

Detlev Glanert



Detlev Glanert photo © Bettina Stöß

Time Past, Present and Future

An introduction to the music of Detlev Glanert

by Guy Rickards "I am not a composer who destroys the past to create his own world," Glanert declared in an interview at the start of his ten-year residency as House Composer for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam. "I want always to know where I am coming from, where my roots are ... that makes me free." This statement encapsulates the key facet of Glanert's music-making, that his music sits Janus-faced taking in elements from past traditions and recasting them in new forms and contexts, not just for the present but for future audiences. This attitude to musical culture and history seems almost an application in sound of the merging of the past, the present and the future that have informed the philosophical and poetical works of a number of writers, T S Eliot not least. Glanert's acute sense of time is evident in all his works, from the tiniest, lightest of miniatures, such as his Four Quartets for double-basses (or cellos; 1984, rev 1986—the title has no links to Eliot's poem) or the Kleine Kuttel-Daddel-Du Musik (1997) for barrel organ, to his full-scale operas Caligula (2004-6) and Solaris (2010-2). It informs the structures and textures of each work as much as the harmonic language and established forms like sonata or rondo do. The impact of his sense of time can be heard graphically by comparing his four most recently completed operas. Caligula, based on Albert Camus' tract on tyranny, is a modern exposition of the ancient historical subject of one of Rome's maddest emperors and written in a full-blooded postmodernist idiom. Despite the murders, blood and rape, there are comic, surreal and satiric touches a-plenty. The chamber opera-ballet Nijinskys Tagebuch ('Nijinsky's Diary', 2007-8), on the other hand, is composed with leaner instrumental textures and in a more advanced musical style which, paradoxically, evokes the avant garde of the late twentieth century. The one-act Das Holzschiff ('The Wooden Ship', 2008-10; based on the first part of Hanns Henny Jahn's Shoreless River trilogy) is richly illustrative in its depictions of the sea and the principals' emotional states, with an immediacy worthy of Korngold (although more controlled harmonically). In Solaris (based on Stanislaw Lem's renowned novella), fuller textures return, including some remarkably acute writing for the chorus, for this full-scale opera set on board a space station orbiting around a distant planet in the future where manifestations of the past dominate the present. Glanert's reputation at home was made primarily by his operas. These currently number fourteen, starting with the brief chamber opera Leviathan, setting one of Thornton Wilder's 'Three-Minute Plays', in 1986. Eight years later he added two further instalments, Der Engel, der das Wasser bewegte ('The Angel that Troubled the Waters') and Der Engel auf dem Schiff ('The Angel on the

Ship'), forming an hour-long Thornton Wilder triple-bill Drei Wasserspiele ('Three Water Plays'). By this time he had also produced the tragic fairy-tale Leyla und Medjnun (1987-8), set in the medieval Middle East. Der Spiegel des großen Kaisers ('The Mirror of the Great Emperor', 1989-93) is set primarily in Palermo in 1235, the unnamed Emperor presumably Frederick II, who is granted visions of the future including the destruction of his imperial line and the Battle of Verdun in 1916. While Frederick was grandson of King Roger, Glanert's music for all its initial lyricism is certainly not descended from Szymanowski. In 1998, his one-acter Joseph Süß, on the life of an eighteenth-century Jew in the ducal court at Württemberg, achieved much publicity in Germany but it was his next, the satirical Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung ('Jest, Satire, Irony and Deeper Meaning'; 1999-2000)—in which the Devil is stranded on a banal, apocalyptic Earth—which proved commercially and critically successful. After this came Die drei Rätsel ('The Three Riddles'; 2002-3)—for children and adults—and his tiniest, the comic operatic sketch or intermezzo Ich bin Rita ('I am Rita', 2003) set in the present day and requiring just 7 performers: a 'soubrette' soprano and tenor, accompanied by piano quintet. Glanert's reputation abroad was made, by contrast, primarily through his chamber and orchestra works, although this division is blurring, with operatic premieres outside Germany and chamber and orchestral performances within. "I see music as a muscle," Glanert remarked in the Amsterdam interview, "made from emotion, construction and material... sometimes one is dominating the others, sometimes not, and then it starts to move. For me music is completely organic." Movement, harmonic movement, is another cornerstone of Glanert's music, which always has a clear sense of pulse, vital for a composer of symphonies, concertos, sonatas and operas. The organic growth of motifs and themes is the mainstay of these works, not least those for orchestra which part of his output is, after the operas, his best-known. Glanert came early to the symphony (unsurprisingly given his relationship to his teacher Hans Werner Henze and through him back to Karl Amadeus Hartmann and Hindemith) in 1984-5 with two works: his First for large orchestra, a wholly satisfying single-movement design that builds to a vibrant and convincing climax and a 25-minute Chamber Symphony for seven players. The Second, by contrast, is a set of Three Songs from 'Carmen' by Wolf Wondratschek (1988-90). If, with its sometimes operatic writing for the baritone soloist, this work only gradually convinced its composer of its symphonic credentials, in performance it leaves no such doubts with the listener. Glanert's Third and currently last (1995-6) was commissioned for the BBC Proms (as was *Theatrum bestiarum* a decade later) and its five vividly scored movements were inspired by Roman Polanski's bloody and violent film of Shakespeare's Macbeth. Framing this work were his first two concertos, No 1 for piano (1994—so far there is no Second) and Music for Violin and Orchestra (1995-6). Aside from three dances for tuba and orchestra extracted from the opera Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung (2002), his only other original concertante work is the Double Concerto for 2 pianos and orchestra (2007), written for Simon Crawford-Phillips and Philip Moore, its nine sections (grouped in threes) partly inspired by the Pathfinder images of Mars and the realization that the regions on the planet are all named from Roman and Greek myth; the first stage, perhaps, on the flight path to Solaris. Since the Third Symphony, Glanert has chosen to develop his orchestral muscle in freer forms, such as the gripping 'Metamorphosis for large orchestra' Katafalk ('Catafalque', 1997) and Burleske (2001), or satellite works to his later operas: the 'songs and dances' in memoriam Shostakovich *Theatrum bestiarum* (2005, extracted from

Caligula) and Shoreless River (2008, related Das Holzschiff). His most recent works include the 'Adagio for large orchestra', Insomnium (2009-10), Brahms-Fantasie (2011-2, subtitled 'Heliogravure' after the early photographic technique and based on brief quotations from Glanert's fellow Hamburg-born composer), Nocturne (2012), Frenesia, for the Royal Amsterdam Concertgebouw's celebrations of Richard Strauss' Strauss' sesquicentennial (2013), and Weites Land (2013), for the Oldenburg State Orchestra.

Counterpointing the symphonies in his chamber output are his three chamber sonatas, Vergessenes Bild ('Forgotten Picture', 1994), Gestalt ('Figure', 1995) and Geheimer Raum ('Secret Room', 2002), in which the acuity of Glanert's experimental instrumental writing is revealed under the microscope. His chamber music output teems with such 'workshop'-type pieces, including string quartets, wind quintets and octets, although his most chamber work, the large-scale piano quartet Elysion (2013), has a more somber purpose as a memorial to Hans Werner Henze. The same spirit of trying things out invests his purely instrumental pieces chief amongst which are the Four Fantasias for piano (1987) and the dreamily imaginative guitar suite in seven movements, Paralipomena (1994, after Novalis). His vocal works include the choral-and-orchestral Mörike Cantata (2003-4) and Orlando furioso: 15 Lieder for counter-tenor and guitar, running to over 40 minutes (2005). Another, increasingly prominent strand in Glanert's output might be termed the circularity of experience, in the sense of one who seeks out new landscapes and vistas only to return to Base Camp with an entirely changed perspective. This holds good not just for his original works with their close awareness of past traditions—the much-played Mahler/Skizze (1989), for example, and the Brahms-Fantasie—but for his orchestrations and reworkings of music from the past as well. These are remarkably varied in manner from straight arrangements to considered recompositions and range from Glinka's tiny Variations on a theme of Mozart for flute and orchestra (2002) to two distinct versions of the 'sacred' concerto Argentum et Aurum after Heinrich Isaac (2004-5). Most successful of all is the set Vier Präludien und Ernste Gesänge ('Four Preludes and Serious Songs', 2004-5), part-orchestration, part-variation on Brahms's final song set (somewhat in the manner of the Deutsche Requiem) in which the preludes and interludes grafted onto and in between the songs become a composed comment to Brahms' music in a style which is a sublime fusion of both composers. In 2009, Glanert orchestrated Schubert's glorious solo song-cum-cantata Einsamkeit (2009) pointing up its foreshadowing of Mahler, one of his compositional heroes, before moving on to Mahler's leftover Wunderhorn-Lieder (2013) and the 1859 Te Deum (for soli, chorus and—thanks to Glanert—orchestra, 2013) of the completely forgotten Ciro Pinsuti (a student of one of Glanert's favourite composers, Rossini). In 2002, Glanert also reconstructed and re-orchestrated Giuseppe Becce's incomplete score for the 1924 silent film Der letzte Mann ('The Last Laugh'). Glanert may not be, perhaps, the most experimental of composers but he is, manifestly, a musical explorer: expressively, structurally and philosophically with the vital dimension of time. For him, each end is a new beginning, a notion Eliot would have heartily endorsed. © Guy Rickards, 2013