

Friedrich Cerha, Composer

Biography

Composer Friedrich Cerha was born in Vienna in 1926. He started fighting actively against fascism as a student, deserted twice from the German Wehrmacht and survived the end of World War II as the innkeeper of a cabin in Tyrol. In 1946, he entered the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Vienna to study violin, composition and music education. At the same time, he studied musicology, philosophy and German philology at the University of Vienna.

As a concert violinist and music teacher he was in contact with young composers, poets and painters of the avantgarde underground who later joined together to form the Art-Club. He also became part of the Austrian section of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) and analysed works of the Viennese School with Josef Polnauer, a former Schoenberg pupil. In 1956, 1958 and 1959 he attended the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music. With comrades such as the composer Kurt Schwertsik (and later also H.K. Gruber) as well as his wife Gertraud, he founded the ensemble *die reihe* in 1958 to create a forum for contemporary music. The ensemble toured extensively to great acclaim presenting works of the Avantgarde, the Viennese School and the early 20th century. From 1959 to 1988 Friedrich Cerha held a position at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Vienna, where he taught a class of composition, notation and interpretation of contemporary music from 1976 to 1988.

From 1960 to 1997 he was active as a conductor and worked with renowned ensembles and orchestras at festivals and concert series such as Salzburger Festspiele, Berliner und Wiener Festwochen, Venice Biennale, Warsaw Autumn, Festival d'Automne Paris, Jyväskylä Festival, musica viva Munich, Nutida Musik Stockholm, Neues Werk Hamburg, Musik der Zeit Köln and others. In addition, he has made guest appearances at international opera houses such as State Opera Unter den Linden Berlin, Vienna, Bavarian State Opera Munich, Liceo Barcelona and Teatro Colon Buenos Aires. In 1978 together with Hannes Landesmann he established the concert series "Wege in unsere Zeit" at the Vienna Konzerthaus which he directed until 1983. In 1994 he became president of the Klangforum Wien, a post he held until 1999.

Friedrich Cerha's music historical significance is also ensured by his completion of the third act of Alban Berg's *Lulu*. While working on this (from 1962 to 1978) he also completed his own music theatre *Netzwerk* (World Premiere in 1981 at Wiener Festwochen) that translates questions of organic growth from the realm of Biology to Music. His other music theatre works *Baal*, *Der Rattenfänger* (*The Pied Piper*), *Der Riese vom Steinfeld* (*The Giant of Steinfeld*) and *Onkel Präsident* (*Uncle President*) tell different facets of the relationship between society and the individual – a subject that has occupied Friedrich Cerha since his early youth.

It is not possible to relate Friedrich Cerha to only one aesthetic or tradition. He has spent much of his career delving into various musical styles of the 20th century, including 12-tone technique, neoclassicism, and serial music. However, the most important feature of his work is not its use of each music theory, but its sensuous sound experiences, which are easy for even the untrained ear to follow. A perfect example of Cerha's artistic pursuit is the cycle *Spiegel I – VII* for orchestra, on which the composer started work in 1960/61, with its complete performance first given in 1972. The sound world of the seven pieces for orchestra exerts a compelling power on the listener.

His oeuvre encompasses all genres, and he wrote numerous pieces for ensemble, choir and orchestra commissioned by major international institutions and festivals such as Koussevitzky-Foundation New York, BNP Paribas Paris, Festival de Música de Canarias, Südwestfunk Baden-Baden, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, musica viva Munich, Konzerthaus Berlin, ORF Wien, steirischer herbst Graz, Wiener Konzerthaus, Musikverein Wien, Wiener Philharmoniker and others.

Friedrich Cerha is a recipient of the Grand Austrian State Prize, a member of the European Academy of Arts and Sciences, and an officer of the Order of Arts and Letters. The Venice Biennale awarded Cerha with the Golden Lion for his life's work in 2006. Friedrich Cerha was honoured with the 2012 Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, known as the "Nobel Prize of Music".

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