

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 11 March 2023
7.30pm

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Will Liverman baritone
Adam Walker flute
Sean Shibe guitar
Owen Gunnell percussion

Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012) El Cimarrón (1969-70)

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Hans Werner Henze was a German-born composer who composed a body of revolutionary musical works for different compositional contexts – particularly the opera house and concert hall space. *El Cimmarón* is considered one of Henze's most significant compositions and is, in fact, rooted in his socio-political lived experiences. Therefore, before discussing the specifics of this work, it is important to contextualise *El Cimmarón* by offering a biographical backdrop to the composition.

Henze was born on 1 July 1926 to Margarete and Franz Henze. During his formative years growing up in Germany, Henze witnessed the ideological conception and administrative rise of the Nazis' oppressive regime during the early 1930s and, given its procedures of mass murder and ethics of oppression, developed an extreme disdain towards what he perceived as an intolerable society. As a young and emerging composer developing his political awareness, Henze's disdain intensified towards his compatriots who refused to conjure the moral and political courage to stand up and speak out against the social atrocities and political evils of Hitler's Nazi regime. The advancement of Hitler's political administration and oppressive administration, in addition to the Cold War, became a serious cause for concern for Henze. In addition to this, Henze also experienced crisis on a personal level; one fuelled by the social isolation he faced as a gay man living within an oppressive and intolerant society.

Yet even in the face of personal and political crises, Henze studied at the Braunschweig State Music School, where he developed his musical and compositional skills and gained greater political understanding of Nazi oppression. Soon after completing his education, given the disgust he had developed for his countrymen who remained silent and complacent about the persecution and injustice surrounding them, Henze relocated to Italy where he strengthened his personal and musical conviction and artistry.

Having developed a political and artistic voice inspired by his experiences, Henze composed a body of significant musical works and went on to become one of Europe's leading composers during the period following the Second World War. Evidenced in his compositions was a diversity of compositional dimensions: full scale operas, chamber and comic opera, concert pieces and works for radio. At the heart of his compositions was a commitment to left-

wing politics which he developed during his youth and his ideological conversion to socialism. Henze was known to express his political sentiments within his musical works, believing that art could be a vehicle for such expression; *El Cimmarón* is a prime example.

Composed in 1969-70 during one of Henze's most overtly political periods, *El Cimmarón* follows earlier pieces *The Raft of the Medusa* (written as a requiem for Che Guevara) and *Versuch über Schweine* ('Essay on Pigs'). The title of the piece, *El Cimmarón*, means 'The runaway slave'. The libretto is taken from *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, put together from transcribed interviews with Esteban Montejo, an escaped Cuban slave. Born into slavery in Cuba in the 1860s, Montejo escaped to freedom before slavery was formally abolished in Cuba in 1886. At the age of around 104, Montejo narrated his story in interviews with ethnologist Miguel Barnet, who subsequently edited and published the story of Montejo's life in 1966. Within the interview, Montejo spoke of his experiences as a slave living on a plantation in the Las Villas region of Cuba.

Given Henze's commitment to left-wing ideology and his advocacy for social justice – in addition to living in Cuba between 1969 and 1970, and being exposed to Montejo's story through an invitation by author and translator Hans Magnus Enzensberger – Henze composed *El Cimmarón* to create awareness on social injustice and the liberating power of ordinary people. Significant to mention also is that Henze met Montejo and, in awe, stated: 'I had never seen a man that old. He was as tall as a tree, walked slowly and very erect; his eyes were alive; he radiated dignity; he seemed to be sure he was a historical personality'.

El Cimmarón through Henze's musical lens is a theatrical composition set for three instrumentalists and a vocalist. As Henze puts it more aptly, it is a 'recital for four musicians' – namely, the baritone (the voice lyrically and sonically personifying *El Cimmarón* himself); flute, guitar, and percussion. The composer's principles and convictions, and his emotional connection to the subject matter, which has its roots in his formative experience growing up in Germany, serve as a backdrop to the piece. As a work in performance, *El Cimmarón* sets out to raise our social and political awareness as much as it is tasked with expanding our musical imagination.

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Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012)

El Cimarrón (1969-70)

*Hans Magnus Enzensberger, based on Miguel
Barnet's rendering of words by Esteban Montejo
Sung translation by Christopher Keene*

Part 1

I. The World

Back then, in the days of slavery,
Often I stood looking into the sky.
Its beautiful colour was good to see.
Once the sky began to glow just like a burning coal.
After that there was a terrible dry spell.
Another time, the sun disappeared over the entire
island,
The day was blacker than night.
It was as if the moon and the sun were fighting.
The world went backwards.
People were struck dumb with terror.
Other people were killed: heart attacks.
I don't know what caused these things to happen.
It is all Nature's concern.
Nature is everything: even those things we cannot
see.
Gods up above us rule our fortunes.
I know that they can fly around us.
Anything that they want to do,
They can accomplish with magic spells.
But why didn't they do something about the slavery?
I can't figure out the answer to that.
As I see it, slavery began with the scarlet bandanas.
Till then all of Africa was protected by the ancient
wall.
The ancient wall was made of palm leaves and bark.
In it there were a thousand insects,
And they would sting and bite like the Devil.
That's the reason the white men weren't in Africa
long before.
Then they had the idea to play a trick and wave their
scarlet bandanas.
When the black kings saw the red bandanas,
They shouted: 'Go! Bring me that scarlet cloth!'
And the Negroes ran out to the ships,
Like a herd of sheep they were forever trapped.
The Negroes always had a kind of fatal attraction for
the colour red.
Red was their undoing.
That is how the slaves came to Cuba.

II. The Cimarrón

Because I was a Cimarrón,
I never got to know my parents.
I never even saw them.
This is not sad, though, because it is true.
My godparents told me when I was born:
December, 1860, on the day of Saint Esteban, the
one in the calendars.
That's why I'm called Esteban.
Those days, white men were buying and selling the
blacks as though they were piglets.
Me too.
I went to the sugar plantation Flor de Sagua.
I was only ten years old the first time I tried to
escape.
They captured me and beat me up with the chain;
Even now I still can feel it.
They carried me back with handcuffs put on
And sent me again to the fields.
The blacks were treated in those days just like
convicts.
Now no-one will believe these stories,
Although I lived through it all myself.
If a Negro child caught the Master's eye,
They took him with them to the house,
And God knows what they did to him there.
The whole day long they'd make him stand next to
the table
Keeping off the flies.
Those white men would stuff themselves the whole
day long,
And if a single insect got in their food,
They'd curse him, and have the servants whip him.
I have never been in the master's house.

III. Slavery

Every morning at half past four the Overseer rang
the Ave Maria.
By the ninth stroke all of the slaves had to be out of
bed.
At six they rang the bell for the inspection out front
of the barracks:
The women to the left, the men to the right.
It was a big, wide, dust-covered place.
There was not even one single tree:
Not one palm tree, not one cedar, not one fig tree.
After roll call they drove us out to the sugar fields.
There they made us work until the sun began to set.
Then they rang the prayer bell.
At nine o'clock, the last bell sounded
And the Overseer came to the gate and locked us in.
During slavery, I saw some really terrible things
happen.
In the boiler house of the refinery were the stocks.
The stocks were made of crude and strong thick
boards
And there were five holes in them:
For your head, your hands and both of your feet.
Any kind of provocation, any kind of crap,
They would lock you up in the stocks and beat you:
Two, sometimes three months at a time.
The Overseer always had his whip ready;
They made the pregnant women lie on their
stomachs,
So they would not lose their baby.
Believe me, I've seen many of my comrades with
bleeding shoulders!
To heal your torn-up skin, they would rub you with
tobacco leaves,
With salt and with urine.
That burned you like fire!

IV. Escape

I knew that I could not stand that kind of life much
longer.
Only a nobody would put up with it.
I could not stay there.
All I thought of was to escape.
Often I could not go to sleep:
I had my escape to plan.
The slaves were mostly frightened by the thought
Of living in the mountains.
'You'll be captured just like that', they told me.
But still I decided:
The woods would be better.
What could be worse than working in the fields?
That was like being in hell!
I kept my eyes on the Overseer,
That son of a bitch,
I watched him closely.
I can still see him now.
He never took his hat off.
The slaves were frightened of him.
He used a whip:
One slash from that and he'd cut your skin to
ribbons.
One day I couldn't take it any more.
My rage swept my body like a fire.
I whistled and he turned round to look.
I grabbed a rock from the ground as he turned
And I smashed it into his filthy, ugly face.
I hit him good and hard.
I knew that, for he screamed;
I ran off and did not look back until I was alone in the
mountains,
In the woods.

V. *The Forest*

I liked my life in the woods.
I knew my way around there.
I spent many years out there in the forest.
I had good luck like any child.
I wanted nothing more to do with slavery.
I would forget that I was in hiding
And start up whistling and singing my songs.
For a long time, I didn't say a word to anyone at all.
How I loved that peace and quiet!
With my rope, I set out and captured some piglets.
I cooked the meat on my fire.
I had lots of vegetables there,
And leaves, quite useful for cigars to roll yourself,
And wild honey.
The water in the mountains was very good.
I had most everything all except women.
Women kept out of the woods.
Only horses.
There were horses.
I could always find myself one,
But those horses whinnied,
As if the Devil rode them.
The overseers would hear the noise and come on the
run.
An idiot who would get caught and put in jail
Just for screwing a horse!
Out there in the woods, I had to learn how to live with
the trees.
I know one special tree who sang nights:
Utsch utsch ui ui utsch utsch like a bird.
Ah, a tree is something splendid.
It is like a God.
Ah, no-one dares to hurt or kill it,
For a tree always gives you all he has.
Don't waste your trust on others.
You can't even trust the Holy Ghost.
A Cimarrón only has himself to rely on.
But I had the birds and the trees to entertain me
And I always had enough to eat.
In the woods I had everything.

VI. *Ghosts*

When you try to talk of spirits and ghosts,
It's impossible to say just what they look like.
Everybody sees these spirits,
Although most people do not want to talk about it.
I myself have seen unbelievable things happen.
The Headless Horseman, sure,
He is a horrid apparition.
Once I met that Headless Horseman and he told me:
'Go down there and get that gold!'
I did as he told me, scared to death,
And what do you think I found?
Just a pile of black coal!
That was the ghost of some poor joker
Or else some stupid devil.
There's another kind of spirit called the Guijes.
They come out of the rivers and sun themselves on a
warm day.
Dark, black, little people with heads like frogs have.
And the Mermaids come up from the sea,
Especially on St John's Day.
They love to comb their hair
And coax the men to come after them.
They often drag a fisherman down in the sea.
They have a special magic by which the man does
not drown.
But you should not be afraid of spirits.
The living can be far more dangerous than the dead
are!
If you should meet a ghost, then you must ask:
'What is it you want, Brother?'
When someone dies or if he's asleep,
Right away his soul gets up and runs off.
It is tired because it must put up all day with so many
things.
That's why it runs off and flies through the sky and
over the ocean,
Like a snail that has left its shell.
I don't want to think much about it.
It is all so mysterious.
It makes a man tired.
But a man keeps on thinking,
And mostly, when no-one's round him,
Thinks even in his dreams.
It is not good to talk about it.
For many a man, it's cost his life, all this talking.
Anyway, these ghosts are no different from some of
those fairy tales
That seem to have no ending.
No-one knows the answer.

VII. The false Freedom

One day I heard people shouting:
'We are free!' That's what they cried.
I heard it, but I couldn't believe it.
I don't know why, but I thought to myself:
This is a lie.
I decided to leave the mountains.
As I left the forest,
I met an old woman with two children in her arms.
I spoke to her:
'Tell me, is it true that the slaves are really free now?'
The woman answered: 'Yes, we are free.'
So I went further and tried to find myself some work.
They'd taken away the locks and chains,
Unbolted the doors of the barracks,
And the guards were also gone.
But the work out in the fields was the same as ever.
After three months,
I had torn all the skin off my hands
And my feet were badly swollen.
The sugar cane and heat nearly killed you.
A day in the fields, it seems never-ending.
The overseers were just as bad as before.
If someone tried to take a break, they told you:
'You'll get yourself fired!' That was what they called liberation,
Which we all had heard so much about!
I told myself at the time that this was a filthy lie.
Ranting and raving don't prove one thing.

Part 2

VIII. Women

The finest thing in the world
Is a woman.
I could always find me a woman who would tell me:
'I am going with you'.
When I was in need of women, I went to town.
On Sunday all of the streets were full of dancers.
Those days the girls were very different.
They did not make things difficult.
When they found someone they liked,
They would take him out to the fields
And there they would lie in the sugar cane
Making love.
That is what I liked:
One today, tomorrow have a different one.
I have had every kind of girl there is:
Soft ones and wild ones,
Blonde ones and dark ones.
When I think about it,
It seems as if there must be a lot of my children
around.
There was a woman with whom I stayed a long time.
She was one of those most attractive mulberry-
coloured mulatto girls.
Her name was Ana.
Only, this girl was a witch.
Every evening, she summoned the ghosts to the
house
And talked things over:
They used to scare the life out of me.
But to stick forever with one alone,
That's simply not the life for me.
Now I am old.
From time to time I still can find a girl to go to bed
with,
Only it's not the same as it once was.
A woman is something splendid.
I'm telling the truth now:
Out of all the things that I've had in all my life,
The best were women.

IX. The Machines

For a long time, engineers kept on coming and going.
They ran around the fields
And inspected the old sugar refinery.
Nothing was good enough for them.
When we heard: 'The engineers are coming',
Then all of us had to put on our Sunday best,
And the Overseers made us shine the boilers
Till they shone like the sun itself.
The engineers, they were mostly foreigners.
They usually came from England or America.
The good old steam engine went much too slow to suit them.
They needed a much bigger one installed.
They also brought in a centrifuge.
The sugar works at Ariosa had now three machines.
The grist mill for chopping the sugar cane,
The rolling press crushing the pulp out.
The grinder ground up the scraps burnt in the furnaces.
When I saw how those three great big machines operated together,
I could not believe my own eyes.
They ran all by themselves:
An incredible sight.
I had not ever seen such amazing progress before.
The planters liked these new improvements,
The faster the mills, the bigger the crop they got.
As for the machinists, the boiler and cart makers,
They thought they were better than everyone.
They got to live in the comfortable houses
But those machines also brought a lot of hate and injustice.
If you worked out in the fields,
In the burning sunshine,
They did you no good.

X. The Priests

The faithful should best be left untroubled.
I never had much interest in religious things.
When I was young, everyone in Cuba
Used to call himself a Christian,
Even the biggest gangsters.
In Ariosa on the Holy days the sugar mills were closed
And the fields were as deserted just as a graveyard.
The priests started with their prayers
First thing in the morning,
And kept on praying the whole day long.
The church was very close,
But I never set foot inside it.
Their holy church was a real whorehouse.
'Your Reverence, give me your blessing.'
That's what the clever girls said to the priest
Before they went to bed with him.
I did not give a Goddamn for the priest.
There were some real scoundrels in the priesthood.
Always looking around for a piece of ass.
Any children they had they hid under their cassocks
And called them their nephews or their godchildren.
An Ariosa all of the priests were most powerful,
They interfered in everything.
They had a lot of money but they kept it all for themselves.
You can bet your life that they never thought of caring
For the men in the sugar mill.
And they never came into the machine houses.
Perhaps they were afraid that they would suffocate there.
The priests were soft and weak as butter.
Actually, there aren't any true Catholics in Cuba.
In fact, everyone has a magic all of his own.
All of the religions had been mixed up together.
The Spanish religion is weak; the African is strong.
Don't try to argue about religion.
To be patient is the most important thing.
Without that, everything in life seems a lot harder.

XI. The Rebellion

Then came the time when the whole world
Began to talk of rebellion.

It smelled like war!

'Of the Spaniards,' they said,
'We've had more than enough
And Viva Cuba libre!'

I listened to all of this and said not one word.
But the Revolution pleased me.

I had lots of respect for the Anarchists;
They were not afraid of anything
And they risked their necks.
Only, don't fool yourself!

The war serves to destroy what faith may be left in
us.

There your brothers die before your eyes
And you can't help them at all.

And when it's all over,
That's when the filthy rats come from their tunnels
And help themselves to a real feast.

And then, you could not just run away
When the going got too rough.

You had to take it, or you were worthless.
The Negroes, they did not waste too much time
Asking with the revolution came.

The war had to be.

No-one wanted to be kept in shackles,
Or eat the rotten meat or to go cut the sugar in the
fields.

It was not fair that the Whites had everything
And that we had no freedom left.

That's why we all fought for our independence.
We fought to save our skins.

He who stayed home lost all his friends.
He died of loneliness.

XII. The Battle of Mal Tiempo

In December of '95 I told my friends what I was
thinking:

'It is time for us to stand up for ourselves.'

That very afternoon, a number of us left the refinery,
We went to the nearest farm we found.

I asked the farmer very nicely:

'Please sir, let us have some of your horses.
I'll take the saddles, too.'

We all mounted up and galloped away.

In Las Villas, we joined the revolutionaries.

We did not have any rifles, only our big machetes.

Our commander said before battle:

'When you see Spaniards, cut them to bits with your
machetes!'

Mal Tiempo is in a big, wide plain,

Round it are sugar cane and pineapple fields.

It was early one morning.

When the Spaniards saw us, they all started to
tremble.

We scared them to death with our machetes.

Many threw themselves on the ground.

Some of them left behind their fancy rifles,

While they tried to hide behind trees.

I must say, some of those bastards really had guts.

One little Spaniard very nearly killed me off.

I grabbed him by the collar

And held him tight.

He gave me one look and screamed:

'You are a bunch of savages!'

The Spaniards were wondering if we did not just slice
their heads right off.

They were certain that we were not human beings,
just cattle.

The fight lasted no longer than half an hour,

And yet it was a bloody and terrible killing.

When we were done, everywhere Spanish heads
were lying

Between the pineapple bushes.

At Mal Tiempo the Cubans realised how strong they
were.

It was a mighty big triumph for the Revolution,

A tremendous massacre.

So it had to be.

XIII. The Bad Victory

We marched down to Havana town to celebrate our
victory.
The place was like a fairground.
Where machetes were seen,
There were the heroes.
The women fell to us like plums that fall from trees.
The harbour echoed by day and night with drum
beats.
The people threw their hats and their handkerchiefs
up in the air.
Everywhere sounded the rhumba.
It seemed like the end of the world.
Everybody kept on screaming:
'Viva Cuba libre!'
There were some snags in our glorious victory.
For the Cubans let themselves believe
The Yankees only meant to visit our little island for
pleasure.
Soon it was plain to see:
The Yankees came with the plan
Of stealing the nicest piece of cake for themselves.
So then we knew:
The Yankees are the biggest pile of shit!
This is true.
Tell me, who brought them to Cuba, then?
It was all those filthy rich Cubans
Who always managed to get their fingers in every
pie.
And don't forget our loyal army officers:
They had lots to do with it!
The Yankees strutted around in yellow uniforms all
day long,
Always nice and fancy
And always dead drunk.
'Nigger! Nigger!' that is what they called the Blacks.
And whenever a pretty woman came somewhere
near them,
Then they'd say: 'Fucky! Fucky! Fucky! Fucky!'
If I had to choose between the Spaniards and the
Gringos,
I'd rather have the Spaniards.
At least as long as they stay in Spain.
Everyone should stay where he belongs!
When the war was over with,
I saw that the town was full of swindling and
cheating.
'Nigger! Brother! Here you'll get rich!'
Yeah, a fat chance!
In Havana, people often died of hunger.
I packed up my things and walked down by the
harbour
To the railroad station.
And then I went back to the sugar fields.
And I did not have a cent.
I have forgotten nothing.

XIV. Friendliness

The best thing in the world
Is when we behave like brothers to each other.
You won't find that in the city.
In the towns there is too much money.
Rich men believe that they can rule the world,
And won't help a single buddy.
In the country it is different.
The place where I come from,
People treated all of the neighbours like brothers.
Each would help the others,
Whether it was farming or a cartload or burying a
relative.
When they helped you,
A hut made of palms could be built with a roof
In two or at most three days.
Everyone worked together;
We all knew one man alone would get tired
And would not get much done.
Believe me, all this goes to show
What I call friendliness.
Much of this, you won't find now in the world.
The people are now so hostile.
That's why I'd rather be alone.

XV. The Machete

Maybe I will die tomorrow.
But I am not hiding my face, not yet.
Once, we were forced to keep quiet:
Naked and filthy in the mountains
With the Spanish divisions marching right by
Like a bunch of tin soldiers
With all their powerful new-fangled weapons.
Now all that is different.
The truth can no longer be hidden.
I don't want to die.
I shall be here for all the battles that are coming.
I shan't go into the trenches.
I shan't need a new rifle.
My old machete, my big machete, that's all I need.

Text from the book by Miguel Barnet.

Translated and adapted by Hans Magnus Enzensberger.

English version by Christopher Keene.

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