El Cimarrón by Hans Werner Henze

A New Approach to Political Song¹

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Abstract: During the years prior to World War II, a number of composers in Germany were creating music of political content that addressed social issues. By writing *El Cimarrón* (1970), Hans Werner Henze made a unique contribution to the tradition of political committed music in Germany. Henze was able to go beyond the achievements of his predecessors by giving a documentary character to the work and integrating the results of his own experiments into the composition. This paper discusses the characteristic features of *El Cimarrón* and Henze's approach to composing this work.

Keywords: El Cimarrón, Hans Werner Henze, German political song.

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uring the years prior to World War II, a number of composers in Germany were aiming for an art of political content that addressed social issues and gave voice to the proletariat's struggle. In 1918, a group of artists and intellectuals who had settled in Berlin founded Novembergruppe³ (November group). Members of the music section of this group were composers Kurt Weill, Paul Dessau, and Hanns Eisler. These composers developed a prolific output of militant songs in collaboration with German poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who was a member of Novembergruppe as well.

Almost forty years later, in the 1960s, Hans Werner Henze continued the tradition of political committed music in Germany. His interest in music with political purposes could be rooted in several childhood experiences that left a mark on him. The repressive practices of the Nazi regime, his obligatory enrollment in the Nazi Youth⁴ and the authoritarian attitude of his father are some of the memories that led him to develop a feeling of repudiation towards fascism. Between 1960 and 1965, Henze began to produce works with political messages. Three compositions from this period demonstrate his early political commitment:

Jüdische Chronik (1960–61), a cantata that responds to acts of anti-Semitic vandalism; Der Junge Lord (1963–64), a comic opera that warns of a dark future for Germany; and In memoriam: Die Weiße Rose (1964–65), a double fugue for chamber ensemble written in honor of the Munich resistance movement. (COOPERMAN, 2011: iii)

In 1967, Henze confirmed his political commitment by joining the Socialisticher Deutscher Studentbund (Socialist German Student Union). As a consequence, works from this period such as *Das Floß der Medusa* (*The Raft of the Medusa*, 1968), *In Versuchüber Schweine* (*Essay on Pigs*, 1969), and *El Cimarrón* (1970), were intended to convey an explicit political message. *El Cimarrón* was an effort by Henze to contribute to the tradition of political song without repeating the models established by the composers of *Novembergruppe*. According to Henze (1982: 172): "My interest in *El Cimarrón* began during a conversation with Hans Magnus Enzesnberger in about 1968, when we were discussing the difficulties of writing political songs which could go beyond or circumvent the achievements of Eisler, Weill and Dessau."

By writing *El Cimarrón*, Henze made his own statement in the genre of political song. He was able to go beyond his predecessors by setting a text based on an actual testimony, giving a documentary character to the work, and integrating the results of his own experiments into the composition. As a result, he developed a unique work of functional music that shows a distinctive musical style.

⁴ The Nazi Youth or Hitler Youth was a program of the Nazi party intended to indoctrinate young people with Nazi ideas. For more details about the Hitler Youth practices see KUNZER, 1938.

³ Novembergruppe was a society that held encounters with artists of different genres, debates on political issues, and presentations of newly finished works.

The text of El Cimarrón was drawn from the ethnographic work Biografía de un Cimarrón (Biography of a Cimarron) by Cuban researcher Miguel Barnet. In 1968, Hans Magnus Enzesnberger suggested Henze Barnet's book as the subject for this project. Biografía de un Cimarrón features the life story of Esteban Montejo, a former Cuban slave that survived until the post-revolution years in Cuba. This work describes his lonely life in the mountains, his survival techniques, his relation with the elements of nature, and his beliefs and superstitions. Through several interviews, Montejo related detailed aspects of slavery in Cuba, the Independence War, and the Battle of Cienfuegos, as well as his experiences as a cimarrón (runaway slave). Biografía de un Cimarrón is not only an intimate approach to Montejo's life as a fugitive, but also a direct testimony of life in Cuba during the last years of the Colony and the first days of independence. Barnet's work provided Henze's project with a real story that served to highlight political issues such as injustice, slavery, exploitation of workers, and the proletariat's struggle. According to Matthews (1970: 24): "it is quite feasible, and legitimate, to see Montejo as a symbol of all exploited peoples, and interpret his indignant outbursts against the Spaniards and the Americans as denunciations of imperialism." In this manner, Montejo's account became the cornerstone of *El Cimarrón*. It not only provided the subject matter for *El Cimarrón*, but also gave it a documentary character and shaped its form as a composition.

Since his documentary oratorio *Das Floß der Medusa* (1968), Henze tried to bring historical elements into his militant works. This oratorio describes the wreckage of the ship named Medusa on the coast of Senegal in 1816, and was regarded by the composer as a requiem for revolutionary leader Ernesto Guevara. In this work, Henze exposed the injustice committed by the dominant class by pointing out the way the captain and other "important people" took advantage of their position to save themselves, thus abandoning the rest of the crew and passengers to their faith. In other words, Henze used a real story to address social issues in accordance with his political commitment. The text is based on a diary kept by one of the survivors and some stanzas from the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. About this work, the composer declared that "[t]he oratorio should also be seen as an allegory: it sings of the heroic struggle against death, against the temptation to give up, against the comfortable surrender to despair." (HENZE, 1982: 162)

Two years later, Henze collaborated with Hans Magnus Enzesnberger in the text setting for *El Cimarrón*. Enzesnberger suggested *Biography of a Cimarron* as the subject for the project, and he was in charge of the adaptation and translation of the text into German. Enzesnberger took advantage of the narrative prose style of the original text⁵ to achieve unity and eloquence in the setting. His work consisted of arranging fifteen passages from Barnet's book to create a cycle of melodramas that summarized

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⁵ In order to preserve the spontaneity of the story, Barnet kept the account in first person and introduced Montejo's vocabulary and idioms. Thus, he provided an intimate approach to the account. The original text in Spanish can be seen on BARNET, 1980.

Montejo's story. Finally, Henze grouped the melodramas into two parts as follow:

ERSTER TEIL (PART I)

- I. Die Welt (The World)
- II. Der Cimarrón (The Cimarron)
- III. Die Sklaverei (Slavery)
- IV. Die Flucht (Escape)
- V. Der Wald (The Forest)
- VI. Die Geister (Ghosts)
- VII. Die falsche Freiheit (The False Freedom)

ZWEITER TEIL (PART II)

- VIII. Die Frauen (Women)
- IX. Die Maschinen (The Machines)
- X. Die Pfarrer (The Priests)
- XI. Der Aufstand (The Rebellion)
- XII. Die Schlacht von Mal Tiempo (The Battle of Mal Tiempo)
- XIII. Der schlechte Sieg (The Bad Victory)
- XIV. Die Freundlichkeit (Friendliness)
- XV. Das Messer (The Machete)

In the first melodrama, Montejo introduces his religious beliefs and explains the origins of slavery. In II and III, he recalls experiences from his childhood as a slave and reveals the cruelty and oppression suffered by slaves. In IV, V, and VI, he describes his escape from a sugar plantation and his lonely life in the forest, surrounded by nature and supernatural beings. The title of VII, The False Freedom, alludes to the abolition of slavery and relates how the workers' conditions were virtually the same as before abolition.

In the second part, Montejo depicts his life as a free man. In VIII, he tells about his relationships with women. In IX, he describes labor at industrialized sugar factories. In X, he exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of priests. XI, XII, and XIII are about the beginning of the revolution, the Battle of Mal Tiempo, and how the Americans took the place of the defeated Spanish in a new era of exploitation. In the final numbers, XIV and XV, Montejo yearns the brotherhood of the countryside and expresses his willingness to fight in future battles.

After the early 1950s, Henze started a period of experimentation to develop musical resources

that provided him with the necessary elements to fulfill his artistic aims. In this respect, *El Cimarrón* represents a synthesis of the composition techniques developed by Henze in his previous output. In works such as *Symphony N.6* (1969), *The Raft of Medusa* (1968) and *Essay on Pigs* (1969), Henze developed a unique sound by applying the results of his discoveries to vocal and instrumental performance. For instance, In *Essay on Pigs* and *The Raft of Medusa*, Henze applied an extended range of vocal techniques in order to bring a wider spectrum of timber and intensity to his music.

Another innovation in Henze's musical language was the combination of electric and acoustic instruments. This can be seen in the instrumentation of *Essay on Pigs*, which calls for a vocal soloist, woodwinds, brass, string, percussion, electric organ, and electric guitar⁶. Referring to the vocal writing of this work, Henze mentioned: "In Versuchüber Schweine (Essay on pigs, 1969) written shortly after the Medusa scandal, I took further what I had started in the latter work: I made use of new possibilities of vocal production, and thereby opened up areas of expression into which I had never before entered [sii]." (1982: 181)

These new possibilities are featured in the vocal part of *El Cimarrón*, which requires the singer to perform a number of vocal techniques that include singing sounds of undetermined pitch, narrating in spoken style, singing in quarter tones, whistling, gasping, and imitating birdsongs. This style of vocal performance provides the music with an expressive range that allows the narrator to convey the protagonist's intense emotions. Figure 1 illustrates the notation for these techniques:

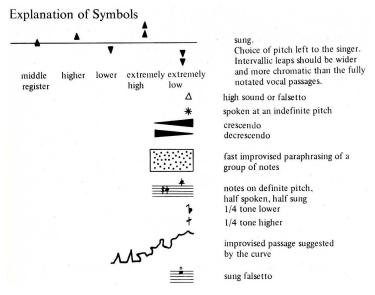


Fig. 1 – Explanation of symbols for the vocal part of *El Cimarrón*.

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⁶ The complete instrumentation can be seen on: https://en.schott-music.com/shop/versuch-uber-schweine-1.html

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In order to notate the vocal part, Henze used two different systems. The first of them is shown in Figure 1. It consists of a single line that represents the middle register of the baritone. Above and below the line are symbols that represent relative pitches of the sounds within a range that goes from extremely low to extremely high. The other system is conventional staff notation in bass clef. On the staff the composer notated symbols that represent pitches, intonation in quartertones as well as graphics to indicate improvised passages. In both systems, the notes have relative values that must be adapted to the pace of the narration. See figure 2:

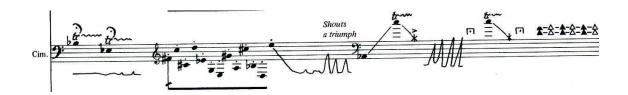


Fig. 2 – Staff and graphic notation in the vocal par of *El Cimarron*.

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Originally, the line-up for *El Cimarrón* was intended to be voice, flute and percussion. However, after hearing Cuban guitarist-composer Leo Brouwer performing in 1969, Henze decided to include a guitar part to provide harmonic support to the score. As a result, the new line-up consisted of a total of four musicians, baritone, flute, guitar, and percussion. Henze applied to these forces the result of his previous achievements in terms of timbre exploration through unusual combinations of instruments and the use of extended techniques. In *El Cimarrón*, Henze was able to achieve a unique sound by exploring the characteristic timbres of an extended percussion set, a variety of flutes and wind instruments, guitar, amplified voice, and a number of exotic instruments. The complete instrumental set includes:

- Winds: piccolo, flute, alto flute, bass flute, ryuteki, mouth-organ (harmonetta), trill whistle, bird whistle, Jew's harp.
- Guitar
- Percussion: 3 bongos, 13 tom-toms, 4 log-drums, 8 bamboo drums, Afro-Cuban marimba, small drum, gran casa, 2 tam-tams, 3 suspended cymbals, maracas, guiro, 3 temple bells, marimba, vibraphone, crotales, Trinidad gong drum, shell chimes, bamboo sticks, 3 cow-bells, conga, claves,

matraca, chain, 2 thundersheets, glass chimes.

Performance practices required by the composer include: improvisation and performance of undetermined passages where the score provides just some parameters. In these passages, rhythm, tempo, phrasing, articulation, and intensity are left to the players' choice. Throughout the piece, the players must shift among different instruments and all the performers are required to play percussion instruments. Additionally, the flutist must play a series of secondary instruments. According to Henze (1982: 198): "Each of the four players involved in this work has material with which he can work creatively." In this manner, the performers become creative collaborators.

When Henze wrote the music for *El Cimarrón* with a specific group of performers in mind. These performers, however, were not members of an established ensemble. Henze choose them because of their expertise in new music and outstanding technical skills. The team of performers consisted of William Pearson, baritone of great experience in contemporary music who had worked with Kagel and Ligeti in the past; Karlheinz Zöller, principal flutist with the Berlin Philharmonic and enthusiast of instrumental experimentation; Stomu Yamash'ta, virtuoso percussionist member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; and Leo Brouwer, guitarist-composer leader of the avant-garde in Cuba. They played a crucial role in the development of the piece and collaborated with Henze by providing their own insight about instrumental and vocal techniques.

Throughout the work, Henze integrated a series of quotations from Cuban music and other musical styles to depict different settings. Since his Symphony No.6, Henze demonstrated his interest in Cuban rhythms. About this work, the composer mentioned:

What was novel about this piece was the way in which it incorporated both contemporary and timeless folk music into its structure. I made the step from quotation to integration. Even the basic rhythm of my Sixth Symphony comes from the people: it was Jorge Berróa, an Afro-Cuban adherent of the Yoruba faith and comrade of mine who passed it on to me. (HENZE, 1998: 260)

Several genres of Cuban music appear in *El Cimarrón*. For instance, in V (The Forest), percussions play a *toque*⁷, which is a rhythm from the Lucumi religion (Shown in figure 3). In this case, the integration of religious music symbolizes the protection needed by Montejo to survive in the forest and preserve health. Additionally, in VIII (Women), a *son* rhythm (Shown in figure 4) underlines the vocal line while the protagonist talks about women⁸. The influence of Leo Brouwer had special importance for the

⁷ In Lucumi religion, the *toque* is used for adjuration to Babalú Ayé, the goddess that protects from diseases. This *toque* is in 2/4 time and its basic rhythmic pattern is expressed in two measures. The first measure features a polyrhythm of 3 against 2 in the first beat and two eighth notes in the second beat, whereas the second measure contains only three consecutives eighth notes and an eighth note rest.

^{8 &}quot;The genre called son is a Cuban synthesis: Bantu percussion, melodic rhythm, and call-and-response singing, melding the

development of these movements. In addition to his contribution as a guitarist, Brouwer brought an authentic folk sound to the parts that called for Cuban idioms.

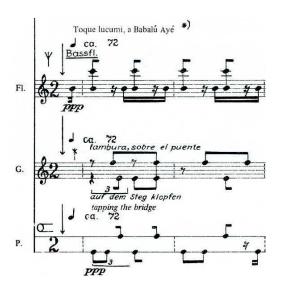


Fig. 3 – Toque lucumi.

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Fig. 4 – In VII (Women), the guitar and marimba present the rhythmic pattern of a son.

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American and European music styles appear as a means of parody. For instance, in X (The Priests), the vocalist mocks the singing style of a preacher by intonating a kind of plain chant, while the instruments accompany him with a chorale plagued by parallel intervals (Figure 5). In XIII (The Bad

Spanish peasant's guitar and language. Its balance of the Bantu and the Spanish, and their common adaptability, made it the great mother form for Cuban music in the twentieth century." (SUBLETTE, 2004: 333) *Sones* are typically in duple meter and feature a prominent use of syncopation.

Victory), when the text alludes to the arrival of the Americans to Cuba, the flute and mouth organ play fragments of American tunes (Figure 6).

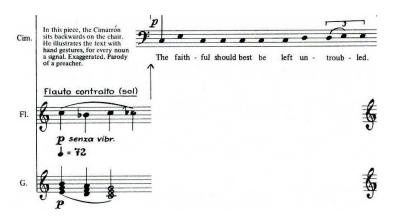


Fig. 5 – Parody of a preacher in X (The priests).

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Fig. 6 – The flutist plays a theme that resembles the opening motive from the American anthems on a mouth-organ.

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In addition to parody and symbolism, the music in *El Cimarrón* features a constant use of word painting. The emotions, environments and events depicted by the text are faithfully reflected by specific sonorities. Words such as "terrible" and "fire" (referring to the pain caused by lashing) are notated in the highest register of the phrase and accompanied by highly dissonant chords with the dynamic mark *FFFF*. Another instance of word painting is when Montejo depicts his fugue in IV (Scape). In the phrase: "I ran off and did not stop until I was alone in the mountains, in the woods." (HENZE, 1972: 31). As a result, the piece achieves an intense theatrical expressivity. According to Henze (1972): "This process of making music physically present is still concerning me today. In *Cimarrón* and *Natascha Ungeheuer*, I make even the musicians visible and they more or less become actors."

Some histrionic moments in *El Cimarrón* can be seen in III (Slavery), when the singer rattles a chain to symbolize the sound of a bell, and in IV (Scape), when the Cimarron tells the story about his scape. In the latter passage, the singer is required to run through the stage and drop a chain while the guitarist shouts "Don't let him go" through a megaphone from the other side of the stage. Then, the musicians represent the pursuers and are required to "improvise and wander nimbly through the instruments with the outmost speed." (HENZE, 1972: 31).

It is possible to find the influences of several composers in Henze's output. These could be divided into ideological and stylistic. Ideological influence from composers of *Novembergruppe* is evident, particularly that of Paul Dessau. With Dessau, Henze sustained a relationship of admiration and respect since their first meeting in 1948. From him, Henze learned that music can be used as a vehicle to express social concerns. According to Henze (1982: 252): "In everything that he [Dessau] said, his aesthetic was revealed, which I liked a great deal, and which made me reflect for the first time on the role of the artist in society." Furthermore, Dessau introduced Henze to Bertold Brecht, who exerted great influence on his works for theater.

On the musical aspect, El Cimarrón shares common traits with Arnold Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire (1912) and Eight Songs for a Mad King (1969) by Peter Maxwell Davies. The vocal part of El Cimarrón resembles the Sprechstimme style developed by Schoenberg in Pierrot Lunaire. Although the term Sprechstimme does not appear in the score of El Cimarrón, the vocalist is required to perform half-spoken half-sung passages, as well as notes of indefinite pitch. Furthermore, El Cimarrón, like Pierrot Lunaire, consists of several short melodramas grouped into different sections of similar size. Additionally, in 1971, a year after composing El Cimarrón, Henze finished Natascha Ungeheuer (The Tedious way to Natasacha Ungeheuer's Flat). According to Berry (2014: 200) Natascha Ungeheuer calls for "an instrumental quintet identical to that used in Pierrot lunaire." Which demonstrates Henze's interest in Schoenberg's Pierrot. However, the overall musical style of El Cimarrón is not related to that one of Schoenberg. In El Cimarrón, Henze did not use tone rows or any of the techniques developed by members of the Second Viennese School.

Eight Songs for a Mad King by Peter Maxwell Davies is another work El Cimarrón presents similarities with. Both works were composed in the same year (1969) and feature parodies and paraphrases for dramatic purposes. Moreover, the two pieces feature theatrical elements and require the vocalist to perform a variety of extended techniques. According to Curtin (2009: 102): "In addition to requiring that the vocalist have an extended vocal range, Davies's work includes notations in the singer's part for chordal effects, articulated breathing, overtones, harmonics, and variations of Sprechgesang (a type of vocal enunciation between speech and song)." However, despite the affinity between these works, there is no evidence of Henze having been influenced by Davies's or vice versa. These works are perhaps

parallel results of the avant-garde exploration in the late 1960s in Europe.

In the mid twentieth century, other composers such as Luigi Dallapiccola and Luigi Nono suffered the oppression of fascism in Italy and produced works to protest against tyranny. After listening to Mussolini's speech in 1938, Dallapiccola wrote in his diary "Only by means of music I will be able to express my indignation." (BOYDEN, 2002: 549). In works such as *Canti di Prigiona* (1938-41) and *Il prigioniero* (1948), Dallapiccola addressed the theme of oppression and applied dodecaphonic techniques.

On the other hand, Luigi Nono expressed his political stance in *Il canto sospeso* (1955-6). According to Nielinger-Vakil (2015: 21) *Il canto sospeso* is "A work by a committed communist who dared to address Nazi crimes at a time when they were still largely taboo in West Germany..." In *Il canto sospeso*, the composer applied integral serialism techniques and the text is based on a collection of letters written by members of the European Resistance who were sentenced to death.

El Cimarrón, however, represents a new possibility of realizing politically committed music. In this work, Henze integrated a text based on a real account with avant-garde music idioms and theatrical elements. Additionally, the composer gave the performers the possibility of creatively contribute to the interpretation of the piece. As a result, Henze created a new type of concert and made his own contribution to the tradition of political committed music.

Additionally, *El Cimarrón* stands unique among other manifestations of protest music due to its documentary character and its function as a vehicle for education in favor of the oppressed. Although *El Cimarrón* was written for an ensemble of highly accomplished players, Henze aimed for a musical style that was accessible to the audience and could be used as an educational tool for social struggle. According to the composer, music in *El Cimarrón* "strives to involve the listener, to make him imagine that he could do it too. And so, he understands, sees relationships, and is no longer alienated and a stranger." (HENZE, 1982: 199).

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