

Gavin Dixon, editor

## Schnittke Studies

*Schnittke Studies*. Edited by Gavin Dixon. (Routledge: London and New York, 2017. xxvii+273 pp. £95. ISBN: 9781472471055.)

In many ways this is the book on Schnittke we have all been waiting for. It brings together an international group of scholars working on Schnittke's legacy from many different perspectives, but all of them acknowledging a tremendous debt to the work of Alexander Ivashkin, to whose memory the collection is dedicated. As Gavin Dixon points out in his introduction, without Ivashkin having taken on the role of archivist more or less by accident, photocopying the composer's scores so that they remained accessible even when the originals were not, our knowledge of Schnittke's output both inside and outside Russia would be vastly different, reduced and compromised. Had this not been the case, all the scholars who have contributed to this collection of essays would necessarily have taken tremendously different approaches to Schnittke's work, and for that reason Ivashkin casts a long and beneficent shadow over the whole enterprise.

The book comprises nine chapters, and is organised in three sections: Interpretative studies, Theoretical studies, and Russian perspectives. The first contains an absorbing study by Ivana Medić of the representation of the Cross in Schnittke's Symphony no. 2, "St Florian," a study hugely enhanced by the newly accessible sketches at the Juilliard School. Medić's "Revised Catalogue of Alfred Schnittke's Sketches in the Juilliard Manuscript Collection" is also usefully included in the book as an appendix. The way in which the underlying symbolism of the Cross is expressed in compositional technique will hardly be a surprise for anyone who has looked closely at Schnittke's relationship with religious music and symbolism, but this kind of detailed study is not only needed, but also quite revelatory. The following essay by Emilia Ismael-Simental expands this exploration of symbolism to examine the composer's use of Znamenny chant (a liturgical chant system used in the Russian Orthodox Church) throughout his oeuvre, beginning with some early pieces and discussing the Three Sacred Hymns and Symphony no. 4 (1984), the Hymns I, II and IV (1974-79), and the String Quartet no. 2 (1981). Ismael-Simental offers a detailed analysis of the way in which the chant is plundered as musical material but retains its integrity, after the manner of Yuri Butsko, with whom Schnittke discussed these matters, and whose "extended" Znamenny mode is helpfully reproduced. This analysis does not centre on symbolism per se, but moves the discussion into a much broader context: the author concludes that these works "comprise a particular segment of Schnittke's oeuvre that reveals not only his deep spiritual and cultural engagement but also elaborates on the synchronic relationship of its materials, resulting in a musical discourse that understands space and time

as cultural and relational principles of organisation and not as systematic and homogeneous structures of reality.” (p. 58) There are, incidentally, two mis-translations of Slavonic hymn titles: Budi imia Gospodi (which should in fact be Budi imia Gospodne) is “Blessed be the name of the Lord”, not “In the Name of God”, and Svyaty Bozhe is “Holy God”, not “Holy Divine”. There is also a misapprehension concerning the word *stichera*, which is not singular but the plural of *sticheron* (brief verses chanted, usually after a psalm verse, during various services in the Orthodox Church).

By contrast, Amrei Flechsig contributes a chapter on the “negative spirituality” of Schnittke’s opera *Life with an Idiot*, which explores the idea of the “negative passion”, and traces parallels between the central character Vova and the holy fools of ancient Russia (*yurodstvo*). In this context Vova is an anti-*yurodivy*: “[Vova] brings aggressive violence into the world and destroys the cultural artefacts of civilisation; he shows men how to return to caveman instincts and how to live out their lust. In this regard, he can be interpreted not only as a parody of the *yurodivy*, but also as anti-*yurodivy*, with an anti-Christian justification” (p.66). Moreover, the context provided by Flechsig concerning the elimination of undesirable members of the intelligentsia and political dissidents in lunatic asylums is also of singular importance to understanding Schnittke’s concerns here. Schnittke’s explorations of good and evil are well known, from his operas on Faust and Gesualdo, but here there is a specifically Soviet context that this chapter elucidates brilliantly: “Life with an Idiot deals with the unspoken terrors of the Soviet past by using radical negativity, aimed to shock.” (p. 71)

The final chapter in the first section is by Gavin Dixon, which deals with “Polystylism as dialogue”. Having recourse for the ideas of the literary theorist Bakhtin, author of *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Dixon proposes a dialogic view of polystylism, in that “Dostoevsky’s dialogue and Schnittke’s polystylism both imbue the concept of style with semantic potential. The primary mechanism in both cases is the multiplicity of styles within a single work, which for Bakhtin guarantees the presence of dialogue.” (p. 75) Just how this is achieved in Schnittke’s work is the central question here, and Dixon examines this by using the Piano Quartet (1988), itself built from Mahler’s fragmentary work for the same scoring, which Dixon argues invokes “Gustav Mahler as a stylistic presence.” (p. 73) This is far more than theoretical speculation, however, and anyone aware of Schnittke’s own comments on his divided identity (Russian-German, Christian-Jewish) will easily grasp its relevance. As Dixon concludes, “Mahler’s legacy [...] acts as a point of stability against the paradoxes of the multiple cultural pasts to which Schnittke feels drawn. An interaction takes place in which a contemporary sense of rootlessness and uncertainty is addressed through a historical sense of identity and stability.” (p.99)

Polystylism is also discussed in the first chapter of the second section, by Gordon E. Marsh, but from an analytical-theoretical standpoint, and with specific regard to the *Concerti Grossi*. Marsh’s aim is to “identify an archetypal pattern in [Schnittke’s] polystylism” (p.136), which Marsh achieves by uncovering the use of archetypes as a structuring means. This offers Marsh a “psychological scheme” (p. 110), devised in reaction to Alastair Williams’s dismissal of the *Concerto Grosso* no. 1 as a work that reduces “historical depth structure to surface configurations of the present.” (p. 106) Such a project

is not easy to implement, but Marsh is impressive in his conviction and the minutiae with which he builds his case. Just as impressive is Aaminah Durrani's discussion of the symmetrical constructions in the fourth movement of the String Quartet no. 4 – a highly detailed technical analysis whose virtuosic dissection of the movement is clearly inspired by a deep love of the music.

The third and final section of the book, "Russian perspectives", contains three further chapters: Victoria Adamenko's "'Faith through scepticism': Desacralisation and resacralisation in Schnittke's First Symphony", Evgeniia Chigareva's "On the late style of Alfred Schnittke (the instrumental works)", and the late Alexander Ivashkin's "The Schnittke code". Adamenko's chapter deals with a number of phenomena simultaneously. "Desacralisation" does not only have its obvious meaning, but also refers to musical tradition – the author discusses the way in which Schnittke "desacralises" the classical symphonic tradition, and also the way in which it is "resacralised" as a kind of cosmic drama, which feeds into the composer's continuing preoccupation with the struggle between good and evil. Chigareva deals with musical and conceptual links between the works of Schnittke's stripped-down late style, and makes a good case for their interconnectedness, but it is extremely odd that no reference is made to Maria Kostakeva's seminal book on the composer's late style, *Im Strom der Zeiten un der Welten. Das Spätwerke von Alfred Schnittke* (2005). Ivashkin's final chapter is the kind of thing only he, with his personal knowledge of the composer, could have written: a discussion of Schnittke's use of "codes" (monograms signifying various performers and composers, Cabbalistic calculations, liturgical-numerical symbolism and so on), related very precisely to musical structure and contour. He illustrates this with a specific example in *Klingende Buchstaben* (1988), which is dedicated to Ivashkin himself. Yet given that all this is related to the perennial ideas of the composer's questioning of his own cultural identity and his investigation into good and evil, it is ironic that the title of Ulrich Siegele's article is misspelled and appears to deal with Bach's "teleological" rather than his "theological" concept of form!

In sum, this collection of essays is essential reading for anyone interested in Schnittke's legacy. It shows the diversity of possible approaches in evaluating his work, and the way in which new scholarship both builds on earlier research and expands it into new and fascinating areas.

Ivan Moody  
CESEM - Universidade Nova, Lisbon