism can be detected in his *Symphony No. 1*, a large work including quotations from Haydn, Chopin, Johann Strauss, Tchaikovsky and Grieg, but also episodes of jazz. These quotations are interwoven to the point that they become unrecognizable. The unity is destroyed on a "theatrical" level as well, as the work begins with only three performers on the stage, the others entering subsequently, in an improvisational chaos stopped by the conductor. The end of the work acts as a mirror reflecting its beginning, the performers leaving the stage one by one.

Schnittke's repertoire is largely phased: it goes from Vivaldi-Corelli reminiscences in *Concerto grosso No. 1* (for two violins, harpsichord, prepared piano and string orchestra, 1976-1977) to Brucknerian resonances and a Latin mass incorporated in *Symphony No. 2* (1979-1980); from derivations of musical materials of the Russian sacred chant in the *Second String Quartet* (1980) or the quotations including Lasso, Beethoven and Shostakovich in the *Third String Quartet* (1983) to the hiding of a tango in the cantata *Seid nüchtern und wachet...* (1983), the literary cabalistic of the sounds of his name and his friend's, the violinist Gidon Kremer, in *Violin Concerto No. 4* (1984) and even to the hidden game, where every "antiquity" is not stolen, but falsified by the composer, in *(K)ein Sommernachtstraum* for orchestra (1985) – with melodic lines that could have been composed by Mozart or Schubert.

Concerto grosso No. 1 projects, in the first four of its six movements, a light fascicle on discursive typologies of Baroque origin: *Prelude*, *Toccata*, *Recitative* and *Cadenza*. As expected, the *concertino* group is accompanied by a *continuo* group and exploits, through figurative solo parts, the virtuosity of

⁴ See: Gratzler, Wolfgang, „Postmoderne“ überall? Aktuelle (In-)Fragestellungen im Blick auf sowjetische Musik nach 1954, in: *Wiederaneignung und Neubestimmung der Fall „Postmoderne“ in der Musik*, Hgsb. von Otto Kolleritsch, Wien-Graz, Universal Edition, 1993, p. 72.

the violinists. Nevertheless, the harmonic language is completely modern. The fifth movement, *Rondo*, surrealistically juxtaposes episodes of tango-gypsy with variations of the Corelli-like theme.

The most characteristic of Schnittke's works are considered to be the polystylistic ones, which draw the attention especially in the 1980s. They contain his individual mark of irony and parody, allowing him to introduce elements of tonality in frequently unfamiliar contexts.

The Third String Quartet

The string quartet enjoys a special place in Schnittke's output. The four works belong to the years 1966, 1980, 1983 and 1989. The string instruments are endowed with a great significance and emotional weight.

Although the first and the second quartets were composed 14 years apart, they can be seen as two chapters of the same book. The *First String Quartet* is defiantly non-conformist in the substantial way it uses the technique of serialism: it is indeed Schnittke's avant-garde manifesto. This led to the consideration of the work as anti-soviet. But the composer tried to explain the musical process of the work: in its highest point, each musical element disintegrates and goes back to the original twelve-note row. In the *Second String Quartet*, Schnittke expresses the love for his native Russia, for its vast landscapes and its people, including allusions to the medieval sacred music. The last quartet is also the end of this journey, but despite what might have been expected, it brings neither peace, nor harmony.

Composed in the summer of 1983, the *Third String Quartet* was commissioned by the *Mannheim Gesellschaft für Neue Musik* and its premiere took place at the *Kunsthalle* in Mannheim, in 1984 (performed by the Eder Quartet from Budapest).

The work is a symbol of Schnittke's stylistic and compositional preoccupations. Showing a deep knowledge of the musical inheritance, which he brought into the present by means of a great variety of modern compositional techniques, Schnittke did not consider innovation to be a purpose in itself. But what this piece presents as a new element is exactly the perception of the "old" and the manner in which the composer integrates it into his own language.

The unifying idea of the work is represented by a set of musical quotations, which signify the new polystylistic tendencies of Schnittke's art. Although Schnittke's conclusions to the faith of the Western cultural inheritance are mostly tragic and pessimistic, the quartet is set in a quiet mood, something very rarely met in his music. The *Quartet* begins with three quotations, marked as such in the score: a double cadence from Orlando di Lasso's setting of *Stabat Mater*⁵, the theme of Beethoven's *String Quartet Op. 133*, *Great Fugue*,

⁵ Edited in 1585, in München: Adam Berg, in the collection *Orlandi Lassi... sacrae cantiones... Quatuor vocum* for double four-voices choir

and the Shostakovich's musical monogram *D-S-C-H*. The variation of these materials will be achieved through the permanent exploration of their inherent possibilities and through the transposition of these vestiges belonging to a past musical world in a brand new stylistic context. The dominant qualities of Schnittke's organization are moderation, order and economy. The material is subjected to an extended motivic and polyphonic treatment, progressing from simplicity to complexity. Thus, one can follow the way the motives are transformed and related up to the stage where they receive a new existence.

With an extremely heterogeneous thematic material, direct quotations and hidden monograms, the *Quartet* appears as a typical postmodern work. Schnittke cleverly combines the technique of strict variation with a complex aesthetical overview on the history of music, as the quotations comment on each another and make reference to other works.

The first movement, marked *Andante*, can be interpreted as a study on severe counterpoint and its tradition, ranging from the diatonic polyphony of the 15th and 16th century, to the Baroque fugal technique, the highly achromatized Beethovenian fugue, which somehow foreshadows, already in the beginning of the 19th century, the changes of language in the 20th century, the emancipation of dissonance and the dodecaphonic technique.

The relations between the borrowed elements are still explicit and distinct. Once the thematic material is displayed and its perspectives are sketched, the music will be structured according to the rule of bringing this material closer to the present. These motives are reminded almost as in the original, although there are interpolations that seem to be foreign and sometimes receive dramatic effects.

The first four measures of the *Quartet* firmly state Schnittke's intention: recognizing the phenomenon of leading-tone alterations in the Renaissance music around 1500 as the "genetic code" that led to the gradual dissolution of diatonic harmony and tonality, the composer begins his work with a quotation from Lasso's setting of *Stabat Mater*, a double-cadence from m. 22 of the first verse, sung on the word *dolentem* by the first choir. Despite Schnittke's indication, ms. 3-4 are not to be found in Lasso's setting, only the first two acting as an open quotation.

Ex. 1

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Schnittke's Quartet, marked *Andante*. It features four staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello. The music is in 4/4 time and consists of four measures. The first two measures are marked *pp* (pianissimo) and the last two are marked *p* (piano). The score includes a double-cadence from m. 22 of the first verse of Lasso's *Stabat Mater*, specifically the word *dolentem*. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings. A bracket at the bottom indicates the source: "Orlando di Lasso - Stabat mater".

Schnittke's quotation of Lasso's *Stabat Mater*

Ex. 2

20

- tris-tan - tem et do - - - len - - - tem per -
 - tem, con - tris-tan - tem et do - len - tem per -
 - tris-tan - - tem et do - len - tem per - trans-i -
 8 tem et do - - - len - - - tem pertrans-i -

Lasso's *Stabat Mater*, Verse 1

Naturally, the quotation opening the *Quartet* is far from having a bitonal character, since it relates to music from the 16th century. But in the harmonization of the *discantus* in ms. 9-10 (the original *clausula* appears only in the viola), B major and c minor are connected by the common third, *d sharp*, respectively *e flat*.

Ex. 3

5

p *pizz.* *mp* *mf* *mf < f* *p* *pp sub.*
mp *mf* *mp arco* *mf < f* *p* *pp sub.*
p *pp sub.*
p *pp sub.*

rall. *a tempo*

I

Ludwig v. Beethoven - Quartett N. 16 | D S C H | *p* *< f*

Bitonal harmonization

In ms. 46-48, Schnittke quotes, this time with no reference, another cadence on *g* from Lasso, on the word *dolorosa*.

Ex. 4

Quotation of Lasso's cadence, ms. 46-48

Ex. 5

Primus Chorus - I. Versus Erstdruck 1585

Superius I Sta - bat Ma - ter do - lo - ro -

Superius II Sta - bat Ma - ter do -

Altus I Sta - bat Ma - ter do - - lo -

Tenor I Sta - bat Ma - ter do -

sa, ju - xta cru - cem la - chri - mo -

- lo - ro - sa ju - xta cru - cem la - chri -

ro - sa, do - lo - ro - sa ju - xta cru - cem la - chri -

- lo ro - sa ju - xta cru - cem la - chri -

Lasso's cadence, ms. 5-6

The second quotation Schnittke presents at the beginning of his work belongs to Beethoven's *String Quartet Op. 133*, namely its famous theme. The end of the quotation builds, with the notes *d-s-c-h*, Shostakovich's musical monogram, often used by the composer himself (most obvious in his *Eighth String Quartet in c minor*, composed in 1960, in Dresden). Moreover, the beginning of Shostakovich's *Quartet* can be put in the traditional line of the German-Austrian string quartet, bearing obvious resemblances with Beethoven's *String Quartet Op. 132*. Actually, the thematic material is common to the *String Quartets* from Op. 130 to Op. 133. In the light of these remarks, one is entitled to observe that Lasso's double-cadence belongs to a totally different world than the other two motives.

Ex. 6

Beethoven's theme and the *DSCH* musical monogram

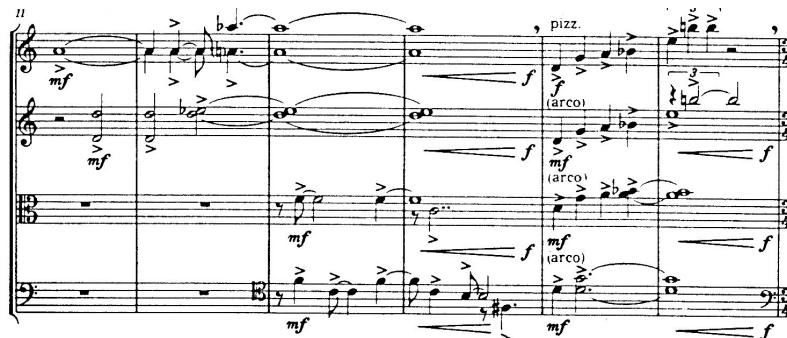
But the *D-S-C-H* motive is hardly the only musical monogram Schnittke uses in his work: the other composers' names appear as well. For instance, in ms. 11-12, the violins play the succession *a-d-d-a-es-as*, corresponding to Orlando di Lasso's name.

Ex. 7

Lasso's musical monogram

In ms. 15-16, with emphasis on each note, one meets *Ludwig van Beethoven's* monogram, described by the notes *d-g-a-b-e-h.*) The writing of this particular fragment is in accordance with the *Great Fugue* quotation from m. 5: the instruments play in *unisono* and the melody gradually turns into a dissonant chord.

Ex. 8



Beethoven's musical monogram

The listener unfamiliar with Schnittke's music will miss yet another monogram: the *B-A-C-H* motive. Schnittke himself admitted that his entire work was in debt to the Baroque master. In the *Quartet* nevertheless, the motive does not appear evidently, but in a latent form – his inversion, *h-c-a-b*, in ms. 6-7, the last four notes of the Beethovenian fugue theme (to assume is that this was also a tribute Beethoven brought to Bach). Since these four notes are kept in the inferior voices, the *BACH* monogram will be set in a chord, above which the violins bring the *DSCH* motive.

The motivic elaboration begins in m. 27. It is almost as if we entered the musical world of the 16th century: a diatonic *Soggetto*, in *g* mixolydian, freely paraphrasing a melodic return to the beginning of *Stabat Mater*, is developed through the technique of a severe canon.

Ex. 9



The Soggetto

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The second movement, marked *Agitato*, has an obsessive theme that looks back to the technique of canon and, thus, to Lasso and Beethoven, both of whom are soon reminded more directly. It can also be seen as an image of the history of music and counterpoint. But this time, it begins with a genuine 19th century quartet theme, in a tonal *g minor*. The melodic line in the first violin is accompanied, in canon, by the viola and rhythmically sustained by an *ostinato* figure. The motive *d-g-a-b* belongs to the *Beethoven* monogram of the first movement. The cello repeats *g* and *d*, the basic notes of Lasso's double cadence. In ms. 7-8, the second violin brings the *Beethoven* monogram, right where the music suddenly changes its style, moving toward a chaotic, apparently atonal, discourse.

The theme continuously changes its harmonic configuration. Moreover, the discourse is now set in a distant place compared to the original thematic material and is structured according to the principle of contrast between sections and textures. The already known motivic kernels are presented in a renewed thematic context, the retrospective element fades out and Schnittke's own personality becomes more prominent. The form, identified as a monothematic rondo, loses its importance, whereas the polyphonic treatment remains in the background.

Ex. 10

The beginning of the second movement

A variation of Lasso's motive, beginning in m. 16, introduces a counterpoint between the scherzo-like theme in the viola and Beethoven's in the first violin. The movement then goes on through parody and drama and ends with a slow march. The conflict is solved in this very moment.

Schnittke's manner of thematic development and, especially, the alternation between the dramatic episodes and the static textures, highlight his highly personal technique and, as a consequence, the material receives a new and independent existence. In the third movement, marked *Pesante*, the transformation is complete and the metamorphosed stage reached by the musical material is most evident. Schnittke presents it as if it were his own, placing it in an intensively achromatized context.

Schnittke brings all the thematic profiles of the work, interweaving them: in m. 86 and m. 95 the *DSCH* motive and the *Lasso* monogram, in m. 93 and m. 86 the *Beethoven* monogram and the theme from the second movement, as well as the dodecaphonic melodic line of the middle part in m. 90. The work ends with a genuine cadence, thus reflecting its beginning.

Ex. 11

The musical score consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 84-90) features a Violin (V) and Viola (V) part with a piano accompaniment. The Violin and Viola parts are marked with *pp* and *pizz.* (pizzicato). The piano accompaniment includes *pp sub.* (pianissimo sul ponticello) and *p* markings. A tempo change from *rall.* to *a tempo* is indicated at measure 16. The second system (measures 90-96) continues the Violin and Viola parts, with the Violin part marked *arco* and *mp* (mezzo-piano). The piano accompaniment includes *f* (forte) and *mp* markings. A tempo change from *accel.* to *a tempo* is indicated at measure 17. The third system (measures 96-100) shows the final cadence, with the Violin and Viola parts marked *p* and *pp*, and the piano accompaniment marked *pp* and *morendo* (diminuendo).

The juxtaposition of the motives and the final cadence

The entire process of this work can be considered Schnittke's personal response to the problem of creativity within a given tradition. Continuously seeking for new perspectives, his vivid expressivity is in need for a traditional musical environment of devices and form, as it signals its presence through contortion, parody and extreme level: strange thematic transformation, venturing toward the farthest limits of register and dynamics. The traditional expressive role of the strings is also highly implicated.

Schnittke's musical style derives from a quite singular ability to make the common look extraordinary, to combine consonance and dissonance in the most natural way possible. Schnittke made considerable efforts to reach this point. The contrasts resulted from juxtaposing the old with the new were for long experimented before finding the right context to allow him to freely play with major and minor chords without the fear of consequences or "classical" expectations. Not only that his musical originality and expression form the core of Schnittke's inheritance, but is also his highest personal contribution to the second half of the 20th century.

Translated by Oana Andreica

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