

Detlev Glanert



Detlev Glanert Photo © Copyright Iko Freese.

Once again, the longing for wholeness

An introduction to the works of Detlev Glanert

Sometimes it is necessary to question deeply-rooted notions or entrenched positions. Detlev Glanert (b. 1960) is one of those composers who began to free-up their style in the late seventies and after thorough training appeared on the scene in the eighties. The talented young composers of the time considered musical modernism to be a project which had almost been worn out: deadlocked by rules and proscriptions which had not even been properly formulated, and discredited by a misuse of the idea of chance even by significant composers. For most, following the mainstream of such an 'ossified' modernism was not an option. They began to realise that musical modernism was not in a position to tackle problems such as the relation of contemporary music to society, since neither promoters nor the majority of listeners really appreciated new music. Therefore, Glanert's generation began to explore new shores - even if they sometimes turned out to be the old ones. The irreversible course of time, however, had already transformed those shores and the way they were perceived. *Colourful imagery and tight structure*

In his works Glanert has managed to merge compositional approaches and processes which had formerly been considered incompatible. His *Symphony No.1* (1984) combined dramatic expressivity with a tight structure, an approach which a clever observer described as an 'imaginary discourse about the genre'. Similarly, Glanert's following works - marking the intended line of perception with visually evocative titles such as *Norden* (North) or *Aufbruch* (Departure) - attempted to reconcile musical imagery, encouraging the listener's associations, with the principles that had developed from the quest for 'autonomous' music. His music was both iconographic and pure 'form moving in sounds'. When he decided that his suggestive *Three Songs from "Carmen" by Wolf Wondratschek* for baritone and large orchestra (1988-1990) - some passages of which show an almost operatic emotional quality (as seems fitting considering the texts) - was also to be his *Symphony No.2*, he achieved a congruence of sensual concentration and formal abstraction.

Suggestive titles also appeared in Glanert's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No.1* (1994) and *Symphony No.3* (1996); in the latter, Glanert suggested the idea of a virtual five-act drama. *Music for Violin and Orchestra*, completed in the same year as the symphony, was inspired by Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (a myth which has been of crucial importance for music theatre) and uses a broad range of instrumental colours. By including subtly orchestrated dance elements and a growing interest in rhythmic structures, Glanert revealed his affinity to the

music of Maurice Ravel (an affinity he is happy to acknowledge). The fragile score of *Mahler/Skizze* (Mahler/Sketch, 1989) proves that Mahler is another of Glanert's household idols. It pays tribute to that virtuoso composer from around the turn of the twentieth century (thereby inviting a ceremonial aura itself). It is no accident that one of his next orchestral works, dealing with the irrecoverable loss of past greatness and beauty, bears the title *Katafalk* (Catafalque). His most recent orchestral work, *Theatrum bestiarum*, a score which was commissioned by the BBC for the 2005 Proms and composed in the course of his work on his latest opera, *Caligula*, once again suggests an imaginary stage. Glanert himself describes the piece as a 'dark and wild sequence of songs and dances for orchestra, during which the audience witnesses a dissection of human beings revealing their animal nature, like in an anatomical theatre,' and as 'an attempt to examine dangerous dreams and wishes and glimpse into the inner nature of a monster - a monster of a kind that humans can turn into.' The dark satire which sometimes appears in the music points to the dedicatee of *Theatrum*, Dmitri Shostakovich.

While the historic roots of Glanert's compositional style are often implicitly or explicitly present in his music, his adaptations of works by such composers as Johannes Brahms, Franz Schreker, Heinrich Isaac or the film composer Giuseppe Becce show a particular, personal way of approaching the music of others. Glanert's large-scale scores *Vier Präludien und Ernste Gesänge* (Four Preludes and Serious Songs), *Das Weib des Intaphernes* (The Wife of Intaphernes), *Argentum et Aurum*, the reconstructed score of the silent film classic *The Last Laugh*, but also his intimate octet arrangements of Brahms' piano pieces sound surprisingly and brilliantly 'original', while nevertheless being characterised by Glanert's typical, unmistakable instrumental style.

The cycle of his three chamber sonatas, *Vergessenes Bild* (Forgotten Image), *Gestalt* (Figure) and *Geheimer Raum* (Secret Room), is another example showing that Glanert is as familiar with intimate chamber music forms as he is with a modern orchestra. For him, chamber music is a 'laboratory' where he can unfold his broad range of instrumental colours and characters within a deliberately limited scope; on a small scale, great things happen.

New magic on old contexts

For his stage works, Glanert has preferred subjects in which archetypal situations are viewed from a historic or geographical distance. Once this distancing is recognised, the drama reaches out and touches the hearts of the audience with something of wider significance. In one instance, however, he faced the audience with a rather common situation from everyday life: the morning after a night spent drinking - a hangover which proved rather sobering for the short opera *Ich bin Rita* (I am Rita, Cologne 2003). It was Glanert's contribution to a Cologne pasticcio of five intermezzi. A totally unknown woman intrudes upon the life of a man suffering from a serious hangover, with the help of instrumental suggestions of a waltz. With this collaborative project, the Cologne opera house aimed to breathe new life into a genre which had long been out of fashion. At the same time, the organisers intended it to encourage music theatre audiences to attend more and larger-scale works by contemporary composers.

Glanert began to approach larger forms in the eighties, when he wrote the fairy-tale piece *Leyla and Medjnun* (Layla and Majnun), a work coloured with Turkish elements, and the chamber opera *Drei Wasserspiele* (Three Waterplays: Leviathan - The Angel that Troubled the Waters - The Angel on the Ship) based on plays by Thornton Wilder (Bremen 1995). The latter experimentally places an

artificial world full of magical atmosphere against the background of a civilisation which becomes fragile in extreme situations. Another piece which embraced magic was *Der Spiegel des großen Kaisers* (The Mirror of the Great Emperor, Mannheim 1995) about a mirror which sheds light into a realm of magic. Arnold Zweig's novel from 1926 explores the contradictory personality of the Hohenstaufen ruler, Frederick II. Set against the backdrop of a complex diversity of political and social interests at the time of the late Middle Ages, Zweig uses this context to discuss the causes of World War I. This corresponded exactly to Glanert's intentions of musical reflexion, his sense of orchestral colour and his interest in subtle differentiations. In order to illustrate the enigmatic title character, he revived various compositional techniques of the 20th century (from Puccini to Penderecki) in multiple ways, balancing lyricism and 'waves' of euphony against eruptive percussion. One of Glanert's most durable orchestral works, *Parergon*, is also based on the *Mirror* score.

With *Joseph Süß* (Joseph Süß, Bremen 1999), based on Lion Feuchtwanger's novel *Jud Süß* from 1925, Henze's pupil presented a score on quite a different scale to that of *Layla*, the *Waterplays* or *The Mirror*. For the central elements of the novel, Glanert provided in his score a broad historical horizon and numerous background elements. Fragments of various 18th and 19th century melodies and harmonies flare up between ostinato expanses and highly dissonant climaxes. They are reminiscent of the Age of Sensibility and seem to grimace in some places. The entertaining style of the piece is stimulated by semantically defined musical gestures which seem like remnants from antiquity, as well as more extensive pseudo-quotations such as the coloratura figures. The recollection of the 'chase of life' from the late Baroque era roars with ominous hilarity. Süß's daughter Naemi, who jumps to her death, emerges as a transforming, touching figure from a background of stubbornness. One of the most effective moments is when the singer in the role of Magdalena Weissensee barks a fierce "Joseph!" into the ominously growling polyphony of the court scene in which Süß's sentence is pronounced. In such moments, Glanert's music unfolds impressive moods and reaches intense emotional states.

Humour is somewhat neglected in contemporary music. For Detlev Glanert, however, this was no reason to avoid this delicate territory. *Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung* (Jest, Satire, Irony and Deeper Meaning, Halle 2001) is a trip to hell: the devil escapes from his week of cleaning duty, generating a serious drama. Christian Dietrich Grabbe's farce aimed at no less than a fundamental criticism of German idealism (which was not an invention unique to Schiller) and an ossified educational system; it was written in the years of the Vormärz (the eve of the 1848 German revolution). Another aspect of the play is its reflection of Goethe and his devilish *Faust*. The fact that Liddy, the Baroness, is courted four times is contrasted with scenes for four natural science academicians, silly Gottliebchen and his schoolmaster. Glanert's music is always 'on the go' and accurately captures the piece's sense of humour: fourteen roles, covering almost every expressive aspect of the voice - from speaking to an illustrious *bel canto* - gradually develop the farce's deeper meaning by musical means. In a charming way, the music explores facets of the diabolical.

Die drei Rätsel (The Three Riddles, Halle 2003), an 'opera for children and adults', reveals Glanert's stylistic features in a cheerful way. Talking about *The Three Riddles*, the composer once pointed to another of his great idols, Rossini, and explained: "I think music should always be a pleasure to listen to. It doesn't have to be simple-minded for that, however. On the contrary: it should be our aim to

reach a maximum of serenity and alert intelligence."
Frieder Reininghaus, 2006 (translation: Andreas Goebel)