

LEO BROUWER

Creative musicians do not, on the whole, like critics. And with good reason, because generally the critic has spent less time on the music than the composer has in composing it and the player has in rehearsing and practising it. When critics spend at least an equal amount of time on a work before writing about it, then their status might improve. Comment, of course, will continue to be made, much of it the uninformed or at least ill-informed product of an imperfectly digested consumption.

It can be a little unnerving to meet someone whose work you have known and written about for a long time. Some composers — Benjamin Britten was one — have an almost pathological hatred of critics and regard their work as unnecessary. At the highest creative levels, perhaps they are.

But then, I am not happy with the critic label, preferring to write about music that I either admire or enjoy. Leo Brouwer's music comes into both categories, and I was therefore delighted to be summoned to the BBC studios in Maida Vale, London, to meet him.

*The composer Gareth Walters was doing fine work for the guitar at that time, hosting a half-hour weekly broadcast on Radio 3, attending guitar festivals around the world, engaging the best guitarists to play for the BBC, and generally doing a wonderful job in bringing the classical guitar to the radio audience while encouraging it in many other ways. Bringing Leo Brouwer to England was one of his most obvious successes. Out of it came numerous conducting engagements for Leo, the *Concerto Elegiaco* (Brouwer's third guitar concerto) which Julian Bream played and recorded, and a radio recording of the *Toronto Concerto* (the fourth guitar concerto) with John Williams as the soloist. All this made as British airwaves. Gareth Walters decided to direct his musical and organizational skills elsewhere, and a general apathy crept into the BBC, so far as the guitar was concerned, from which it has never recovered. The guitar has been left to the discretion of individual producers, who appear to prefer a second-rate piece for the piano to a first-rate piece for the guitar.*

At that first interview Leo explained his 'conversion' from avant-garde to nouveau romantique. Time to take another look at Vaughan Williams? That seemed to be his message. We did not know then how his new style would develop, but after most of the music that was being fabricated in considerable quantities by the serialists and post-serialists, we were willing to listen to almost any alternative, even minimalism.

Leo Brouwer's excursions into the strange and barren landscape of minimalism have managed to avoid tedium, which is not surprising when you consider the resourcefulness of the man himself. The Cuban landscapes he depicts are anything but barren, and are perceived in the glow of Brouwer's own creative vision. It demonstrates that it is not the form that matters so much as the skill of the composer who works in it.

*My second interview with Leo Brouwer was in Rome, where he was conducting a performance of his *Concerto Elegiaco*, with Leonardo De Angelis the soloist. Before the performance Leo held a press conference, attended by several Italian journalists as well as myself. Leo chose to talk about the binary nature of the universe: night and day, hot and cold, north and south. He mentioned the Italian writer Italo Calvino, who was also born in Cuba, and whose novels included the remarkably binary manifestation of *The Cloven Viscount*, the unfortunate man who was split into two halves during a battle. One half was good, the other bad. Brouwer had just composed the *Helsinki Concerto*, which contains these ideas.*

*Then Leo chose to talk about the significance of numbers. Also in the evening concert was his *From Yesterday to Penny Lane*, a reworking for guitar and orchestra of seven celebrated Lennon and McCartney numbers done with other composers in mind. Bach was one of them, described by Leo as 'A sonata in five movements, on a ten-note theme.' It was, naturally, assigned the number 5 in the series. For similar reasons, the Falla-flavored piece was given the number 7, because of his *Seven Spanish Popular Songs*.*

Then Leo pointed out that his own personal number was 3, because he had been born on the 1st day of the 3rd month of the year 39 — 1939. An Italian journalist said excitedly that his own number was 6, because he had been born in the 6th month of 1966. Everyone began to examine their own birth dates to see if they contained numerical significance.

It was the end of any serious discussion, and the press conference degenerated into a cheerful free-for-all as every journalist present competed for attention. Leo surveyed the scene benevolently, and announced: 'We are all crazy — fortunately.' It brought a semblance of order, but it was too late: Leo had to leave to prepare for the concert, and it was clear that I had nothing on tape that could legitimately be called an interview.

Instead, I wrote an article on binary rhythms, bringing in Leo Brouwer, Italo Calvino, the Rule of Opposites,

and the Manichean principles that see a primordial conflict between each pair of extremes. It filled the space and met the deadline, and in some ways I was quite pleased with it; but it is not an interview, it does not reveal much about Leo Brouwer the musician or the man, and for that reason I prefer to rely on that first interview, in June 1985, which is printed here with some editing.

What are we to make of Leo Brouwer's astonishing shift in direction? Announcing that the avant-garde is dead, he turns back to melody and tonality of the kind that we tend to associate with the nationalistic and romantic composers such as Dvořák, Martinů, Janáček and even Tchaikovsky and the other Russians.

It is rather as if Schoenberg, after half a lifetime of writing serial music, had suddenly come up with *Verklärte Nacht*, the post-romantic work he wrote at the outset of his career. But there are many other parallels. Perhaps the most obvious is Stravinsky who, despite the uncompromising starkness of *The Rite of Spring*, went on to compose a large amount of music that by no stretch of the imagination can be said to carry on where *Rite* left off. This music is generally referred to as 'neo-classicism', and its composer as the first neo-classicist.

Walton went through a neo-classicist phase before developing the warmer style that we associate with his later music. Bartók, too, was a neo-classicist before Hungarian folk music claimed his attention. Prokofiev's early, lively and rhythmically very strong music can be described as neo-classical — but his change to a warmer and more lyrical style was, as we know, 'encouraged' by a government clearly unaware or uncaring that it constitutes an assault on an artist's integrity to attempt to impose a style from outside. Hindemith was one neo-classicist whose music does not appear to have undergone any fundamental change (musicologists may argue), but it seems to be the rule rather than the exception for a composer to make one or more somewhat drastic changes during his or her career.

If neo-classicism is now dead, so, according to Brouwer, is the avant-garde. He calls his latest music 'hyper-romantic' or 'neo-romantic', and the tag will do as well as any other. After 30 years of atonality and aleatory, he feels that it is time to relax a little as we approach the end of the 20th century (possibly the most disturbed century in human history) and to enjoy music to the full. If you argue that you already enjoy Leo Brouwer's music (and most guitarists do), he would no doubt reply that *he* no longer does — at least, not in that particular form — and that it is time he composed something along different lines. It is an essential condition of the creative urge that you write

what you believe in. If an artist doesn't believe in what he is doing, how can anyone else?

It is necessary to say this, because already there are critics who suspect a seeking after the kind of popularity that the *Aranjuez* Concerto has been accorded, especially in the fourth concerto, the *Concierto de Toronto*. I don't think this analysis holds much water. Rodrigo was not seeking that kind of popularity when he wrote his concerto. If he had sought it, he probably wouldn't have got it. Besides, Brouwer has managed very well without such popularity in some 30 years of professional musicianship, during which time he has achieved a level of eminence given to few guitarists. And he has achieved it by composing and playing the music that he wanted to compose and play.

Naturally, Leo Brouwer will not escape criticism. Neither will he lack praise. Both reactions should be regarded with caution. It is impossible to assess new music accurately, whatever the pundits say, except in terms of technical competence — and even that is a matter for argument. Time is necessary for assess-



Photo by Colin Cooper

ment. Will listeners ultimately become bored with the 'accessibility' of the fourth guitar concerto and ultimately return to the 'difficulties' of the first? Time alone will tell. Meanwhile, we might as well sit back and enjoy the new forms in which Leo Brouwer's compositional skills choose to express themselves.

Leo Brouwer himself denies that his new music constitutes in any way a return to his roots. He insists that the roots have been in his music all along, even in the most difficult of his atonal and/or aleatoric work. The implication is that his composition is not a path leading to a destination, but a growth, a large tree, perhaps; we have been considering the branches and the foliage, but now we are being invited to contemplate the roots which have been there all the time. The composer has shovelled away a little of the loose earth that covered them, so that we may the better observe the massive strength. Our perception of the whole tree is thus enhanced.

There is another, and possibly more fundamental, way to look at what some observers may feel to be a severe case of compositional schizophrenia. Brouwer himself provides the clue: 'There has been too much brain', he said in reply to a question about the nature of recent contemporary music. He feels it is time to appeal to other and equally valid human attributes, of which the heart and its basic rhythm is obviously one but not the only one.

Those of us who have become accustomed to the cerebation now have to come to terms with a kind of celebration — of warmth, of romance, of melody, of the approaching end of a century about which most intelligent people must have mixed feelings. Have we much to celebrate? Leo Brouwer thinks so.

He came to London in April 1985, to conduct the BBC Concert Orchestra and the Langham Chamber Orchestra, which is also a BBC organization — and, incidentally, just celebrating its second anniversary. He chose all the music himself. It was his first conducting engagement with the BBC, and he wanted to provide a good variety of music — some well known, some new or not so well known. With the Concert Orchestra he did Falla's *El Amor Brujo* with mezzo-soprano Mary King, Schubert's *Rosamunde* and his own *Canción de Gesta* (the *chanson de geste* or *cantus gestualis* was a medieval verse-chronicle of heroic exploits). This is a work for wind ensemble, written for and commissioned by the Pittsburgh Wind Symphony three or four years ago. The PWS have a summer course, spent cruising down rivers on a boat, suitably acknowledged

by a quotation from Handel's *Water Music*.

For the Langham Chamber Orchestra, he wrote *Canciones Remotas*, a four-movement work for strings. It is dedicated to the Langham, whose qualities he much appreciated. 'I am so happy with these musicians', he said, and they seemed to enjoy the experience too. He had taken care in the choice of other music — *Homenaje a Federico Lorca*, by the Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940), Gershwin's *Preludes* for piano (1926), arranged by Brouwer himself, Samuel Barber's *Adagio for strings*, Henze's *Der Junge Törless*, and *Three Pieces in Olden Style* by the Polish composer Henryk Gorecki (b.1933).

The three-movement work by Revueltas was being rehearsed. Piano, harp, exposed trumpet (rather like the trumpet in a mariachi band), piccolo, clarinet, percussion. A lively, Mexican feel about the texture and rhythm. Extrovert coloring, huge chords, a double-bass open-string tremolo. Xylophone, tam-tam, a tuba like a foghorn, muted trombone like a breaking wave, all making a strong effect. The third movement could almost be an extract from *Façade*, if Walton had decided to put in a Mexican episode. Leo liked the sound of the brass: 'The London sound', he said.

He had arranged two of Gershwin's three piano preludes for strings. The first has a 'Summertime' mood, cellos playing over plucked violins. It goes well, but at the end Leo turns to the control room and asks if Gareth Walters wants a second take. 'What for, Leo?' comes Gareth's voice. Leo blows a kiss into the air and says thank you. He launches into the next prelude with renewed zest, moving energetically on the podium, no baton, but fluent arms.

By the time the orchestra come to his *Canciones Remotas* they are playing as if they had been rehearsing for a week instead of only half a day. Their professionalism is exemplary. One of Leo Brouwer's fingerprints in this work is the quiet, rising arpeggio, with echoes of — could it be Vaughan Williams? Delius? Tchaikovsky? But the strong violin syncopation is pure Brouwer. It so happens that Leo admires Vaughan Williams, praising the *Suite for Brass*, the *Fourth Symphony* and the *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*. Other English composers also appealed to him. Gustav Holst (for *The Planets* in 1915) was one of them.

'Your composers know all the instruments so well', he said. 'Because I play them myself — I studied cello, clarinet, trombone, double-bass, percussion and piano.

So that when I compose, I can put in the fingering. I don't do crazy things that are impossible to play. This is something that you English people have. Britten, Walton, Vaughan Williams — the Fourth Symphony is incredible! Clean designs which are as basic as Bach's *Inventions* or the first movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony. Magic squares! Beethoven took a four-bar theme and built up the whole structure with it.'

To explain what he was driving at, Leo drew a version of Paul Klee's Bauhaus tree design. There were two very basic trees, with leafless branches. In the middle, an identical tree but inverted. The branches have become roots. And the third tree, with an outline added, becomes a leaf. Thus are the forms of nature interconnected. The leaf becomes the tree; the brick becomes the building. And Beethoven's four-bar theme becomes the first movement of the *Pastoral* Symphony.

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for strings* was immensely popular during the second world war, many people finding in its slow unfolding of string counterpoint a reflection of their own fortitude implicit in the underlying tragedy. Nearly half a century later, only its musical qualities remain, but they are considerable. The LCO got the point quickly, efficiently dispatching the music to the master tape file, and turned their attention to Henze's *Der Junge Törless*, which was originally written for a film in 1965. Elegiac and energetic by turns, it contains plenty of movement. some spikiness,

a serene violin tune — good, well-contrasted writing that exploits the form and avoids monotony.

Gorecki's three pieces elicit a wonderful surge of tone, effortlessly reaching the heights of string band sonority. And so to Mozart's String Serenade K525, invariably known under the name which helped to seal its popularity, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. Leo steps away from the rostrum, humorously indicating that the orchestra know the piece so well they can play it without him. He steps back, of course, and introduces several nice touches, giving one passage a series of little pushes to create a fractional tension, omitted in the repeat. Subtle gradings of dynamic demonstrate a keen musical intelligence at work. He asks for a diminuendo at bar 14 in place of the more common crescendo. It makes sense. Every phrase comes alive. It is clear that it is not the piece itself that is well worn but the minds of the people who listen to it — and very often of those who play it.

This is what creative music making was about, even if it was taking place in a recording studio rather than a concert hall. But thousands of people would be listening to the broadcast eventually, and it had to begin its existence as a live performance. Nevertheless, the concept of the importance of live performance was not one that was automatically held within the hallowed halls of the BBC. As manager Peter Holt put it, 'Some people's idea of music in the BBC is a piece of plastic with a hole in the middle'.



On this evidence at least, the creation of the Langham Chamber Orchestra two years earlier was more than justified; a creative act in an environment where cutback and recession and budgetary limitation were words of common currency.

It was clear that Leo Brouwer is a very good conductor. Did he enjoy conducting more than playing or composing for the guitar?

‘No. For me, the guitar is total communication. But conducting — I’ve learned how to do it. I enjoy the ability to produce the colors, the dynamics.’

So no career change was contemplated. What obviously was interesting as a topic of discussion was the form of his latest compositions. ‘That avant-garde epoch of mine is a little bit gone’, said Leo. ‘A little bit too old, maybe. I think in this part of the century we need to relax and enjoy it. I think that in the near future music is going to get very romantic once more. It has been too brainy, too cold, too mathematical — too *mastermind*.’

He feels strongly the lack of communication for which the music of 15 or 20 years ago is in his opinion responsible. ‘I did it also’, he admits. ‘I did everything! I scratched the guitar, I cut, I broke the strings. Whatever was done, I did also.’

‘Guitar music should change. It will go back to romantic, national music, I think. Scottish folk songs, Welsh, Irish, some French, Canadian, Indian folk song — all coming back in a kind of reconsideration. In a way, it’s like the turn of the last century and the nationalistic school.’

He saw no future for the avant-garde as we knew it. ‘It is a moment for opening doors, for alerting people, for cleansing music. Since 1971 I’ve started to introduce the old universe of sound once more. Quotations, allusions, E major chords, cadences, Bach chorales — keeping the attention on the heritage. No more Boulez! No more Stockhausen! It’s finished!’

The *Nutcracker* instead of *Le Marteau*? ‘Nutcracker — why not? I love it. The most simple and the most beautiful music. Now we are going to have hyper-realism or -romanticism. It will become the new expressionism. 20-century music *has* to go somewhere other than the avant-garde. All the things I did 15 years ago were necessary; but, as everything in history has done, things have reached a turning point.’

It was, said Leo Brouwer, the turning point of an upward spiral — an eternal spiral, if you like. ‘So we are continually encountering the same point, but

developed. We are once more taking up 19th-century music but on a higher level of expression. I don’t mean that we are going to surpass Mahler or Brahms. I repeat, I’m not talking about quality. It is one step further in remodelling the whole thing.’

Neo-classicism had flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, with Stravinsky the main figure and with Hindemith and Britten (whom Brouwer feels to be one of the greatest) also playing prominent parts. But that was not going to return. The names that Leo mentions now are Copland, Vaughan Williams, Shostakovich, Rachmaninov, Walton and Holst. He speaks with utter conviction. He does not say that these things *might* happen, but that they *will* happen, or are already happening. In 50 years’ time, perhaps, some composer will be heralding the arrival of the neo-avant-garde or hyper-aleatoric movement, and speaking of Stockhausen as a great communicator. Meanwhile, we have Leo Brouwer’s music to enjoy — and one feels that neo-romanticism is by no means the end of it

By way of a postscript, it is worth noting that it is only by pure chance that we have the *Tres danzas concertantes*, *Tres apuntes*, *Elogio de la danza* and many other pieces, because he had thrown them away with a lot of what he calls ‘garbage’. It was a friend, Jesús Ortega, who happened to have copies and was thus able to restore the music to a now grateful guitar world.

An extract from another interview (with Gareth Walters, CG September 1984) deserves to be quoted, since it underlines Leo Brouwer’s philosophy and helps to explain further what appears to many as a baffling change of direction:

‘The heritage of Schoenberg was so strong that the entire world was influenced by this challenge to transform the language — the code of communication. But once this language is absorbed into you, and you try to present it as a piece of art, you discover after a certain period that you need to create and to express in many, many other languages.’

To keep up with the old Brouwer we had to learn a new language. This time we are relearning an old one, but if Brouwer’s past record is anything to go by, it will have more than a few new words in it.

CC