Brigitte Schiffer

Kelemen Reflects

Milko Kelemen, *Klanglabyrinthe: Reflexionen eines Komponisten über die Neue Musik, mit einem Interview von Joachim Kaiser* (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1981)

Although the Yugoslav composer Milko Kelemen (b.1924) has been writing 'avant-garde' music for the last 25 years, although he belongs to the brotherhood of Messiaen pupils and Darmstadt followers, has pursued every possible compositional trend, been played at all the major music festivals, often by famous soloists, and received commissions from orchestras, ensembles, and opera houses all over the world, his fame in Britain rests entirely on his role as founder and organiser of the Zagreb Biennale, and almost nothing of his music has yet been heard in this country. His book, therefore, can give to most of us only a second-hand impression of a music the sound of which is so far unknown.

The title of the book ('Sound labyrinth') is a rather curious choice considering its subject matter. Kelemen seems unaware of the implications of the word 'labyrinth', a concept that goes back to antiquity (it is known in the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman civilisations) and has a venerable history in modern times, beginning in the 16th and 17th centuries. In our own time it has been used as a powerful symbol in the work of Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Ṣalvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, Henri Michaux, Paul Éluard, Franz Kafka, Federico Garcia Lorca, Jorge Luis Borghes, Dylan Thomas, and many others. W. H. Matthews (*Mazes and Labyrinths* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1922)) defines the labyrinth in ancient cultures as a metaphor for the unification of the predictable and unpredictable in the world, a symbol of the truth that perfection is achieved only by following a tortuous route. Kelemen entirely ignores the resonances set in motion by this potent image. His labyrinth is simply the multiplicity of characteristics that are covered by the term 'new music' and the state of apparent confusion in the contemporary musical world; he attempts to explore and explain this complexity by asking the far from original questions 'What is new music?', 'Why is new music so difficult to understand?', 'Has new music got a future, or will it soon be forgotten or regarded as an aberration?'.

The book is a collection of 26 essays of which 18, collected under the subsidiary title 'Meine Klangwelt', are Kelemen's reflections on his own compositions; the remaining eight investigate music education, musical institutions, the manipulation of public opinion, the role of the mass media, and music criticism, and are written in a rather contentious spirit.

From the moment Kelemen finished his musical education at the Zagreb Academy of Music (1945-52) he seems to have been a favourite of the very 'institutions' that he castigates so bitterly: he proceeded from one scholarship to the next—awards for study at the Paris Conservatoire with Messiaen and Aubin (1954-5) and at the Freiburg Musikhochschule with Fortner (1958-60), a Humboldt Scholarship to enable him to work at the Siemens electronic studio in Munich (1966-7), and a scholarship from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst to finance a period (1968-70) in Berlin; he then passed straight into his first appointment, as a teacher at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik, Düsseldorf (1970), followed three years later by a similar appointment at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Stuttgart. He has been equally fortunate with his publishers: for several years he was connected with Schott of Mainz, Universal Edition, and Heinrichshofen, and then he entered into a permanent contract with Peters. And commissions keep coming his way from all parts of the world—which makes his disapproving reference to 'certain composers, who have a way of getting commissions' seem rather inappropriate.

The biographical facts about Kelemen are elicited in an introductory conversation with Joachim Kaiser, but by far the most interesting information comes out in the 18 essays in which Kelemen writes about his musical development and discusses his work. When he first left Yugoslavia in 1954 he was deeply steeped in folklore and was ignorant of any developments in the musical world after Bartók. As a result he was open to all kinds of influence, ready to absorb whatever came in his way, and he started to make up for lost time by a tremendous productivity.

One of the features of Kelemen's music that most strikes the listener is a certain sensationalism: at the climax of *Composé* (1967) for two pianos and

orchestra, chains are thrown from high up onto a tam-tam lying on the floor; *Changeant* (1968) for cello and orchestra has an 'impossible' and absurd-sounding cadenza, accompanied by a harp beaten with the open hand, a harpsichord the box of which is struck with fingers wearing thimbles, and bongos on the skins of which the player 'writes' with his fingernails; in *Passionato* (1972) for a set of five flutes (one player) and three orchestral groups, the soloist is asked to shout a magic word into the instrument; and in *Olifant,* a concerto for exotic instruments, the trombonist is required to mix groaning, panting, gasping, snoring, growling, and howling with the musical sounds. In summarising Kelemen's motives as a composer Kaiser characterises this tendency as 'a wish to do, at all costs, something that goes to the very limits of the possible'. Earlier Kelemen himself makes a remark that corroborates Kaiser's conclusion: 'there can be no art without the element of surprise'. This is hardly a novel discovery—Dyagilev made it 70 years ago—but it explains the 'sensationalism' as springing from a desire to amaze; Kelemen describes his frequent recourse to stunning effects as the result of a 'readiness for wild thinking and for moving heaven and earth in order to penetrate into new regions of music'.

Another weapon in Kelemen's arsenal is noise. *Splintery* (1977), his second string quartet, breaks up when a calm, melodic – harmonic canon is suddenly obliterated by the brutal noise of exaggerated bow pressure; the work culminates in destruction. This type of treatment is used for a directly contrary purpose in *Der Belagerungszustand* (The state of siege) (1970), an opera based on Albert Camus' *La peste* (1947). Kelemen records that until it came to shaping the end of the work he and Camus were in complete agreement; but he felt unable to adopt Camus' suggestions that the work should close with an aria and then fade away. Instead he created a more positively optimistic ending, one of protest and action, in which the 'plague' theme that has permeated the whole work is augmented and then absorbed into a noisy orchestral tutti.

That Kelemen is capable of more subtle climaxes appears in another opera, *Novi stanar* (The new lodger) (1964) after Eugène Ionesco's *Le nouveau locataire* (1957). Here he remains faithful throughout to Ionesco's 'absurd' idea: the 'empty' room of the new lodger becomes gradually more and more cluttered with furniture, and, as it finally overflows into the street and down to the river, the music thins out and gradually disintegrates.

There can be no doubt that Kelemen has an exceedingly keen sense of theatre; in discussing this he claims that his dream for the future is of a spherical auditorium, suited to the ultimate stage work, a 'total' opera. In *Apocaliptica* (1973), a ballet-opera with a text by Fernando Arrabal, he has gone as far as prevailing conditions permit: his next theatre piece may well have a super surprise in store for us.

Kelemen's book makes interesting reading and, when he talks about his own compositions, is full of valuable information. The 'Reflexionen eines Komponisten über de Neue Musik' lack originality and perspective, and the introductory interview with Joachim Kaiser is not particularly informative, but what Kelemen has to say on the subject of his own work fortunately occupies more than two-thirds of the book. It can be warmly recommended, especially to the reader interested in the present state of musical life in Yugoslavia.