“I hear the silence here”

Cristóbal Halffter

»Ich habe den spanischen Krieg nicht miterlebt. Im August 1936, ein Monat, nachdem der Krieg begonnen hatte, kamen mein Vater, meine Mutter, mein Bruder und ich in Deutschland an, wir hatten ja eine deutsche Abstammung. Von 1936 bis Juni 1939 lebten wir in Deutschland, wo ich in die Schule ging und Deutsch lernte.«
Cristóbal Halffter

Cristóbal Halffter became involved with opera relatively late. His [first,] Don Quijote, which premiered in 2000 in Madrid, is a setting of the most renowned work in Spanish literature. After that came Lázaro (Kiel Opera, 2008), followed by Schachnovelle (premiere slated for Kiel Opera in 2013), after the book by Stefan Zweig. Halffter explains the link between the three

works in this interview.

A simple question to begin with: why Stefan Zweig's Schachnovelle?

Halffter: It was chance. Some things in life are very difficult to analyse. Anna – she's married to my son Pedro – gave me the idea. She sent me the book, I read it in the afternoon on a free day, and the opera was finished that evening – I still had to write it down, but it was finished. I conceived everything while I was reading.

At what point did you become hooked?

Halffter: You can play football alone, if you play against a wall – you can play cards alone – but it is very, very difficult to play chess against yourself. You need two brains. You have to be A and B – at the same time. That really fascinated me. That was the only way for Dr. Berger, the main character (Dr. B) to carry on living. For a short time, during the Nazi interrogations, he argues even more clearly and sharply for what instills that respect [in the Nazis]. But ultimately he goes crazy, because it's impossible to maintain that schism for long.

And then there is this coincidence – Dr. B. emigrates from Vienna to Buenos Aires after the liberation, and he loses his memory. He finds himself on the same ship as the world champion Czentovic and he briefly relapses into his old "chess poisoning" by playing against him. That is very exciting. And of course there is Stefan Zweig's way of writing, which is always very fine.

Someone survives because he is creative.

Halffter: That's right. One can be a physical wreck, but mental deterioration is the worst. He struggles against that total mental deterioration by playing a game. That is the great thing – that playing a game is so important.

Yet at the same time Dr. B. is an idealist; he fights for his ideals.

Halffter: Of course; that was also an important reason for writing the opera. The material expresses that everyone must fight – not always with weapons; there are other ways to fight. He fights violence, and the aggression that he experienced at the hands of the Nazis in Vienna.

Czentovic, who manages to escape a small village by playing chess and subsequently becomes world champion, is defined via another kind of playing; he earns a lot of money, whereas his opponent plays the same game – but not

for money. These two ways of playing chess express a lot. That is another important aspect.

That notion of the opposing pair seems very important to me; the idea traces through your entire operatic oeuvre; Dr. B. and Czentovic, Lázaro and Judas – there are even elements of it in Don Quijote, although one of the characters is always fictitious.

Halffter: I think that can stand as a constant in my work. Don Quijote is a hero, a mythical figure who never existed, except in the mind, in Cervantes' legend – and now his renown is worldwide, although he never existed. The case of Lázaro is similar – no one knows whether he ever lived – opinions differ – some say he was a "Pre-Christ," since he, too, was resurrected; the spirit was again victorious.

If I understand you correctly, the theme of the victorious spirit is common to all three of your operas.

Halffter: Precisely. That is a fundamental principle I discovered in my youth. Perhaps it was just chance that I received a book about Ghandi when I was 13 or 14 years old. His expressive spirit had a profound impact on me, and has stayed with me all my life. The notion that you lose your rights if you try to assert your ideal with violence impressed me deeply. Many of my friends have led very different lives – my brother and my father, for instance, were big-time industrialists.

My brother is older than I am, and I lead my life on a completely different principle – perhaps only because I just happened to read that book. Of course it is difficult sometimes, the impulse toward violence can be overwhelming – as Wozzeck says, "sometimes nature just wells up" – but this is followed by an apology, of course.

Wozzeck also says that "man is an abyss." You experienced the abyss in Spain under Franco's dictatorship.

Halffter: I did not experience the Spanish war. It was in August 1936, one month after the war began, that my father, my mother, my brother and I arrived in Germany – we were of German descent – we lived in Germany from 1936 to June 1939 – that's where I went to school and learned German.

That was the time when Nazism was blossoming. It was palpable everywhere, even in school. "You must do this, you must do that, you must speak like this!" For me, it was like an inoculation against any kind of dictatorship – I did not

want to live in such countries.

Then we went to Spain, in 1939. It was a very difficult time until about 1970. I found culture and sensitivity only at home – never outside.

To what extent did your time in the Spanish dictatorship affect your thought?

Halffter: Spain was a dictatorship – but it was a Mediterranean dictatorship. I was able to do things under Franco's dictatorship that would probably never have been possible in East Germany without getting thrown into prison. I wrote the Requiem por la libertad imaginada ("Requiem for Imaginary Freedom") – but nothing happened except the piece wasn't played anymore.

There was also the Elegias a la muerte de tres poetas españoles ("Elegy on the Deaths of Three Spanish Poets"): Machado in exile in 1939, Hernandez in prison in 1942 and Lorca, shot down in 1936 – that was how poets died during Franco's dictatorship. It was my denunciation. The piece was played, sometimes there were small disturbances

Did it ever occur to you to leave Spain?

Halffter: No, no now, there is a lot written about Franco, he was a very complex man – he had that kind of militarism deep within him – against the Freemasons, against Communism, for instance – and he was completely indifferent to culture. Those small dictators under him, they were the bad ones – many of them forcibly established prohibitions. Nevertheless, painters could still produce abstract work; musicians had it easier than poets and writers, theatre makers and filmmakers. Everything that expressed something clear and easily definable was forbidden – so, from that viewpoint, music was not important.

Spain experienced terrible things in the 18th and 19th centuries, much worse than in a dictatorship. The Spanish ended up separated from the rest of Europe. We had no scholars, no philosophers. The music that was used for nationalism came along in the late 19th century – but that was not good. Isaac Albeniz, Enrique Granados and Manuel de Falla did not come along until later.

"Spain was a dictatorship – but it was a Mediterranean

You began by establishing a new musical language in Spain. How did the classics of the modern era influence that?

Halffter: In tonal music, Stravinsky and Bartók. Otherwise, Schönberg, Webern and Alban Berg influenced me – in that order. My Uncle Rodolfo, who was a good musician and a great intellectual, emigrated to Mexico.

I was 12 or 13 – it was 1942/1943, when he asked my father to send his library to Mexico. But that was not easy – there were scarcely any ways of sending parcels to Mexico. Later on, he wrote another letter; according to which I, his nephew, was allowed to have everything [from his library] that I wanted. Of course he knew that I liked music.

So I went to his apartment, where I found many things which were like suddenly stepping into the light for me – Schönberg's Pierrot lunaire and the Op. 31 Variations, string quartets by Webern, lots of Stravinsky – I was allowed to keep all of that. I chose about 20 scores and played them on the piano, in my still very rudimentary way of reading music. So by the time I was 16, 17, I had a background which my colleagues could never have had, as those scores were not to be found in Spain. They were not imported – in fact they were forbidden – yet I had them there at home!

Schönberg was in Barcelona – actually, there was a tradition – or perhaps a tradition had begun which was suddenly cut off.

Halffter: Yes, it was cut off. There was a small group who were together with Schönberg in Barcelona, but that was broken off.

It's speculating – but if that had continued for another 10 or 15 years, how would musical life in Spain look today?

Halffter: Completely different. We had great luck in having the finest guitar, piano and cello soloists – although most of them were absolutely opposed to new music.

Apparently, Pablo Casals once wrote that he had received a letter from Schönberg in which he alleged that everything in his music was wrong – but no one other than Casals ever saw that letter. If one commits a sin, then one must atone – and he thought that Schönberg had to atone, confess his guilt. That was in the 1940s.

Leonard Bernstein says the same thing in his Harvard Lectures; he says that Schönberg ultimately became a tonal composer again.

Halffter: Utter nonsense. The guitarist Andrés Segovia was also strongly opposed to new music, like many others. When the IGNM Festival took place in Barcelona in May 1936, Casals was the conductor – that was where Berg's Violin Concerto was first performed. Casals had tried to forbid the performance – Webern came to Barcelona to conduct the piece. But a piece by Webern was also on the programme, so Casals instructed his musicians to work against Webern. That was when they called in Hermann Scherchen.

Although Webern did say that the orchestra was not good enough, and that he was leaving …

Halffter: Yes, Webern did say that. But the musicians said to him, "We can't play this music – it's too awful. And you conduct badly. We can't understand it, the music is terrible, we don't want to perform this music." They flew Scherchen in so they wouldn't have to cut the Berg from the programme. That was the mood back then.
Had there been 15 more years, much would have changed. Manuel de Falla's Harpsichord Concerto is the first step toward a new way of musical thinking. It was still very neoclassical, but it was already atonal, too. That type of atonal neoclassicism opened a window to let the light in. For my generation – or for me, at least – that Harpsichord Concerto is a beginning, and I worked a lot in that style when I was writing my first works.

It is the reverse of Stravinsky's path – he actually began in a more contemporary way …

Halffter: … before he arrived at Neoclassicism. Apollon musagète is incredibly conservative.

Did you ever meet Stravinsky in person?

Halffter: Yes; I gave him a massage once. He had come to Madrid; I went to a rehearsal and talked with him. After the rehearsal, he asked me if I could massage him. The small of his back was very broad. I said to him, "Maestro, at

this moment I am massaging musical history, la historia de la musica!" He negated that – he was very intelligent, very clever and quick.

I experienced something similar with Paul Hindemith. There were many conductors and some composers coming to Spain, but almost no one in my milieu could speak English or German – so I acted as translator. That gave me the opportunity to get to know those musicians.

That was the situation I was in when I met Ataúlfo Argenta. He was the first to conduct Mahler in Spain – that was in the 40s. He was committed to new music, but he died when he was 48, cutting short his career and plunging Spain back deep into the mire. I am convinced the music scene in Spain would have been much different had he lived longer. Argenta was also the conductor of the Spanish National Orchestra – yet in 1954, four years before he died, he wrote a fantastic article about Spanish composers – he lost his job as a result!

So it was quite dangerous in Spain?

Halffter: Yes.

It is interesting that Spain was always just on the verge of discovering modernity – but something always happened to set it all back.

Halffter: Yes, a counter-reaction. The years between 1930 and 1936 – that is, before the World War – are called "the silver epoch" here. We had everything we wanted on all levels – and it all suddenly disappeared in 1936.

For example?

Halffter: Ortega, Picasso, Dalí, Lorca – it was the same for the sciences – attorneys were also very prominent. But that was only a small section of society, and there was not time for it to take deep enough root for the two societal levels to be able to understand each other.

When did modernity arrive in Spain – when did it begin?

Halffter: I believe it was in the 70s, during the last years of Franco's dictatorship. It was mainly music and the fine arts that were affected, including painters and sculptors. There is a picture in my scores made especially for me by Manuel Rivera. It was abstract, so it was not a threat to the government. We took advantage of that chance right up to the end. It was the beginning, the impulse.

What did the audiences think?

Halffter: The audiences were very much against new music in the early 60s, but they gradually began to accept it. A year ago I received this carta blanca; the National Orchestra performed 12 concerts of my music and the audience applauded. That would certainly not have been the case 30 years ago – but today it is possible.

Music always takes longer than painting, doesn't it?

Halffter: Yes – you have to hear it, and you need time to do that. And the time, the silence audible here [i.e. Villafranca, a place in Northwest Spain – ed.] are also very important for music. I always say, "I hear the silence here."

Webern said, "Rests sound good."

Halffter: Yes – fantastic!

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler