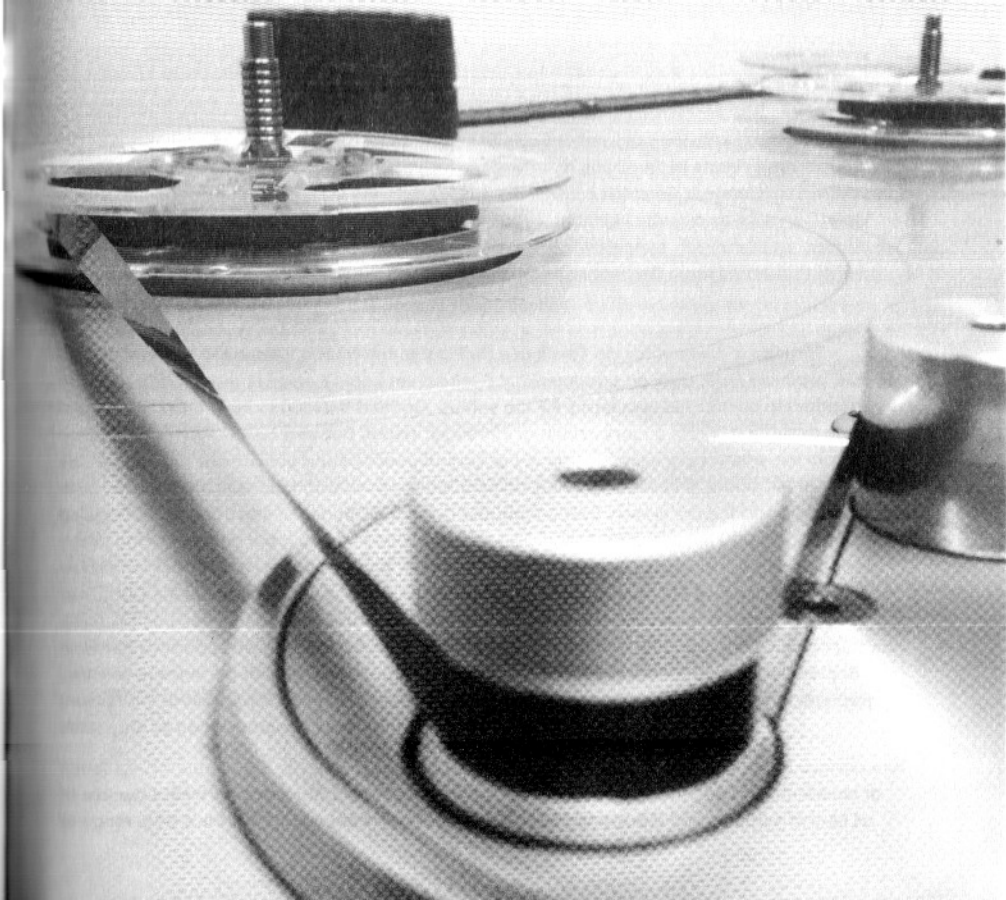


A NOTE ON GERHARD'S LAMENT FOR THE DEATH OF A BULLFIGHTER (1959)

In spring 1968 Roberto Gerhard reported that he had a gramophone company interested in his *Audiomobiles*—the longer *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter* 'would be ideal for the backbone of one of the sides,' he remarked. This CD puts forth the venture of that shelved publication project drawing on the open-reel magnetic tapes in the composer's personal archive, which at the time of writing have been recently transferred to digital format. It is fair to say that it has taken some time for that enterprise to gain momentum (45 years!). Dirt has settled onto Gerhard's tapes and it has become unusual to release electroacoustic music on phonographic records in the meantime. But the *Lament* remains a pivotal work in the composer's catalogue and marks a significant milestone in Gerhard's adventurous life and rich artistic journey.

Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías (1934) is, for many, Federico García Lorca's poetic masterpiece. Lorca wrote this vast elegy in homage to his friend, the bullfighter, writer and supporter of the *Generación del 27*, Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, who died as a result of a fatal accident in the bullring of Manzanares in August 1934. Lorca was at the peak of his success and the *Llanto* soon became widely known across Spain, awakening popular passions. In this poem Lorca transfigures the reality of the bullfight in a ritual and mythic vision that exceeds any traditional viewpoint. The *Llanto* is a celebration of the hero and of the higher faculties of the human being engaged with the ancient tradition of the elegy. But Lorca's vision stands apart from the classic pastoral setting of the elegiac conventions and rejects its traditional message of comfort as false. The poem's truth is that death should be faced for what it is—Lorca's *Llanto* is the scenario of the struggle between the human being and nothingness.

Decades later, Gerhard still kept a moving remembrance of the various occasions in which he attended Lorca's reading of the *Llanto*. Gerhard and Lorca had literally become acquainted as students in Madrid in the early 1920s and their paths crossed every now and then during the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1936). One can easily imagine Gerhard in one of Lorca's multitudinous recitals in Barcelona in autumn 1935, against the agitated backdrop that precipitated the general elections soon after (February 1936). In those days Gerhard would



have been busy with the preparations—as Secretary of the Catalan subsection—of one of the most important events in the young history of the International Society of Contemporary Music: the ISCM Conference in Barcelona (18–25 April 1936), with the first performance of Alban Berg's

Violin Concerto as climatic highlight. Exactly four months after that concert it was Lorca who would face his own death, executed in the midst of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)—the same conflict that would force Gerhard to escape into exile weeks before Franco's rebel troops took Barcelona two and a half years later.

The idea of *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter* moved into view in the summer of 1959 as BBC producer D. G. Bridson proposed that Gerhard set Lorca's elegy to music. With absolute freedom to choose his own terms for the setting, Gerhard decided to have the poem recited and to support it with a composition of electronic sound. Gerhard connected his reluctance to have the words sung with the memory of Lorca's readings and the intrinsic musical beauty of the sound of speech. Drawing on prior experiences with tape in applied works, such as radio and theatre pieces, Gerhard argued that the attributes of electronic sound implied that significantly simpler structures could be used, thus mitigating the problem of the rivalry between speech and music. To start with, Gerhard took Stephen Murray's recitation as a given theme. By analysing the rhythm, stress and intonation of the recorded speech, the composer arrived at a kind of blueprint of the overall time-structure of the poem that became the basis for the composition. Gerhard then created the electronic setting on his own apparatus between September and December 1959. The outcome was fitted together with the voice at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop before the year was out. Eventually, the first broadcast of the *Lament* took place on the BBC Third Programme on 22 May 1960.

Two obvious features in this piece are the differential treatment given by the composer—in terms of sound-colour and patterning—to each of the four sections of the poem as well as the use of all kind of acoustic and electronic sound sources as raw materials. There are a wide range of

connections between Lorca's poem and Gerhard's sound composition—including at the prosodic, syntactic and semantic levels—, often operating simultaneously. Taking the opening section as an example, we could mention links such as: 1) the interplay of the tearing sound derived from the piano that keeps re-echoing as a kind of ostinato device, matching but not coinciding with the obsessive refrain '*at five in the afternoon*'; 2) the use of onomatopoeic devices coinciding with the verses '*the wind bore away the cotton gauze*' and '*bones and flutes sound in his ears*'; and 3) the musical underscoring of the strophic organization—to name only a few. A sound with certain physiognomic characteristics and time behaviour, a set of instruments, a distinctive harmonic structure, a formal arrangement, or the use of pre-existing materials with semantic properties, are all devices that Gerhard exploits musically and emotionally in the *Lament*.

If something distinguishes Gerhard's attitude toward the electronic medium it is his interest in the expressive potential of recorded sound, and in finding a balance between emancipated music and emotional narrative. Gerhard thought that what separated him from *avant-garde* composers was precisely his interest in communication. From today's perspective, the *Lament* is a work that is difficult to categorise. It is a radiophonic poem, heir of the literary explorations of the BBC in the years previous to the creation of the Radiophonic Workshop, as much as a composition for speaker and magnetic tape that converses with the electronic *avant-garde* on an equal footing. Perhaps too, we may add, a musical microcosm in which Gerhard embraces the artistic experience as an intimate form of expression and enters in dialogue with his fellow countryman, Lorca.

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A PRESENT FOR THE ONCE FESTIVAL

The idea of composing *Caligula* (1961) arose during a visit to the United States in the summer of 1961, on occasion of Gerhard's appointment as faculty member of the music academy organized by the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. During that gathering Gerhard came together with some of his students from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he had been visiting professor of composition the previous year. In the meantime—stimulated by the deep impression left by Gerhard's teachings—a group of young Ann Arborite composers including Robert Ashley, George Cacioppo, Gordon Mumma and Roger Reynolds had decided to cooperatively to produce a festival of musical premieres by the name of ONCE. The first series of ONCE concerts had turned out to be a popular success and Gerhard committed himself to compose an electronic piece for next year's anticipated follow-up series. *Caligula* was presented at the Dramatic Arts Centre, Ann Arbor on 18 February 1962 in the last of six concerts, in an evening that showcased ONCE's first all-electronic music program (Table 1). Today, the ONCE festival (1961–65) is highly considered as one of the most famous and influential epicentres of the American experimental electronic music scene in the 1960s.

Momenti (1960) Luciano Berio
Caligula (1961) Roberto Gerhard
Scambi (1958) Henri Pousseur
Epoxy : Soundblock 8 (1961–2) Gordon Mumma
Texte II (1960) André Boucourechliev
Rhythmic Study (1954) Conlon Nancarrow
Composition for Synthesizer (1960) Milton Babbitt Public Opinion
Descends upon the Demonstrators (1961) Robert Ashley

Table 1. Program of the ONCE concert in which Gerhard's *Caligula* was premiered.

Caligula is Gerhard's first composition for solo tape conceived of and performed as an autonomous concert work, yet it seems that—living up to the spirit of ONCE—it was never performed in public again in Gerhard's lifetime (at least, not in Europe). The title of this composition is connected with a previous score for a BBC radio adaptation of Albert Camus' *Caligula*—a novel full of existential symbols skilfully superimposed to the story of the third of the Roman Caesars—that Gerhard had completed in May 1961 only days before leaving for his overseas adventure. Although Gerhard had initially devised a few sounds for this BBC production, this first idea was eventually abandoned and the score for the radio play remained purely instrumental. In the totally independent sound composition that can be heard on this CD, Gerhard reclaimed those sounds combining them together with an assortment of acoustic and electronic recordings. The ear-catching dramatic vocalization of synthetic speech and John Youngman's characteristic sculpture sounds stand out in this eclectic montage pervaded with extra-musical references. At the same time, *Caligula* evidences the careful consideration given by Gerhard to the variations of texture and textural contrasts as a means of form modulation.

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