
Roberto Gerhard and Ricard Gomis: A long and fruitful friendship

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ABSTRACT

The Catalan engineer Ricard Gomis was a close friend of Robert Gerhard from the 1930s. Their relationship, especially Gomis' influence on Gerhard's music and his role in Gerhard's life have been little studied. This paper will evaluate, through correspondence and Gomis family documents, the remarkable importance of this long and fruitful friendship on Gerhard, his music and life. Gerhard and Gomis began a close friendship through the 'Club Discòfils-Associació pro Musica'. Both of them shared an interest in the technique of recording music - an interest that was further developed in Gerhard's electronic compositions - and for the possibilities of using records to disseminate classical and contemporary music through discussion and listening. Years later, in the 1950s, their common passion for these techniques sparked a joint visit to a number of electronic music laboratories. Gomis loved Gerhard's music and he commissioned from him, in 1955, a chamber music composition, *Nonet*, for wind instruments. Always a close friend of Gerhard, he tried to help the composer with his economic difficulties. As a mark of his gratitude Gerhard dedicated *Concert for Eight* to the Gomis family. This friendship continued until Gerhard's death.

1. THE BEGINNING OF A FRIENDSHIP AND ITS FIRST FRUIT: *DISCÒFILS. ASSOCIACIÓ PRO-MÚSICA*

Ricard Gomis and Robert Gerhard probably began their friendship in the 1930s as a result of their shared passion of records and music. They met frequently both in the specialized music shops in Barcelona (especially the Union Musical Casa Werner) and amongst the well-informed circles of record lovers.

In 1932, Gerhard joined the society *Amics de l'art Nou* (ADLAN- Friends of New Art), founded by Joan Prats in the same year, where he met with intellectuals and artists such as Salvador Dalí, Josep Lluís Sert, Joan Miró, Joaquim Gomis (photographer and plastic artist) and his younger brother Ricard Gomis. Gomis used to meet with Prats and the other members of the *Amics de l'art Nou* every Wednesday, to listen to gramophone records; it is possible that Gerhard went to these meetings too [1]. In addition, Ricard Gomis was almost certainly involved in the concerts organized by ADLAN with the cooperation of Robert Gerhard. We know there was one concert arranged as a tribute to Gerhard, on 12th July 1933, in which the programme included the *Quintet per a instruments de vent, Quatre cançons populars catalanes* and a selection of melodies from *L'infantament meravellós de Shahrazada* [2].

Ricard Gomis (1910-1993), fourteen years younger than Gerhard, was an interesting and cultured young man: an engineering student, very fond of exploring the possibilities of new music technology, and a member of the Catalan bourgeoisie. Gerhard and Gomis shared mutual interests and similar cultural circles and it is no surprise that they established a close friendship.

One of the first fruits of their relationship was the foundation, in 1934, of *Discòfils, Associació Pro-música* (a Friends of Recording society) promoted by Ricard Gomis [3]. The main objective of this society was to 'spread classical music through records' [4] and it aspired to become an

'organization of high importance in Catalan musical life' [5]. *Discòfils* organized public performance of records, accompanied by discussions. Gomis was the president of the society and Robert Gerhard was appointed as a salaried artistic adviser. This appointment moved Gerhard to write in a grateful letter that, '[this appointment] makes the enthusiasm and love that I have put in the ideal of our association even greater'. His obligations consisted of selecting the pieces performed at the society record concerts, giving, at least, five lectures to accompany them and attending to all the musical and artistic functions of the society [6]. The society's activities continued for two years, until the beginning of the Civil War. Gerhard wrote some interesting articles for the *Discòfils*, lectures about different kinds of classical music (from Bach's productions to pieces of contemporary music) [7]. This *Discòfils* experience was probably the model that Gerhard reproduced later in his radio programmes for the BBC, comprising a selection of Spanish music with explanatory commentaries.

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the defeat of the Republicans in 1939, Gerhard decided to go into exile. The composer wrote to Ricard Gomis, from Paris, in July of that year. This is one of the few letters written by Gerhard at this time that is still preserved, demonstrating his close friendship with Gomis. It is a cryptic letter, written in French, and, among other matters in which he asks Gomis for help, Gerhard informs him that he has decided to move to Cambridge and accepted a minor research fellowship at King's College, offered to him by Edward Dent only a week before,

I have just received an invitation from the University of Cambridge for one year, and conscious of the uncertainty of our return [to Barcelona] I accepted it [8].

Gomis and Gerhard met again in 1948. They continued their friendship and their shared interest for new techniques for the recording of music. Years later, in the 1950s, their mutual passion for these kinds of techniques drew them to visit some European electronic music laboratories together, where, among other things,

Gerhard had listened to Bach's music manipulated through filters that transformed completely its sonorous effect, while the structure remained recognisable [9].

These visits, and the exchange of information between Gomis, the engineer and Gerhard, the composer on technical questions (associated with the sound, its recording and manipulation), coincided with Gerhard's significant work with electronic music (1954-1959) and its application in radio, theatre and television productions [10].

In the 1960s Gerhard exploited electronic composition techniques in a more ambitious way, sharing with Ricard Gomis his advances in this field. In his travels to Barcelona, Gerhard would listen with Gomis to his new electronic compositions. Gerhard sent Gomis tapes of new works (including *Collages*) and the two men exchanged reflections and thoughts on Gerhard's electronic pieces through their correspondence. We cannot study these issues in depth in this brief paper, but a paragraph from their letters relating to *DNA in reflection* (electronic music for a film) a piece composed in 1963 will give an example of their exchanges,

Book for me ten minutes of tape recorder and loudspeaker: and I will take an electronic tape that I have just finished, to accompany a film by a pair of young scientists on the mysterious DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) that the score follows, it contains all the genetic information of an organism. I feel that this score is a step forward with respect to *Collages*. [11]

2. THE INFLUENCE OF GOMIS IN GERHARD'S PRODUCTION: THE *NONET FOR WIND INSTRUMENTS*

The correspondence between the Gomis and the Gerhard families is full of interesting biographical information about the composer, detailed notes on the interpretation of his pieces, information about premières, reflections regarding new projects and information about Gerhard's relationship with the BBC.

It is impossible to disconnect the musical production and the personal life of the composer. The correspondence with the Gomis family shows that in some periods, Gerhard had serious economic difficulties and that is why he accepted some commissioned music he would not have composed in other circumstances. He usually refers to the BBC as 'a good client' [12] and Poldi (Gerhard's wife) uses the term 'business' to talk about the commercial music Gerhard composed. She writes,

[Roberto] is going to begin another long work, 80 minutes of music for orchestra, singers and a choir of women, including electronic music, for a drama for the radio by the English poet Robert Graves (...). It is called 'The Anger of Achilles' and it is about the Trojan Wars, with battles and individual combats, which Roberto hates, there is one battle per day, you can imagine how much he was grumbling when he left the radio station. But these works are better paid than an original composition, and when they are offered to him he cannot let them run away (...). [13]

Gerhard not only composed music for the BBC to help his economic situation, he also composed pieces for Ricard Gomis, who loved Gerhard's music and tried to help him in any way he could. Gomis commissioned a chamber music composition, *Nonet* for wind instruments from Gerhard, in 1955, when Gerhard was going through a particularly difficult financial situation. Poldi wrote a letter to Gomis, in October 1956, asking for a cheque of £50 in advance for the *Nonet*; when they received it she was relieved:

Very many thanks for sending the cheque (...) I was worried because we had to pay the rent of the apartment and the lack of payment is the only reason for which the owner could evict us [14].

The main difference between this kind of commission and the commercial music Gerhard composed for BBC was that in the *Nonet* he was given free reign to explore his ideas, something he relished. Poldi wrote,

Roberto is composing the third section of the *Nonet*, he is very happy and good humored, that is the best signal. He is always speaking of completely new things that will scare us to death, but you know him already, he said the same with the *Symphony* and the *Quartet* (...) [15].

Because of its original combination of instruments (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba and accordion) and its use of serial technique the *Nonet* is one of his most interesting compositions of this period - surprising even Stravinsky [16]. Even though he had used an extended serial system in the two last movements of the *Quartet*, the *Nonet* is the first work wholly composed with this technique. In this system the temporal design (the rhythmic figures) and the dynamics of the whole piece are unified by a pre-established metric system derived from the intervals of the basic twelve pitch series [17].

While Gerhard was composing the *Nonet* he published the article 'Developments in twelve-tone technique' in which he explains his vision of his new system:

I use, together with the twelve-tone series, a correlated set of proportions expressed in numbers. The series is regarded as a miniature code for the combinatorial operations concerned with pitch structure. The proportion set is the steering device for all time structural operations. In this capacity it is the source of rhythm and articulation at all levels of form organization and, in the last resort, it rules form as a whole.

In composition, I now use the complete serial field. The field-order is based on the model of the original series, the sequence of transpositions following (so to speak) an acrostic-pattern which reproduces at super-ordinate time levels the interval structure of the original series. The rotation of the transpositions is ruled by the progression of the time set.

(...)

It would completely falsify my meaning to objectify my time-frame, to take it as a "thing", a tangible construction, armature or skeleton which one mounts and round which one lets the music grow. Not at all. My measurements are not to be understood as props but as principles; as principles which inform the growth of the musical form. The living shape is in no way predetermined by, but arises out of, my steering operations. Furthermore, sense and structure mutually condition one another but need not

always be rigidly co-extensive. (...) sense may run on from structure to structure and thus, without destroying it, achieve a higher freedom on the very support of structure (...). [18]

Jan Bach remembers the composing lessons Gerhard gave him in Tanglewood, during the summer of 1961:

Many of our conversations were technical. We talked about generating rows from sub-sets, deriving combinatorial possibilities using numerical sequences to generate rhythms, intervals, even choices of instruments on particular phrases

but he also emphasized another repeated characteristic of Gerhard's music, the use of folkloric Spanish melodies and the evocation of folkloric rhythmic or melodic features in his pieces. This characteristic quality is present in the *Nonet* too,

Yet he still left room for folk-song in his compositions; I remember him commenting that while composing his Accordion Concerto [*Nonet*], (...), a little ditty kept going through his mind, and he had a hell of a time deriving it from the row that governed the rest of the piece [19].

Julian White writes on this subject:

The otherwise abstract *Nonet* (1956-57) ends with a similar dance-like finale in triple time, exploiting the typical hemiola rhythms (alternations of 3/4 and 6/8) that characterize the triple-meter songs and dances of southern Spain, and citing a popular song from this region - *El Paño*, from Murcia [20].

The *Nonet* was first performed in September 1957, played by the Dennis Brain Wind Ensemble, conducted by Norman del Mar, and broadcast by BBC radio. On the 16 April 1958 it was performed and recorded in Gaspar Hall, at one of the sessions of the Club 49 [21], conducted by Josep Lluís Delas, thanks to the efforts of Joaquim Homs and the Gomis family. In a letter to Homs, dated in October 1957, Gerhard made some interesting remarks about the interpretation of the *Nonet*:

The *Nonet*, as you will see, is not difficult for the individual performers. The difficulty lies in the *ensemble*. The recording of the [London] performance, you will notice, leaves a lot to be desired. The only way to do it justice lies in accurate observation of the dynamics: in this kind of micro-dynamics, the modulation of accents and intensities is constant and within a limited ambit. The dynamic indications—let's say they must be observed *with a magnifying-glass*. The last movement is not *vivo* enough (about 132 instead of 144). There are also very few dynamic indications in the score. I will complete them. [22]

Ricard Gomis was always a close friend of Gerhard, the latter dedicating the *Concert for Eight* premiered in London in 1962, to the Gomis family as a means of expressing his gratitude for this friendship. As with the correspondence about the *Nonet*, the correspondence about the *Concert for Eight* is similarly full of interesting remarks about the interpretation of the piece. Gomis tried to disseminate Gerhard's music in Catalonia, even though this was hard because of the political and cultural situation of the country. Franco's dictatorship prevented the performance of Gerhard's pieces (after all, he was an exiled Republican). Gomis, Homs and some of his friends tried to premiere and introduce his music in Catalonia during his years of exile, although they had to limit their activity to minority forums and to programme only Gerhard's chamber music [23].

The long-standing and significant friendship with the Gomis family continued until Gerhard's death and is a relationship that the author continues to study [24].

3. REFERENCES

- [1] BORRÁS, M. L. 1995. 'Joan Prats, biografia col.lectiva' in: *Record de Joan Prats*, Barcelona, Fundació Joan Miró, Imprenta Municipal, p. 17.
- [2] The newspaper *Mirador* and the associations *Musical Culture* and *Camera Music* collaborated in the concert, which took place in the Institut Català de Sant Isidre. The performers were Carme Gombau

- (soprano), Pere Vallribera (piano), Esteve Gratacós (flute), Cassià Carles (oboe), Josep González (clarinet), Ramón Bonell (horn) and Antoni Goxens (bassoon).
- [3] Discòfils relied on the collaboration of some members of ADLAN, along with Roberto Gerhard, Higiní Anglès, Conxita Badía, Ricard Lamote de Grignon, Eduard Toldrà, Joan Prats, Frank Marshall, etc.
- [4] DISCÒFILS, ASSOCIACIÓ PRO-MÚSICA (29th december 1934), 'Estatuts', manuscript 13_06_02, deposited in Institut d'Estudis Vallen (IEV) Valls.
- [5] DISCÒFILS, ASSOCIACIÓ PRO-MÚSICA (1934?), 'Avant-projecte', manuscript 13_06_01, deposited in IEV, Valls. This kind of listening to records, accompanied by lectures and explanations were common in France and other European countries. In Spain they were introduced in the schools by Francisco Giner de los Ríos, who practiced them in the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (ILE) from the beginning of twentieth century and later his followers applied them in other schools and institutions such as the Madrilenian Instituto-Escuela and the Institut-Escola of the Catalan Generalitat (Gerhard was involved in much musical activity including such listening/lecture sessions through his relationship with the music teacher, Manuel Borgunyó) or in the Misiones pedagógicas (Vid. SÁNCHEZ DE ANDRÉS, L. (2009) *Música para un Ideal. Pensamiento y actividad musical del krausismo e institucionismo españoles (1854-1936)*, SEDEM).
- [6] DISCÒFILS, ASSOCIACIÓ PRO-MÚSICA (12th October 1935), 'Llibre d'Actes de Discòfils, Associació Pro-Música' in: RIBÓ, R. (1993).
- [7] All of these notes are deposited in the Archive of Valls. Other important figures in musicology, like Adolfo Salazar or Higiní Anglès, acted as lecturers in the sessions of Discòfils thanks to their friendship or professional relationship with Gerhard.
- [8] GERHARD, R. (2 July 1939), Letter to Ricard Gomis, Londres, Gomis' family documents.
- [9] HOMS, J. 1991. *Robert Gerhard i la seva obra*, Biblioteca de Catalunya, p. 91.
- [10] During this period (1954-59), Gerhard composed ten commissioned works in which he used concrete and electronic music, on its own or accompanied by an instrumental ensemble. Four of these were for the theatre (*The Prisoner*, *King Lear*, *Pericles* and *Coriolanus*), four were for the radio (*A Leak in the Universe*, *The Unexpected Country*, *Asylum Diary* and *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*) and two for short films (*All Aboard* and *Your Skin*), Ibid., p. 97.
- [11] GERHARD, R. (19 August 1963), Letter to Ricard Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [12] GERHARD, R. (19 July 1957), Letter to Ricard Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [13] GERHARD, P. (5 March 1964), Letter to Mercedes Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [14] GERHARD, P. (23 October 1956), Letter to Mercedes Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Gerhard wrote to Gomis: 'We have been with Strawinsky [in Dartington Hall], I have had the opportunity to make him listen to the symphony and I am very happy with his remarks. He is very interested in the score of the *Nonet* and has very much enjoyed the idea of the accordion', GERHARD, R. (19 July 1957), Letter to Mercedes Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [17] Gerhard was so proud of the *Nonet* that he planned to send it to the Zurich music festival in 1957, but he could not finish it in time. GERHARD, P. (23 October 1956), Letter to Mercedes Gomis, Cambridge, Gomis' family documents.
- [18] GERHARD, R. (First printed in *The Score*, 17, September 1956), 'Developments in twelve-tone technique' in BOWEN, M. (ed.), 2000. *Gerhard on music. Selected writings*, Aldershot, Ashgate, pp. 129-138. Homs explains it very clearly: 'the musical composition is born and evolves through a series of superordered temporal levels. Once determined the basic pitch series of the composition (...) and its metric equivalences, the attention and the imagination of the composer begins to derive in small melodic and rhythmic figures. First in a level that we could denominate 'cellular' (in the space of a measure); from this, another one is derived, concerning the musical phrase, after it the composer reaches a third phase, the constitution of a coherent structure. The fourth level allows the integration of those relatively independent structures in greater coherent units; in the fifth level these sections are integrated in a complete movement, whereas sixth and seventh temporary planes affect to the orbit of the movement in relation to the total music piece'. HOMS, J. (2001), "Nonet (1957)" in: *Antología de la música contemporánea del 1900 al 1959*, Barcelona, Pòrtic, p. 299.
- [19] BACH, J. 2000. 'Reminiscences by two American composers' in HOMS, J. 2000. *Robert Gerhard and his music*, Trowbridge, The Anglo-Catalan Society publications, p. 116.
- [20] WHITE, J. 1993. 'National Traditions in the Music of Roberto Gerhard' in: *Tempo*, No. 184: 12.
- [21] Club 49 was an association founded to support avant-garde art (painting, literature, dance, music, etc.). In the case of music, Club 49 tried to disseminate contemporary music through commentaries with concerts and record listening sessions, related to its antecedents ADLAN and Discòfils, Homs and Gomis were outstanding members of this Club. Among other concert and listening sessions of Gerhard's music, in January 1970, Club 49 organized a concert in tribute to the composer.
- [22] GERHARD, R. (October 1957), Letter to Joaquim Homs in HOMS, J. (2000) *Robert Gerhard and his music*, Trowbridge, The Anglo-Catalan Society publications, pp. 59-60.
- [23] All the national orchestras of the period were reluctant to programme Gerhard's symphonic music.

- [24] We will soon publish a monography about *Robert Gerhard: Music and literature*, Madrid, Fundación Scherzo, and we are also preparing a biography about this composer.