

Resisting the systems

KEITH POTTER on the music of Walter Zimmermann

MY FOURTH article on West German music is devoted to the 35-year-old Walter Zimmermann. He has had a *New Music* column to himself before (*CM* April 4 1981); several pieces of his were heard in Britain in the early 1980s (notably at the Goethe Institute and in Adrian Jack's MusICA series); there is now also an extensive examination of his work available in English (an article by Christopher Fox in *Contact* 27).

The present article attempts to bring the discussion of him a little more up to date, being based on a conversation I had with the composer last spring in Cologne. In addition Zimmermann's work is currently to be heard again in this country: a performance of the splendidly raucous *25 Kärwa-Melodien* for two clarinets was given by Roger Heaton and Victoria Soames in Heaton's 'Modern/Post-modern' recital in the Purcell Room last month; and, likewise already mentioned here, a solo percussion piece called *Glockenspiel* will be played by Robyn Schulkowsky at a New Macnaghten Concert at St John's Smith Square on January 20. The New London Chamber Choir sings *Jeder hat sein Ort* ('Everyone has his place') under James Wood at St John's Smith Square on February 11, and at the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology on February 13 Nigel Morgan conducts the college's New Music Ensemble in *Saitenspiel* ('Chordplay') for 18 instrumentalists, most of whom also sing Blackfoot Indian texts (this is the third of the *Flechtwerk* pieces).

We may now, too, reasonably hope for more regular exposure of his music here since he has recently signed a contract for distribution of his works by Boosey & Hawkes.

Heaton included Zimmermann among his post-modernists; Fox describes him as 'an example of that rare breed, the German experimental composer'. Certainly his starting-points are to be found in early Cage (the pre-chance music for prepared piano, for instance) and in Feldman, long a particular source of fascination and a composer on whom Zimmermann is currently compiling an extensive Katalog, rather than in Henze or Stockhausen. Equally certainly, he is some distance from his neo-Romantic compatriots who are his near-contemporaries; he is undoubtedly rather isolated from the promotional machine that has brought, most notably, Wolfgang Rihm to recent prominence (though Rihm is scarcely the neo-Romantic he once was), and it is perhaps not surprising that he should have been excluded from the London Sinfonietta's 'Young Germans' concert in November.

Zimmermann's relationship with the 'German tradition' is, however, far from being simply one of rejection. Between 1977 and 81 he composed a large sequence of works for

various ensembles entitled *Lokale Musik*. This is based in considerable part on dance tunes from his native Franconia (an area of South Germany) in a project deliberately designed to create what Fox calls 'the development of a new music from his own culture'. Zimmermann no longer works with German folk material, but it is probably still possible to trace the 'non-centred tonality' of such works as his recent *Sternwanderung* ('Star-travelling') cycle (of which *Glockenspiel* forms part, the first of three pieces within the cycle going under the title of *Flechtwerk* — literally 'Braidwork' or 'Plaitwork') to his earlier preoccupation; and it is certainly possible to detect a strong interest in early, rather than the more prevailing late German Romanticism in both this cycle, which includes settings by writers such as Jean Paul, and in the even more recent *Stillebung* (literally 'Standstill'), a music-theatre work which like some earlier pieces draws on *Novalis*.

For Zimmermann, a central problem with the development of 20th-century German music is that the Expressionism of Schoenberg, Berg and even Webern 'didn't allow other things to happen'. He identifies an important element in this as the obsession with the ego in German music: 'it started with Beethoven and never seemed to end'. It is, of course, Zimmermann's disdain for the 'domination of sound with systems, with theories, with ideas, and all that' and his replacement of these things with a more objective concern for sound itself, which nowadays he relates back to Debussy and Stravinsky, that connects him with an identifiable experimental tradition.

Two things, though, strike me as in different ways odd about Zimmermann's music and its reception, in his native country at least. One is that his involvement with folk melody seems offensive to many German listeners; *Lokale Musik* was heavily disrupted, apparently, when played at Darmstadt in 1982, and when in Cologne last year I was given to understand that this hostility goes wider than just an avant-garde summer-school coterie. One can understand that the Nazi past may still be too close for some for it to be separated from any overt relationship with 'the tradition'; but if that is the case, why has the New German Romanticism proved so popular?

The other is that Zimmermann himself now seems to be using a set of technical paraphernalia to explore his 'non-centred tonality' that at first glance look suspiciously close to 'systems, theories and ideas' themselves. The truth is, I suppose, that, as Stockhausen's *Neue Musik* and its progeny have already demonstrated, German composers find at least some kind of system, theory and idea irresistible in the end.