Roberto Gerhard's *Romeo and Juliet* (1947) and the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Gerhard's score for the 1947 production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre was the first of his collaborations with this institution, which stretched up to the 1960s. On this occasion, Gerhard collaborated with the Stratford Theatre's director, Barry Jackson, and the stage director Peter Brook, who was at the start of his career. Given Gerhard's commitment to his works, I consider his music for this production to be much more than a decorative element. This paper analyses the meaning of Gerhard's music in the context of Brook's reading of *Romeo and Juliet* and Jackson's management of the Theatre. I will assess how Gerhard helped Brook to convey a violent impression, with which the latter tried to cast away the directors' tendency to focus on the poetic rather than on the dramatic qualities of Shakespeare's text. I will consider the polemics surrounding the use of recorded music in Stratford, following from Jackson's decision to suppress the extensive hiring of musicians.

1. ROBERTO GERHARD'S *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1947) AND THE SHAKESPEARE MEMORIAL THEATRE

The 1947 production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Stratford Memorial Theatre represented Gerhard's first foray into theatre music. He had arrived in Britain as a political refugee in 1939 and he found the most reliable source of income in the composition of so-called 'incidental' music, just like most German composers who exiled in Britain during the 1930s fleeing the rise of Nazism [1]. In the early 1940s, Gerhard mainly composed stage music, principally ballets based on Spanish folklore, most likely as a way to satisfy a taste for the exotic. These works include his ballet *Flamenco*, usually known as *Alegrías* (Rambert Company, 1943; chor: Elsa Brunelleschi), [2] the ballet *Don Quixote*, which he started in 1941 and would only finalise in 1950 (Sadler's Wells; chor: Ninette de Valois), and the music for a BBC broadcast of Eric Linklater's *Adventures of Don Quixote* (1944), based on his 1941 material for the aforementioned ballet [3]. In 1947, Gerhard starting collaborating with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, to which he contributed eight scores up to 1962, working with directors such as George Devine, Peter Hall, Nugent Monck and Donal McWhinnie [4].

The presence of a critical intention to delve beyond the exotic in Gerhard's Spanish works, invites one to approach his collaborations with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company from the conviction that his music constituted much more than an ornamental element. He was assisted in this endeavour by the innovative and committed production team in Stratford, which he joined in 1947. This team included the experienced Barry Jackson, founder of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and director of the Shakespeare Memorial theatre in Stratford since 1946 [5], the twenty-year-old stage director Peter Brook, and the German exiled set designer Rolf Gérard, who would further collaborate with Brook before being appointed to the New York Metropolitan Opera [6].

Gerhard's contribution was received either coldly or reluctantly, as we will see. The musical score was ripe with modernisms that were unusual in the Stratford theatre, and it was played from a vinyl instead of live, making some critics feel it was dehumanized, 'canned' music. Thus, Gerhard contributed to the quasi-unanimous controversy with which the production was received. Indeed,

music was a fundamental aspect of the production, as suggested by the unusual density of the score, as well as by the importance that the director Peter Brook attached to music in his writings. Given Brook's abhorrence of dogma, the disorder that reigns in his papers seems like a strategy to avoid the possibility that his ideas might be lumped together in a coherent whole. At the risk of ruining this strategy, I will draw on his writings to try to define the function that he assigned to music in drama, and to assess the extent to which Roberto Gerhard's contribution to *Romeo and Juliet* fulfilled it. However, in order to compensate for this form of interpretive violence and to avoid approaching Brook's ideas as an abstract, fixed representation of his activity, I will analyse *Romeo and Juliet* in the theatre culture, performing conditions and critical atmosphere of early postwar Stratford, mostly defined by Barry Jackson's management and the expectations that it stirred.

2. PETER BROOK, *ROMEO AND JULIET* AND MUSIC

Brook revealed the agenda underlying his production of *Romeo and Juliet* in his article 'Shakespeare isn't a bore,' published in *The Irish Times* two days after the Stratford première [7]. Brook opens his article with a celebration of the 'controversy' caused by his production of *Romeo*, which he regards as a 'measure of success.' He deems scandal a remedy for the fact that, according to him, 'Shakespeare has become, for the ordinary playgoer, a bit of a bore.' He blames the trimming of street scenes and the focus on solo and duet scenes, and defends himself against alleged charges that 'Shakespeare's poetry suffers from too "harsh" treatment at [his] hands.' Having thus defended himself against his staunchest critics, Brook puts forth the main purpose of his production:

> What I have attempted is to break away from the popular conception of *Romeo and Juliet* as a pretty-pretty, sentimental love story, and to get back to the violence, the passion, and the excitement of the stinking crowds, the feuds, the intrigues. To recapture the poetry and the beauty that arise from the Veronese sewer, and to which the story of the two lovers is merely incidental. [8]

In summary, Brook sets out to reverse the general tendency to focus on the main characters and rather aims to reflect the social atmosphere. Furthermore, he intends to shake off boredom by way of violence. But, why precisely violence, and, how could music help in such purpose? One cannot help regarding Brook's stance as hardly more than a form of provocation in which music plays a merely ornamental role, if any. Another text by Brook shows that this is not the case, as it reveals more clearly the function that he ascribes to violence and music in drama.

In 1968, Brook published *The Empty Space*, a book-length essay divided into four chapters, which reads like a theatre manifesto. The second chapter, entitled 'The Holy Theatre,' revolves around the idea of the loss of the 'Holy' in performance [9]. In this essay, Brook takes issue with 'the tame play where "higher" only means "nicer," [where] being noble only means being decent.' He recalls his *Titus Andronicus* European tour of 1955, in which he 'touched audiences directly because [he] had tapped in it a ritual of bloodshed which was recognized as true' (47) [10]. This text states it more clearly that Brook conceives of violence as a way to awake conscience, to counter the common tendency to mistake the 'Holy' for theatrical decorum, as he believes that 'all the forms of sacred art have certainly been destroyed by bourgeois values' (48). Furthermore, in this text, Brook articulates more convincingly his critique of the tendency to focus on solo and duet scenes and to trim the supporting scenes. In 'The Holy Theatre,' Brook conceives of everything that surrounds and accompanies the verse, including the supporting scenes, as a means to counter the 'tradition that has somehow wrapped itself around Shakespeare,' consisting in the association of 'poetry' with 'word-music, with sweet sounds […] so that we are conditioned by the idea that a verse play is half-way between prose and the opera, neither spoken nor sung' (48). In order to emphasise the performative qualities of Shakespeare's plays and to avoid their being mistaken for recited verse, Brook calls for 'a language of actions, a language of sounds' (49).

Brook's condemnation of the loss of the 'Holy' in theatre seems reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's criticism of the 'loss of aura' in art as a result of mechanical reproduction [11]. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' first published in 1935, Benjamin put

forward the thesis that the impact of technology on the reproduction of artworks has led to the original's loss of 'authenticity,' and of its 'authority' over the copies (214). Benjamin's central claim is that, while the agency of technology 'may not touch the actual work, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated.' (215) He calls this 'presence' with different names, such as 'authenticity' and – what has become more popular – 'aura,' which he defines as 'the essence of all that is transmissible from [an artwork's] beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced' (215). The result of this process, according to Benjamin, is the 'shattering of tradition,' and the 'liquidation of the traditional value of cultural heritage' (215). In sum, much in a Marxist fashion, Benjamin blames technological reproduction for erasing the historical marks from artworks, turning them into commodified objects of consumerism. Despite Benjamin's modern, essentialist attachment to 'authenticity,' the conception of *history* as *identity* that underlies his stance has exerted a great impact on postmodern formulations of cultural history.

Brook's 'The Holy in Theatre' is indebted to Benjamin's essay, notwithstanding the impossibility to equate fully the 'tyranny of verse' and the agency of mechanical reproduction that they vilify respectively. The loss of the 'Holy' in Brook's text is, just like the 'loss of aura' in Benjamin's essay, a side effect of what he regards as the modern, bourgeois lifestyle. Where Brook blames 'bourgeois values,' Benjamin takes issue with the 'capitalistic mode of production' (211) and 'the growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses,' which he regards as the cornerstones of Fascism (234).

The main influence on Brook, well beyond Benjamin's, was the 'Theatre of Cruelty,' an influential theory put forth by the French surrealist playwright Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Artaud's 'First Manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty' appeared in 1931 in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Together with other texts that expound on this concept, Artaud's first manifesto later came to form part of the collection *Le théâtre et son double*, first published in French in 1938 and translated into English in 1970, that is, two years after the publication of Brook's *The Empty Space*. Brook must have therefore relied on the original French, which suggests how pioneering his adaptation of Artaud's ideas was in England.

Like Brook's 'Holy Theatre', Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' point of departure is a sense of loss, namely, the feeling that 'we have lost the idea of theatre' [12]. Artaud departs from the belief that 'the damage wrought by psychological theatre, derived from Racine, has rendered us unaccustomed to the direct, violent action theatre must have' (64). Like Brook decades after, Artaud uses violence in order to overcome the encumbering agency of tradition, at which he looks back critically. Further anticipating Brook, Artaud aims to drive attention away from the poetic text by way of mass theatre and the exploration of a gesture-based language. Thus, on the one hand, he proposes 'to resort to mass theatre, thereby rediscovering a little of the poetry in the ferment of great, agitated crowds hurled against one another' (65). On the other hand, he sets out to 'break theatre's subjugation to the text and rediscover the idea of a kind of unique language somewhere in between gesture and thought' (68). Artaud's comprehensive theatrical language 'calls on music, dancing, mime or mimicry […] up to the point where they can co-operate in a kind of pivotal expression without favouring any particular art' (69). This integrative endeavour reminds one of Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk,* aimed at restoring a re-invented conception of Greek tragedy based on the coalescence of the different artistic disciplines [13]. Indeed, music is one integral element in Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty', one of the 'magic means affecting sensibility,' which consist of 'differing intensities of colour, light or sound, using vibrations and tremors, musical, rhythmic repetition or the repetition of spoken phrases, bringing tonality or a general diffusion of light into play' (84).

Based on Artaud, Brook set up a theatrical experiment that he named the Theatre of Cruelty, which he narrated in *The Empty Space*. This experiment was aimed at working 'towards different wordless languages,' [14] and it included an exercise consisting in asking an actor to 'imagine a dramatic situation that did not involve any physical movement' and to 'discover what was the very least he needed before understanding could be reached: was it a sound, a movement, a rhythm[?]' (49-50). Music therefore serves Brook in finding alternatives to the verse as the origin of dramatic

impulses and situations. Music is an integral part of Brook's idea of drama to the same extent as most other elements. I feel compelled to regard Gerhard's music for Brook's *Romeo and Juliet* from this viewpoint [15].

3. MUSIC AT THE STRATFORD MEMORIAL THEATRE

Music was regularly played in performances at the Stratford Memorial Theatre since, at least, the late nineteenth-century, as Brodie has documented [16]. The appointment of Sir Barry Jackson as director of the Shakespeare Festival and director of the Memorial Theatre for three seasons (1946-1948) entailed significant changes on how music was to be conceived and performed. Jackson dispensed with musicians and commissioned recorded music, just as he had done before in the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. On the one hand, this measure was a way of saving some of the money spent in carrying out Jackson's idea that a theatre should build its own scenery, costumes and props. The execution of this idea had caused the 1947 season to end in a net loss of almost £6000, contrasting with the highly profitable management of his predecessor [17]. On the other hand, the use of recordings compensated for the lack of space necessary for a large ensemble [18].

Jackson's decision led to a dispute with the Musicians' Union, which ended with the Festival Company having to pay a handsome sum of money to sort the matter out [19]. Interestingly, Jackson replied in *The Birmingham Post* the 15 February 1946 that 'the decision [was] not made hastily' and that 'to add a sort of running musical commentary to the greatest dramatic poetry known appears to be an entirely needless proceeding.' Jackson's stance left little room for music. However, as we will see, Gerhard's score is far from a collection of occasional musical brushstrokes and it results from a somewhat organic and large-scale conception which entailed the use of larger and more abundant musical resources than was customary.

The contrast between Jackson's public disclosure and Gerhard's contribution suggests that either Jackson was not fully sincere when he faced criticism, or that Brook and/or Gerhard took a departure from Jackson's prescriptions. Although this was the last collaboration between Jackson and Brook there is no evidence to maintain that this departure resulted from a strong disagreement between the two regarding this or any other matter. Indeed, in his memoirs, Brook reminisces sympathetically about Jackson [20]. A look at Gerhard's score will provide some answers.

4. GERHARD'S SCORE FOR ROMEO AND JULIET

Gerhard's score for *Romeo and Juliet* is made up of twenty-five self-contained musical numbers, which lack enough large-scale musical development to be considered as movements. Although some of the musical numbers present exclusive musical material, the general characteristic of the score is that bits of music are repeated across different musical numbers, thus endowing the work with an organic sense.

The main compositional method consists in the development by repetition or recapitulation and, above all, by variation, of a series of musical motifs which I have reduced to a series of sixteen. The fact that the total of the musical numbers (twenty-five) is larger than the number of motifs (sixteen) gives an idea of the extent to which Gerhard utilises the principle of motivic development. Figure 1 lists the sixteen basic motifs. The numerals below each theme or motif refer to similar numbers in the prompt book and, therefore, indicate their place in the play. The encircled numerals stand for the self-contained musical numbers, whereas the non-encircled numerals stand for fragments of those numbers. This numeric profusion would, in principle, allow us to match score and prompt book, were it not that there are fifty-seven numerals in the promptbook and sixty-five in the score [21]. Intuition, however, allows for plausible results.

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.2

Figure 1.3

The all-pervasiveness of motivic development and variation, and the constant repetition or recapitulation of material across the different musical numbers bestows an organic sense upon the work. However, this organic quality arises from a functional indeterminacy of the musical motifs,

which work differently and even contradictorily across their multiple occurrences. The only exception is the motif presented in Figure 2, which appears consistently associated with scenes of physical or verbal violence, especially when the confrontation between the Capulet and Montague houses is made explicit. Given Brook's violent project and the profusion of physical and verbal antagonisms in the play, it is hardly striking that this is the most repeated musical motif throughout the score. But not all the fights have musical accompaniment, and it seems hard to establish the reason for this difference in treatment. Should one believe that Gerhard and Brook were seeking 'the unpredictable'?
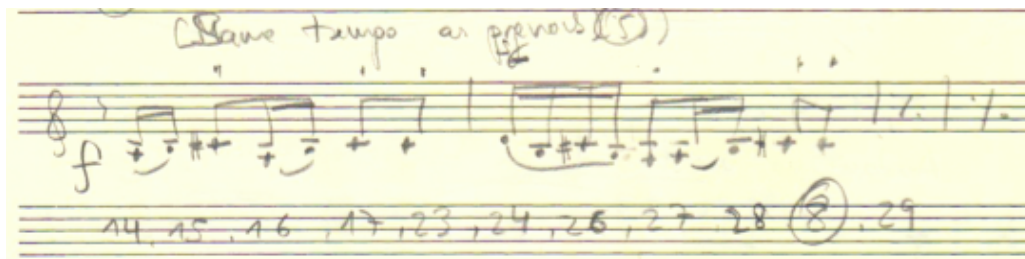

Figure 2

Given that this motif holds a particular relevance in the formulation of Brook's aesthetics of violence, I would like to analyse in more detail how it works in the play. It first appears in the ball at the Capulet's castle in which Romeo and Juliet meet [22]. This music not only functions as the diegetic music for the ballet, but also sets the mood for Tybalt's rage at the sight of Romeo. Furthermore, it brings this scene to an end, thus framing the moment in which Romeo and Juliet first meet. This meeting is accompanied by the contrasting motif – *Con silencio* – played in the violas, shown in Figure 3. The 'violent' motif reappears in the scene in which Romeo goes to tell Friar Laurence about his love for Juliet. Music acts again as a frame for their conversation – which has no music – accompanying the Friar's opening, highly metaphorical speech as well as the ending dialogue between Mercutio and Benvolio, in which the former expresses his fear that Tybalt might kill Romeo in a duel. The next instance of music based on this motif is the transition between scenes 2 and 3 – of Brook's restructuring – of the second act, thus accompanying Juliet's anxiety while she waits for the nurse to return with the news that Romeo shall marry her [23].
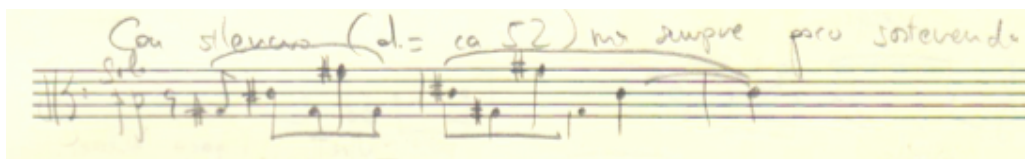

Figure 3

These things considered, it is possible that the main – though not the only – function of this motif is to symbolise the confrontation between the two houses. The fact that this music does not appear anymore after the fight in which Tybalt and Mercutio die [24], confirms this hypothesis. Not that the confrontation between the Montague and Capulet houses is resolved in this fight, but it is not expressed again in physical terms once its most active spokespersons are dead. The hectic nature of this motif serves well the warring mood in which the aforementioned confrontation finds expression. The use of polytonality, understood as the coexistence of two antagonistic tonal centres that fight for the musical hegemony could well be a musical representation of the confrontation, were it not that it appears throughout the score, and that it is a common feature in Gerhard's works. The emphasis on this musical motif makes it seem as if Gerhard was helping Brook to formulate an aesthetics of violence. The focus on the families' conflict and the absence of music in the love scenes also connect with Brook's interest in the 'intrigues' and his deeming of the love story as 'merely incidental.'

5. CRITICAL RECEPTION

In his memoirs, Brook prides himself on the controversy stirred by the extensive use of violence. Barry Jackson's contention that he 'never saw such fights' and that 'night after night, life and limb was in jeopardy,' makes it hardly surprising that 'the press was almost unanimous in condemnation' [25]. Besides violence, the most recurring theme was Daphne Slater's bad acting as Juliet [26]. It seems as if Brook's endeavours to drive attention away from actors through the introduction of massive, crowd scenes, was not enough to stop the critic's inertia. Exceptionally, two reviews proved sympathetic to this aim – though modestly. The review in *Theatre World* made it evident that the intention of the set designer, Rolf Gérard, to bring the 'Mediterranean blue' to Stratford was unusual and even exotic, as it stated that Brook's Verona 'resembles… old Baghdad, thronged with negroes, Jews and watersellers' [27]. The review in *The Times* stated that Brook 'sacrifices poetry, acting, and even the story itself, to pictorial splendour,' and that he 'invariably achieves decorative significance with crowded rooms or street scenes, and surely never had the factions brawled with more vigour or verisimilitude' [28]. However, it regretted that Brook 'appears to loose interest in humanity when he is not treating it in the mass and to be far more concerned with stage an exciting duel than to catch the lyric emotion of the tragedy' [29].

Comments on the music were scarce. The same critic of *The Times* was less favourable about 'the use of mechanical music,' which, he wrote, 'empties the orchestra pit only to emphasize the remoteness of stage from auditorium, which is what is fundamentally wrong with the Memorial Theatre' [30]. A similar concern with technology emerges in the *Birmingham Mail* review on Norman Wright's 1947 production of *The Tempest*, with recorded music by Lennox Berkeley; the critic stated that the 'canned' music 'left something to be desired' [31]. These reactions seem natural in light of the almost complete absence of previous experiences with recorded music in Stratford. Furthermore, Gerhard's modernisms raised general objections. The critic of *The Observer* thought that 'the foolish scenery and unhappy music, meandering into some of the finest lines, were sorry handicaps' [32]. Writing for the *News Chronicle,* Alan Dent contended that 'Roberto Gerhard's music makes a vague, ignoble noise, which is much out of place in the masque in the Capulet's house, where it accompanies a jumbled dance twice repeated' [33]. Dent read Gerhard's music in this scene as mere dance music, thus making it subservient to the action. This critic overlooked the fact that this music could operate simultaneously in different layers of consciousness, as I have explained above, and that it could thus transcend the decorative or descriptive in order to depict the confrontation of the Montagues and Capulets. In general terms, the critics' lack of experience with modernist scores and recorded music, together with the controversy raised by the extensive use of violence, caused that most of the strategies at play in Gerhard's music passed unrecognised. No critic engaged in the effective musical semiotics consisting in the establishment of invariants in the way musical and dramatic elements interact with each other at different moments, such as in the violent scenes. The overall reception of the production may be deemed a flop, but it inspired subsequent Stratford productions, and it was the starting point for Gerhard's decades-long collaboration with the Memorial Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

6. REFERENCES

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[3]   For a full recount of the creative process leading from one work to the other see David Drew's notes to his edition: Roberto Gerhard, *Don Quixote (1950)*, (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1991); also see Antoni Pizá's review of this edition, '*Don Quixote (1950)* by Roberto Gerhard,' *Notes*, 52, 3 (1996) 1025-1027. Gerhard also composed the ballet *Pandora* (Cambridge Arts Theatre, 1944) which presents extensive use of Catalan folklore. However, unlike in his other ballets, in *Pandora* folklore is not treated as an 'exotic' reference. It is rather intended to establish a symbolic parallelism between the Second World War dramas and the plight of Catalonia under Franco. WHITE, J. 1993. 'National Traditions in the Music of Roberto Gerhard,' in *Tempo*, 184: 2-3.

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[22]   BROOK, P. 1947. *Romeo and Juliet prompt book: Shakespeare Memorial Theatre*, Stratford: The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archive. Act I, Scene 4 [Act I, Scene 5]. Hereafter, scene indications refer to Brook's restructuring, while those in brackets refer to the original edition of the play on which Brook made his annotations: William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, with preface and glossary by Israel Gollancz* (London: J. M. Dent, 1896).

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[24]   Act II, Scene 5 [Act III, Scene 1].

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[28] Anonymous, 'Romeo and Juliet,' *The Times,* 7 April 1947.

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