

CASABLANCAS IN CONTEXT

Some months before the birth of Benet Casablanca in 1956, a group of artists including Antoni Tàpies, Joan Brossa, and J. E. Cirlot placed a plaque on the façade of the Barcelona house where Schoenberg and his family had lived during the period 1931–1933. “He loved his window,” asserted his former student Robert Gerhard in a BBC radio interview. “He had his table right against the window. And he lifted his eyes up from the score *Moses and Aron*, which, as you know, he finished the second act in Barcelona in that room—this signed at the end, *Barcelona, 10th of March, 1932*. When he lifted his eyes from the score, what he saw was that fantastic panorama. It was a smallish room. It had a small upright piano, a table perhaps, a sofa, and a few armchairs and that was all!”

The connection between Barcelona and the members of Second Viennese School, however, had started quite a few years before, with the friendship between Schoenberg and Pau Casals, who met in 1912 when they appeared together at a Vienna concert (Schoenberg conducted his *Felieas und Melisande*, and Casals played one of the Saint-Saëns concertos), and in 1913 Schoenberg prepared a realization of the figured bass and cadenzas for a G-minor cello concerto by the Baroque composer Georg Matthias Monn for Casals—who did not, however, perform them. Gerhard became Schoenberg’s student in 1923, and a few years later, in 1925, the Arnold Schoenberg Festival presented *Pierrot Lunaire, Kammer-symphonie*, and a selection of songs in a tour around Catalonia. Of course, in 1931, Schoenberg arrived in Barcelona and in 1932 finished *Moses und Aron* and the *Klavierstück* Op. 33b. Later that year, Webern conducted *Verklärte nacht* and *Acht Lieder* Op. 6, among other works, and in the winter, Schoenberg adapted a 1746 harpsichord concerto by Monn for cello, intending for Casals to play it, but Casals turned this down as well. Lastly, in 1936, Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto was premiered and *Erwartung* was also performed—all in Barcelona. As a result, for the interwar period, the Catalan city became momentarily the capital of musical modernism—its ensuing musical life being shaped forever by the Second Viennese School.

A composer growing up in Barcelona in the 1960s had few clear artistic choices. Generally speaking, the path taken by recognized masters such as Albéniz and Granados was considered exhausted. Composers such as Frédéric Mompou and Xavier Montsalvatge followed their own distinctive course, albeit one tinted by French models. A third stream, though, was the universe unlocked by Schoenberg. In the period after World War II, what might be called, for lack of a better term, a “Germanic” idiom was adopted by a generation of Catalan composers under the guidance of Cristòfor Taltabull (1888–1964), who had been a student of Max Reger. These included a student of Gerhard, Joaquim Homs, and Josep Soler, who taught Casablanca. It was only logical that later, Casablanca would go on to study in Vienna with Friedrich Cerha, a respected composer in his own right as well as one of the foremost performers of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. (Cerha also orchestrated the unfinished parts of Berg’s *Lulu*.)

Casablanca’s affinities with the Second Viennese School thus seem inevitable. Yet his music is at the same time original and unique. Like Mompou, Casablanca has been a miniaturist attracted to the world of children (see for example his *Triptic infantil* for piano). Like Webern, he strives for concision—shortness and succinctness being revealed in many of his titles: “epigram,” “aphorism,” “haiku,” “bagatelle” and even “little” (as in the *Little night music* in tonight’s program). Like Schoenberg, Casablanca is an accomplished essayist on the most diverse topics. He willingly seeks to fill in the porosity of the aesthetic experience with words, working to his advantage the capillaries that connect all the arts in his writings and in his compositions as well. Consider his orchestral work *Alter Klang* after Paul Klee’s painting and *Four Darks in Red*, which of course is inspired by Rothko. The world of literature seems equally important, with compositions based on Shakespeare (tonight’s *Seven Scenes from Hamlet* as well as *The Dark*

Backward of Time based on *The Tempest*) and song cycles on texts by, among many others, E. A. Poe and the early surrealist Catalan poet J. V. Foix (*Poema d’E.A. Poe* and *Jo tem la nit*, respectively).

Since Casablanca’s music adheres to some basic principles of musical modernism (dissonance, rhythmic ultra-complexity, and timbral exploration), it tends to be challenging for the audience. Art and literature, however, establish a sound foundation for the listening experience and Klee, Rothko, Shakespeare, Poe, and Foix introduce helpful keys to the ciphers. Beyond that, a constellation of meanings emerges through persistently returning allusions: notice, for instance, the recurrences of “darkness,” “silence,” and “night.” At first, it might come as a surprise that many of his edgy, testing scores are labeled with titles worn out by two or three generations of amateur musicians. *Album Leaf, Moment Musical, Two Sketches, Tombeau for J. Homs*, and of course *Little Night Music* are subtle winks to Schumann, Schubert, Gerhard, Ravel, and Mozart. It is a welcome comic touch from a man who, incidentally, has produced a hefty treatise on the subject of humor in music.

—note by Antoni Plzà, Director, *Foundation for Iberian Music*