

MUSIC

Settling old scores

Rick Jones discovers a forgotten genius of 20th-century music

Alfred Schnittke Archive

Laurie Grove, London SE14

It's a surprise to discover that the manuscripts, sketches and scores of Alfred Schnittke (1934-98), one of the greatest composers of the second half of the 20th century, are kept not in Moscow, but in a terraced house belonging to the Goldsmiths college in Deptford, south-east London, where they can be viewed by appointment. The appointments book has been fuller than usual recently because Schnittke's music is the focus of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's *Between Two Worlds* concert series.

Schnittke is still relatively little known in the west. Between the 1960s and 1980s, millions of Russians heard him as a film composer, in which guise he is much more a witty purveyor of heroic themes and common-time dances than the taciturn creator of astringent, complex absolute music he was elsewhere. In his serious pieces the dance is still paramount, but is clothed in jagged harmony and tone-row melodies that inhabit a pictureless world of pure sound – socialist unrealism, in a sense. His fancy flits between worlds and eras. A favourite instrument is the harpsichord, reeking of pre-revolutionary decadence in his ultra-modern scores.

The director and part-owner of the archive is Schnittke's biographer Professor Alexander Ivashkin, who is also one of the world's leading cellists and will play Schnittke's *Second Cello Concerto* in the festival. When we meet, he emphasises the importance of the archive. "People visit from all over the world. It is the only real source for Schnittke experts."

Ivashkin leads me up a narrow staircase, and unlocks first a small white room and second a nondescript steel cabinet in which hang the 80 or so plastic wallets containing the composer's works. Schnittke left Russia with the end of communism in 1989 and moved to Hamburg, where he germanicised by adding C to the more Russian "Shnittke". He died nine years later, after a series of strokes had progressively robbed him of his speech, his mobility and his ability to write. "It affected only words, not music," says Ivashkin. "It was a medical case, but to me it's mystical, too. He could communicate only through music and only with his left hand."

He shows me copies of scores covering the period. In *Klingende Buchstaben*, written in Russia, the script is confident, neatly laid out

in black ink. In the *Quartet for Percussion Instruments*, after the second stroke, the notes are bigger and the bar lines wobbly and unperpendicular. In the *Ninth Symphony*, written during Schnittke's third stroke, when he was almost completely paralysed, the struggle to steer the pen is shockingly apparent in the agonising multi-circling of the wild notes and the many angry, scrawled crossings-out. The absence of words is striking: no title, no dynamic markings, nothing save the bald notes.

Yet the work in performance is anything but confused. The last movement in particular is as skilful an exercise in counterpoint as Brahms accomplished in his fourth. It is a last work that becomes the summary of a life and has the lucidity of final comprehension.

We talk about the series and Ivashkin tells me excitedly about Schnittke's opera *The History of Dr Johann Faustus*, which has been performed only once. "Schnittke identified with Faust. He felt the strokes were retaliation because he had dealt with evil forces. Mephistopheles appears only in the final act as pop singer and counter-tenor – one vulgar, one angelic.

"The other seminal piece in the festival," he also says, "is the *Third Symphony*. It's a history of German symphony in a true calligraphic score. You could just publish it – it's like a painting," he says and opens a manuscript in which mathematics, art and music combine in swaths across the pages, every one of the double basses in canon a beat apart, like Wagner at the start of *Rheingold*. The LPO series promises to reveal one of the geniuses of our time. ●

The Between Two Worlds concert series begins at the Royal College of Music, London SW7, on 15 November. For more information visit: www.lpo.co.uk/schnittke