

IN MEMORIAM

1) Blacher

DEAR BORIS BLACHER,

A few months ago you said to me: 'the odd thing about time is, there's never really enough of it'. We were talking about new compositions we had to write. You were surprised at the calm with which I said 'There's plenty of time before the first performance', and on hearing your retort I felt ashamed, for in all the years I had been privileged to be your pupil, I had been taught how to manage time. I should have known better.

Appreciation of time had become second nature to you more than to most. Every moment of your life was intensely lived, filled, allocated; yet there was nothing compulsive about your discipline. The structure of your thinking was orderly, its verbal expression contained in terse language. Every superfluous word was repugnant to you. You had no sympathy for people who talked at length, thus demonstrating their vanity: in your eyes they were 'artists', as you often ironically called them. Modesty, self-effacement, concentration on the matter in hand, on the ever-renewed realization of the tasks you set yourself—that was your highest law. The greatness of your personality stemmed from this almost ascetic attitude to life. You were free, you ranged widely; your untiring spirit, open to all things new throughout your life, was always a move ahead, seeing more than we could. Your inexorable and often disconcerting sense of logic enabled you to recognize conceptual correlations with breath-taking speed. The rhythm of your life, too, had its logical course—a life frequently beset by grave illness, but even illness was kept under control: it often threw you over, but never threw you back. You had made allowance in your life for these disruptions and knew how to make them fruitful—'Illness and fever are important for the development of the imagination', you once remarked. Thus your life's work, in its many-faceted realization of expressive possibilities, as we have it now before us, is a mirror of your life's plan, founded on a logic worked out to its finest ramifications. Persistently enquiring into, and continually re-formulating, the concept of time, you arrived at the discovery of 'variable metres' which called in question traditional ideas about the metrical unit and opened the way to novel

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metrical progressions. Every piece of yours exists right from the outset in a hovering state of metamorphosis, everything develops in the flux of these undefinable laws. The inherent weightlessness of your artistic utterance opens up to it a wide range of unforeseeable, even shocking transformations. Here again, there is nothing superfluous: every note, every melodic shape, every accent, as well as every instrumental colour combination, has its function. In your works, whose very first bars unmistakably pronounce the style of their creator, you place objects—distinctly, economically drawn—into a wide landscape. They are encompassed by the luminosity of your spirit; an atmosphere is created that is full of the future, boundless, open in all directions, visionary.

This was the atmosphere, the personal aura, that radiated from you wherever you happened to be. No-one who had ever held discourse with you could remain impervious to this aura. A course of lessons with you became from the first day on a unique encounter with a great human being. At our first meeting—one year before my final exams—the first thing you said after looking at my outpourings, chiefly songs, of the last five years was that, to begin with, I had to learn how to use rests. You were horrified that I had written so many songs; luckily there were also some piano pieces, a fact which made you better disposed towards me. ‘You must develop your own imagination, not just get stimulated by a given text. That way, you are making things much too easy for yourself.’ To be sure, ‘taking things easy’ where one’s own mind and work are concerned, must have been the thing you hated most. You were soon to teach me that composing is a daily-renewed struggle, a toilsome daily quest of discovery and invention. Never to stand still, never to repeat oneself; it is enough to say things once; to keep the mind active, to sharpen it incessantly; to look for new ways. ‘Composing *with* inspiration, that’s easy—but *without*—that’s where composing starts’. Those were your words on an occasion when I came to my lesson empty-handed, with the feeble excuse that ‘nothing had occurred to me’.

Our work started with rhythmic exercises. With touching pedagogic solicitude and cautious strictness you tried to awaken in me the sense for time, metre, and rhythmic order. I re-wrote endlessly the development section of a sonata for flute and viola—again and again you said: ‘The stuff you’re turning out is music of the Twenties, that’s of no interest to anyone’. I owned myself beaten. For months I was unable to compose. In the meantime I wrote poetry—‘good thing there is a safety-valve’, was your comment—and not until the beginning of October, 1956 did I settle down to write, in two days, the second movement of the sonata I had begun; for I wanted at all costs to avoid starting the new term without having anything to show you. Pleased with myself I went to you, and after you had looked at the movement, you said: ‘I wanted to find out whether composing is a necessity to you—this is much better now, we can continue’. During those desperate months, while I was unconsciously still wrestling with you, old habits were dropping away fast. Without so many words, you made me think afresh, you forced me to re-define my position. Your aim was that I should become fully aware and increasingly critical of all that so far had merely been a nebulous sensation in my mind. Your task now was to help me find that self-awareness which scrutinizes one’s own musical intentions and ideas; which daily questions and re-examines the productions of the day before; which seeks for a still more concise, still more cogent, in fact for the only possible realization of one’s thoughts.

At first, everything grew too long: too many ideas rushed in upon me;

order was threatened. I was saved by a commission to write the music for an educational film. Having suggested me you strongly urged me to accept; for now I would have to don the 'corset' of screen-timing and compose exactly to the second. In the event, you were fairly satisfied with what I did. And then, early in 1954, came the really decisive hour. I was composing the first movement of a violin sonata, and as I was writing four bars of the second subject—these bars came without difficulty, almost of their own, like second nature—I had the uncanny, floating sensation that I alone, no-one else, was in these bars. It was the first time I had consciously experienced this. When I showed you this section of the piece you said 'These four bars are your starting-point, that's going to be your style one day'. I was speechless and confused—how could you recognize what to another man is personal, what is going to be his own idiom? To this day, this inspired pedagogic empathy, this lightning insight into the nature of another, remains a miracle to me. From that day on, I knew what had to be done. You had given me the cue.

In a few words that outweighed the long speeches of others you were able to destroy or to praise. You strove to eliminate any exaggeration, any excessive gesture. Your path led to simplicity and strictness, to the essential. 'If one cannot develop a style of one's own, the whole business of composing makes no sense'.

But it was you, my dear Blacher, who discovered and showed us and developed that which is specific to each of us. You never pressed your ideas upon us, but fetched out our own, giving them the shape in which they might one day be of importance. That could be the reason why all of us who went through your school have developed along such different lines.

From early on, you trained us to think freely and independently, and if later we went through a crisis over problems of form or notation, a brisk piece of advice from you was able to resolve all difficulties. 'You may notate any way you like, but there must be a necessity for not doing so in the conventional way'. The gallop of fashion was as hateful to you as the jög-trot of routine. 'Music festivals must not interest you—your concern is with what happens away from them'. One should go one's own way; have an open mind, certainly, but do one's work in seclusion. If one has something to say, one will get there.

So all of us in the moment of your death felt this dreadful sense of isolation; the irrevocable knowledge that henceforth we were answerable to ourselves alone and had to bear the responsibility for all we did and wrote quite by ourselves, without your support—abandoned to our fate.

Some time during the last year, in the course of one of the long, rich, varied conversations we so often had and which, like your lessons, will for ever be treasured by me, you said 'there is not much greatness in the world'. But your work, which you have bequeathed to us and to future generations, is part of that greatness.

Our thoughts shall not cease to seek you, and you shall live on in our memory and that of the world.

Your grateful pupil,

ARIBERT REIMANN.