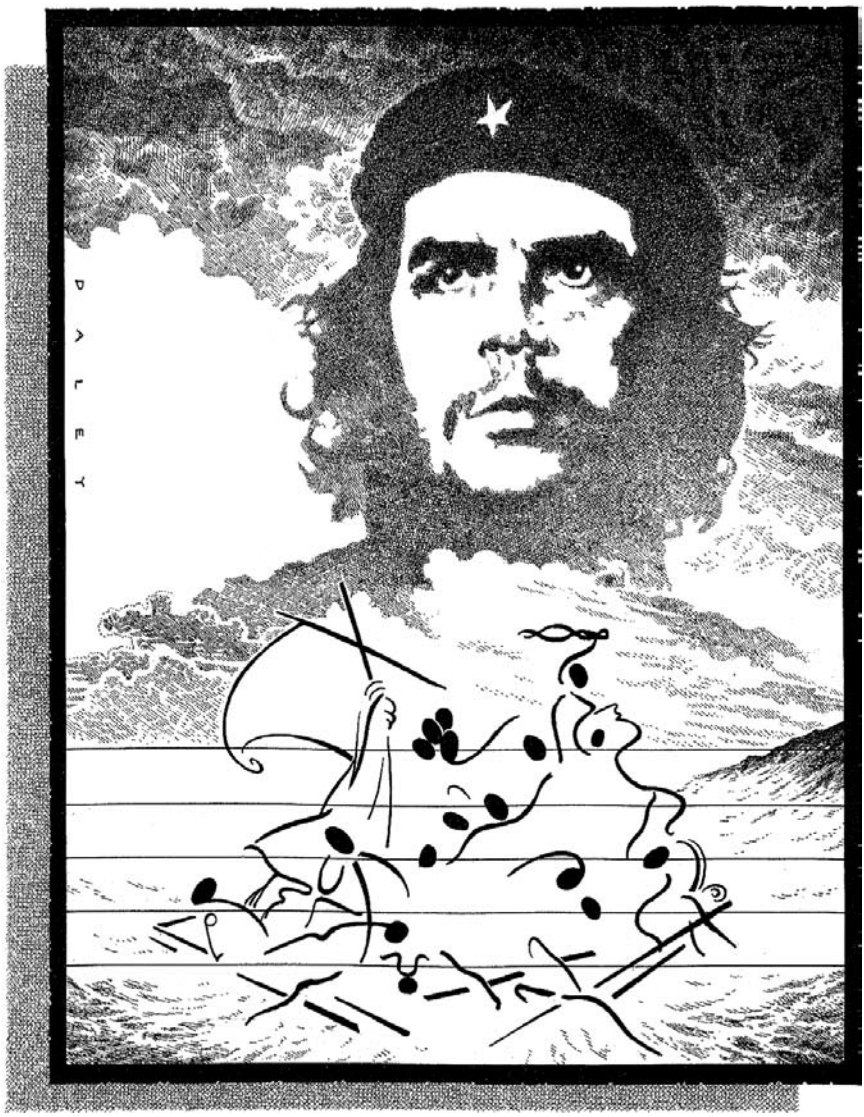
8 *Reverberations of 1968*

Was it really all so vital, so hopeful, so different from any other year? The English middle-class students copying their Paris comrades in college and art school protests against 'repressive tolerance' through the summer and autumn of 1968 would have liked to think so. But there was an air of instant mythologizing that seemed unconvincing even at the time. Whatever the bright novelties of Biba or the Beatles, the year's more serious events in the world at large could only induce a cumulative sense of déjà vu. As Martin Luther King was gunned down like President Kennedy before him, Nixon rose again from the political dead; it was Bloody Sunday once more in Grosvenor Square and Hungary 1956 in Prague. Meanwhile the horrors of post-colonial Africa and Far East dragged on; the shadow of the Bomb continued to loom and the avatars of the growing ecology movement were already warning of a Second Deluge. That anyone might still be around to celebrate the year a quarter of a century later would have seemed one of the unlikelier prophecies of 1968.

And to celebrate it how? Had radical protest carried the day, the obvious memento would be Hans Werner Henze's 'popular and military oratorio', *The Raft of the Medusa*. The scandal of the 1816 shipwreck from which the nobs had escaped in long-boats, abandoning 300 ordinary men, women and children to a raft, had not only inspired Géricault's famous painting but helped to ferment the revolution of 1848. By way of signalling his own new-found radicalism, Henze dedicated the score to the memory of Che Guevara and insinuated into his final chorus the 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi-Minh' march rhythm of the anti-Vietnam war students. In the equivocal event, those same students proceeded to scupper the world premiere in Hamburg on 9 December 1968, raising the Red Flag, under which half the chorus refused to sing, and provoking a brutal incursion of police before a note had been heard. Henze was soon to admit his hope that a performance would lead straight to political discussion and action 'was a utopian and much too optimistic idea'.[1]

So, no doubt, was his dubbing as 'popular' a score largely composed in a fiercely post-Schoenbergian Expressionism – though the notion, dating back at least to the Russian revolutionary avant-garde, that advanced art and politics ought to go hand in hand still sustained some credence in 1968 (in the work, for instance, of Luigi Nono) as it hardly does today. Yet if *The Raft* comes up in its rare hearings as one of Henze's strongest scores, this is surely due less to its Marxist subtext than to an exceptional focus in his usually indulgent idiom and to the effectiveness of his dramatic scheme of a duel between Hope and Death, with chorus members actually passing across the stage as the survivors on the raft dwindle away. But it was apropos his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oratorio that Henze noted surely the dominant aesthetic development of the later 1960s when he remarked: 'I think the most important composer of this century is not Webern, but Mahler!'[2]

For almost a decade, the exclusive rigour of the post-Webernian avant-garde of the 1950s had been yielding to a renewed stylistic inclusiveness. How far the sudden, colossal cult of Mahler was cause, how far symptom, might be argued, but his vast collage-symphonies of 'found' materials – many of them indeed popular and military – evidently provided an irresistible stimulus. Compounded by the still wilder juxtapositions of the newly-discovered Charles Ives, the electronic montages of Karlheinz Stockhausen and the campaign of John Cage to break down the barriers between music and random environmental noise, the bias towards 'free-form' and the loosely pluralistic was to continue into the 1970s before the rise of Minimalism initiated a swing back to simpler, narrower styles. One cannot, however, resist the rider that where the rigours of the 1950s at least represented an aspiration towards the musically new, such latter-day anti-developments as Sacred Minimalism breathe an escapist nostalgia for the old.

Back in 1968, the problem for the composer who cleaved to a consistent, tightly defined style was rather how to gain a sympathetic appraisal at all. Luigi Dallapiccola's long-cogitated opera *Ulisse* (1960-68) was received with the respect due to a crowning opus at its Berlin world premiere on 29 September – the composer had, after all, written some nobly libertarian scores in the dark 1930s and 1940s – but without much enthusiasm. One can understand why. The opera is less a theatrical melodrama than a humanistic meditation and the austere constraints of Dallapiccola's late style simply have to be accepted if one is to perceive the often exquisite delicacy and bloom of its internal detail. Yet only a fortnight later, New York enjoyed the tumultuous first performance (if, as yet, minus its finale) of a score more spectacularly given over to the Mahlerian ideal of 'embracing everything' than almost any since Mahler himself. Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* (1968-69) not only subsumed the serial technique that had sustained Dallapiccola into a musical 'deep structure' by analogy with the then-influential anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, plus a Henze-like engagement in its second-movement lament for Martin Luther King; but it also took the entire scherzo of Mahler's Second Symphony (1895) as a container for a riot of other musical quotations topped up with the Swingle Singers babbling Samuel Beckett. Handled with less than Berio's intellectual energy and aural finesse, the concept might rapidly have confounded itself in modishness. Yet it survives as perhaps the most comprehensive expression of the collective agonies and ecstasies of its time.

Strictly limiting the survey to 1968, it might be questioned whether any American composer quite matched these large, not to say contradictory achievements of Dallapiccola, Henze and Berio – Elliott Carter was not to

complete his surging Concerto for Orchestra (1969) until the following year. Back home, the motley temper of the time expressed itself less through solidarity with the students than a fascination with mixed media. Michael Tippett's opera-in-progress *The Knot Garden* (1966-69) was rumoured to have more to do with cinema and group therapy than traditional forms. Benjamin Britten's *The Prodigal Son* added to the vogue for music-theatre he had helped to inspire with *Curlew River* four years earlier. Harrison Birtwistle deafened Aldeburgh with his skirling *Punch and Judy* (1966-67); Peter Maxwell Davies was well advanced on his neo-Gothick period of screaming nuns; and Alexander Goehr pulled off an elegant fusion of Monteverdi, Noh theatre and cabaret in his *Naboth's Vineyard*. But there were also some surpassingly eclectic arrivals: 23-year-old John Tavener launching both himself and the London Sinfonietta with his Stravinskian-cum-pop cantata *The Whale* (the Beatles duly hailed him as 'underground classical') and 15-year-old Oliver Knussen stepping forth with a frighteningly competent and synoptic First Symphony.

On 12 August, democracy even reached the Proms, when William Glock invited the audience to vote on which of three new British offerings it would like to hear again. But the real issue of the period was what kind of democracy? 1968 has often been construed as the year when the failure of the starry-eyed Left opened the way to the long fight-back by the beady-eyed Right. Shortly after the premiere of *Ulisse*, Dallapiccola found himself having to plead against his more committed critics for the right of the individual artist to pursue difficult aesthetic, philosophical or spiritual ideas even in a collectivist age.[3] Today, when the idea of democracy has been virtually degraded to consumerism and the likes of David Mellor have been heard enthusiastically arguing against the recording of any further Henze if it helps to bring down the price of CDs,[4] Dallapiccola's eloquent words read more hauntingly than ever.

NOTES

Source: 'When Hope Fought Death', *The Independent*, 1 May 1993. The article heralded a short BBC Radio 3 season marking the 25th anniversary of the events of 1968.

1 Hans Werner Henze, 'Does Music Have to be Political?', *Music and Politics: Collected Writings 1953-81*, London, Faber, 1982, p. 168.
2 Ibid., p. 170.
3 Luigi Dallapiccola, *On Opera: Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, ed. and tr. Rudy Shackelford, London, Toccata Press, 1987, pp. 263-66.
4 David Mellor was formerly a Conservative MP for Putney and a cabinet minister; later he reviewed CDs on Classic FM.