

# *The Prisoner*: A missing link in England's history of electronic music

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**This article documents the circumstances surrounding the composition of the soundtrack to the theatrical production of Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner* in 1954. Roberto Gerhard's soundtrack to *The Prisoner* is likely the first piece to utilise ensemble and magnetic tape, and as such potentially the first live performance of musique concrète in England, taking place a year before Gerhard's significantly more infamous electronic score to *King Lear*, produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and four years prior to the establishment of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. No master recording or score has been located and details relating to the soundtrack are sparse. This paper attempts to collect available documentation relating to this production, as well as provide new insights relating to potential draft materials stored in the Roberto Gerhard Tape Archive and a previously unknown connection between the production and Pierre Henry and the Groupe de Reserches de Musique Concrète.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Details of Roberto Gerhard's soundtrack to Peter Glenville's production of Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner* are minimal. Gerhard's accompaniment to the play is, in all likelihood, the first music written in England to feature an ensemble accompanied by magnetic tape, and potentially the first instance of performed musique concrète in the country. As such, it is a missing link in the fossil record of England's history of electronic music. Through the course of this research, correspondence has emerged between Glenville and the Groupe de Reserches de Musique Concrète (GRMC)<sup>1</sup> that indicates that Glenville's original preference was for members of this group to create a soundtrack to *The Prisoner*. At a time when English cultural institutions were largely dismissive of the electronic experimentation taking place in Europe, this connection emerges as hugely significant, and points towards an alternative view of electronic music emerging in England at a pivotal point in England's music history.

<sup>1</sup>Groupe de Reserches de Musique Concrète (GRMC) was founded in 1951 and replaced the Studio d'Essai established by Pierre Schaeffer in 1942. The GRMC later became the Groupe de Recherches Musicales in 1958.

This article summarises and analyses what we know about Gerhard's soundtrack for the production and the involvement of the GRMC. This includes looking at tapes from the Roberto Gerhard Tape Archive<sup>2</sup> that may have a relationship to the production and Gerhard's minimal notes from his composition notebooks. The involvement of the GRMC and Pierre Henry is then outlined based upon what we can derive from Glenville's correspondence archive, and attempts are made to draw conclusions as to how and why this collaboration never took place and how Gerhard came to be involved.

## 2. *THE PRISONER* (1954)

Set in an unnamed communist East European country following the fall of Nazism, Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner* (1954), directed by Peter Glenville,<sup>3</sup> tells the story of the mental duel between The Cardinal and The Interrogator, as the latter attempts to find the former's human weakness to destroy his record as a war hero. Starring Alec Guinness and Noel Willman, the play premiered at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh on 1 March 1954 before moving to the Globe Theatre, London<sup>4</sup> six weeks later where it ran for 60 performances. *The Prisoner* was adapted by Boland for the screen in 1955, marking Guinness's return to the role and Glenville's debut as director. It was met with controversy, banned from the Cannes and Venice film festivals (Kabatchnik 2011: 129–30), accused by some as being anti-Communist, and others as anti-clerical (Anon 1956: 15).

<sup>2</sup>The physical archive is held at Cambridge University Library and the online digital version is held at Heritage Quay, University of Huddersfield: <https://heritagequay.org/rgda/roberto-gerhard/>.

<sup>3</sup>An Oxford graduate, by 1954 Peter Glenville was an established international figure in the West End and Broadway as both an actor and director of musical, comedy and dramatic productions.

<sup>4</sup>The Globe Theatre later changed its name to the Gielgud Theatre in 1997. The name was gifted to Shakespeare's Globe (aka the Globe Theatre) on the Southbank in recognition of the historical connection of this name to William Shakespeare. Discussions of the Globe Theatre in this article refers to what is contemporarily known as the Gielgud Theatre.

Table 1. Summary of contents of Tapes 500, 529 and 586

Tape cue	Timecode	Description
<b>Tape 500</b>		
1	0'00"–0'20"	Low pitch drone, percussive hits in sequence, sparse reverse tape noise loop
2	0'24"–1'24"	Instrumental cue, possible electronic looping
3	1'29"–2'22"	Instrumental cue, possible electronic looping
4	2'28"–3'16"	Instrumental cue, looping electronic arpeggiation
5	3'16"–3'23"	Cymbal strike
6	3'28"–4'18"	Instrumental cue
7	4'25"–5'22"	Instrumental cue
<b>Tape 529</b>		
1	0'00"–0'56"	Instrumental cue
2	0'56"–1'37"	Instrumental cue, looping electronic arpeggiation
3	1'39"–2'38"	Instrumental cue
<b>Tape 586</b>		
1	0'00"–0'46"	Instrumental cue
2	0'46"–1'39"	Instrumental cue
3	1'39"–2'31"	Instrumental cue
4	2'36"–3'34"	Instrumental cue
5	3'34"–4'15"	Instrumental cue, looping electronic arpeggiation

Roberto Gerhard is credited in the Globe Theatre programme as the composer of ‘incidental music’. The Roberto Gerhard Archive at Cambridge University holds one letter from Bridget Boland, dated 13 May 1954, regarding Gerhard’s involvement in the production. García-Karman claims that this letter demonstrates that:

The idea of the composition was an initiative of Gerhard, who after attending a performance of the play [*The Prisoner*], decided to approach the author of the text [Bridget Boland] with a proposal for writing music to the production. (García-Karman 2010: 124)

However, in inspecting this letter (Boland 1954), it clearly consists of Bridget Boland turning down a request from Gerhard to write him a libretto for an entirely different project, on the grounds of her inherent unmusicality. Furthermore, it appears that Gerhard has approached Boland with this request after being inspired by seeing a production of *The Prisoner*. It is unclear if this relates to a production he saw as the producer of the soundtrack or as an audience member, although given the timeline Gerhard must have written his original letter somewhere near the onset of his involvement with *The Prisoner*.

The specifics of Gerhard’s score for the production are unknown, however, there are various records that exist that might allow us to get some idea of what the soundtrack consisted. Gerhard’s soundtrack was included in his list of works featuring electronic music compiled for the International Electronic Music Catalogue, listing the instrumentation as ‘chamber ensemble and tape’ (Davies 1981: 37)

The Roberto Gerhard Digital Archive lists four tapes that may belong to *The Prisoner* in some way, however, without a master tape or original score this has proved impossible to confirm. The four tapes are tapes 171, 500, 529 and 586. Tapes 500, 529 and 586 contain composed instrumental cues for a small ensemble of woodwinds, accordion, e-piano and percussion (Table 1). The extent or manner in which these were used in the final theatrical production and whether these recordings consist of music in final or intermediate states is as yet unknown.

Several cues found on these tapes contain suggestions of subtle electronic processing, with what sounds like tape loops paired with instrumental performance. However, it is difficult to say for sure whether this is the result of electronic manipulation or repeated motivic performance.

Of these tapes, Tape 171 is the most significant in terms of electronic music. It contains a range of sound materials in various states, from instrumental samples and performances of motivic fragments, to processed electronic noises and sound composites of multiple recordings (Table 2). However, it is impossible to say how many, if any, of these sketches were used in the final production.

It is likely that the final cues for *The Prisoner* were transferred to phonograph disc for theatrical playback. The programme from the production at the Globe Theatre credits ‘Sound by Bishop Sound & Electrical Co. Ltd.’s Patented Cuebar System’ (Anon 1954b). Bishop Sound and Electrical Company provided sound playback equipment and sound effects on acetate discs to a number of theatres until the 1950s

Table 2. Summary of contents of Tape 171

Tape Cue	Timecode	Description
<b>Tape 171</b>		
1	0'00"–0'27"	Short, percussive wood-block style strikes
2	0'27"–1'42"	Piano strings, low drone with some scrapes in upper register
3	1'42"–2'15"	Piano notes, high pitch
4	2'15"–2'18"	Electronic sound, short fast pitch series
5	2'23"–3'21"	White noise, sustained electronic tones
6	3'26"–3'56"	Instrumental ostinato, sustained tones, bell strikes at end
7	3'57"–4'04"	Layered harp strings glissando
8	4'04"–5'02"	Bell strikes, some electronic tones
9	5'02"–5'32"	Layered harp strings glissando
10	5'35"–6'54"	Layered electronic pitches
11	6'54"–7'27"	Layered electronic pitches
12	7'27"–8'06"	Looped, imperfect percussion rhythm on large found objects, with sustained pitch
13	8'06"–9'04"	Kick or bass drum with preparations
14	9'04"–9'09"	Short electronic, noisy sound
15	9'09"–9'27"	Instrumental cue
16	9'30"–9'37"	Instrumental cue
17	9'37"–10'40"	Layered, female sung vocals, with layered accordion at end
18	10'41"–11'48"	Accordion with female sung vocals
19	11'48"–11'52"	Loud, electronic whistle
20	11'55"–12'39"	Female, sung vocal
21	12'41"–13'26"	Female, sung vocal (same as 20) with delay <sup>a</sup>
22	13'26"–13'29"	Loud, electronic whistle
23	13'29"–13'52"	Instrumental cue, electronic loop
24	15'52"–13'58"	Electronic texture
25	13'58"–14'17"	Repeated electronic glissando
26	14'22"–15'16"	Percussion texture-looped gong, bells hits in repeated series
27	15'16"–15'48"	Double bass, percussion hit pairing
28	15'48"–15'54"	Electronic percussive gesture
29	16'12"–16'34"	Instrumental cue, sped up wind recording, looped
30	16'37"–16'47"	Percussion cue, electronic looping
31	16'50"–17'07"	Instrumental cue, electronic looping
32	17'10"–17'38"	Instrumental cue, sped up wind recording, electronic looping
33	17'39"–18'04"	Instrumental cue, electronic looping
34	18'04"–18'08"	Cymbal strike
35	18'11"–18'36"	Ensemble cue
36	18'43"–18'44"	Electronic noise
37	18'50"–19'10"	Tape manipulation

<sup>a</sup>This delay effect is most likely tape bleed from cue 20 since, to the best of our knowledge, Gerhard did not own a delay module.

(Theatreworks n.d.). The Bishop Sound Panotrope was a more advanced version of the pre-war Simon Sound Panotrope, improving on the existing twin turntable and valve amplifier design by adding controls for volume, treble and bass, four loudspeaker outputs and a separate monitor output. The cuebar was an innovation for theatrical sound:

Turntables for effect replay needed a way of precisely locating the groove containing the start of the required effect. The Simon Sound Panatropes had a simple groove-locating device. Bishop's cuebar was better: a block was fitted next to the platter into which a 6" long metal rod with a magnetised end could be dropped. The pick-up head attached to the magnet and the protruding length of the rod was adjusted to position the pick-up in just the right place. On cue, drop the pick-up down and, once landed, bring the fader up.

As [David] Collison notes [in *The Sound of Theatre*], a useful factor in the cuebar's design was that as soon as a cue was playing, you could lift that cuebar out and replace it with the one for the next cue (he would have the acetate discs containing the sound effects cut with the earliest tracks innermost, to assist with this). (Halliday 2019: 68)

As such, it is quite possible that these tapes do not consist of a final mix, and instead represent a collection of material that would be transferred to acetate disc at a later date, potentially paired with other sounds and given some further shape during the performance at the production itself.

Of interest is one of the few notes in Gerhard's notebooks that is directly labelled *The Prisoner*. On a quarter page of notebook 10.135, Gerhard has written:

Band 2  
 Band 5  
~~Band 9~~  
 Band 11

Bands 2 and 5 are united with brackets, as are bands 9 and 11. The number 4 is enclosed in a half circle on the right hand side of this list (Gerhard [n.d.](#)).

The term ‘band’ was used by Gerhard as a generic term for ‘tape’ – his anglicisation of the generic French term ‘bande’ – and refers to any tape regardless of its content or stage of completion. The most significant use of this term in his catalogue is found in his Symphony No. 3 ‘Collages’ (1960), wherein Gerhard referred to each completed tape cue for playback as an individual ‘band’. Gerhard had a very methodical approach to working with electronic music. His notebooks outline his thinking of gradually assembling materials:

From these sound-families Gerhard developed a series of clear compositional stages and his own terminology for each:

- Small mixes Gerhard termed sound images or sound aggregates;

These aggregates were mixed to form compounds:

- Numerous compounds were mixed to form multilevel compounds;
- From these multilevel compounds the final assembly or sound montage would be mixed through editing. (Adkins [2021](#))

In the case of Gerhard’s notes on *The Prisoner*, each band, or tape, identified here in Gerhard’s notebook would contain a compound mix, and the combination of these bands would form an ‘assembly’. This note would therefore seem to indicate that, at least at some point in the composition process, the presence of an electronic tape component was not a singular, or minimal, presence in *The Prisoner*.

If we assume that Tape 171 does indeed relate to *The Prisoner*, then it does represent some of the earliest documented experimentation with electronic music in England.

[*The Prisoner*] . . . closely following the first compositions specifically created to explore the possibilities of electronic tape technology, such as Boulez’s *Deux Études* (1951–52) and Stockhausen’s *Studien I & II* (1953–54). Notably, it preceded the establishment of the BBC’s Radiophonic Workshop in 1958, where the techniques of sound generation, as well as oscillation, looping, distortion and other forms of processing were incorporated into incidental music, theme tunes and jingles for mainstream listening on radio and television. (Taylor [2018](#): 117)

That *The Prisoner* pre-dates the BBC Radiophonic Workshop is significant, pointing to Gerhard’s interest in electronic music not yet shared or supported by the dominant cultural institutions of England. Poldi Gerhard describes Roberto’s initial acquisition of commercial tape machines to explore electronic music in an interview for a BBC radio feature produced by Sasha Moorsom:

He was a tremendously curious person, everything interested him. Science and everything, what moved or not moved, everything interested him. And then he said, ‘I would like to try my hand in electronics.’ And I said, ‘Oh, God forbid!’ And he said, ‘Well, yes, in the first place it wouldn’t be possible to buy equipment.’ He became very great friends with George Devine, the producer who is, unfortunately, a few years dead already. And Devine had the idea to do *King Lear* with electronic sounds. And the designer was Noguchi, the Japanese architect, and John Gielgud played Lear. And so that started it off. I bought, from my household money, on hire purchase naturally, as well, and overdraft and so on, the equipment, which was really a very poor man’s equipment. (Moorsom [n.d.](#))

In a letter to the Arts Council, Gerhard described his equipment as consisting of “one microphone, five tape recorders, a track mixer of five channels, and that is all” (*ibid.*). However, it is likely this letter was written some years after Gerhard worked on *The Prisoner*; the total equipment he had to work with in 1954 was very likely far more reduced than this list, and what he did have access to would have been new to him.<sup>5</sup> Gerhard was often praised by his colleagues for his analytical nature, and so it is not impossible to conceive of a situation whereby *The Prisoner* offered the composer his earliest opportunity to experiment with the basics of tape manipulation and make his largest mistakes. Regardless, we can assume that Gerhard’s soundtrack would be much simpler than in later works.

It is significant that reviews from the period make no more than a passing mention of Gerhard’s score for *The Prisoner*, which suggests that it caused no significant impact. This contrasts sharply with the reception towards his score for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *King Lear* a year later:

Gerhard’s score for *Lear* was one of the first to use electronic music in Britain. It was only the second after

<sup>5</sup>Varèse had only been gifted an Ampex tape player in 1953. The Studio d’Essai had a tape machine in 1949 but due to it not being set up correctly, all of the *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1950–1) was composed using phonographs. It was only in 1950 that the tape machine functioned and then significantly expanded what was possible. Given Gerhard’s strong connections to Europe it is most likely that he was aware of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry’s *Orphée* (premiered in Paris 1951) and the second version *Orphée 53* (premiered in Donaueschingen in 1953) a ‘concrete opera’. The work combined traditionally sung arias with musique concrète played through loudspeakers.

Gerhard's contribution to Bridget Boland's *The Prisoner*, premiered at the Globe Theatre, London, in 1954 ... British composers were somewhat slower in gaining interest in electronic music, and it did not help that the BBC opened the Radiophonic Workshop – which held electronic equipment – only in 1958. Considering that it was not until 1960 that Gerhard used electronic materials in one of his concert works – Symphony No. 3 (Collages) – his Stratford collaborations and, particularly King Lear, may be seen as an experimental ground and, even more, a pioneering space in which Gerhard tested media that were as yet unheard of in Britain. (Llano 2013: 120–1)

Gerhard's electronic score for *King Lear* (1955), received a range of criticism, overwhelmingly negative although sometimes intrigued, with critics taking issue with the soundtrack's prominence, abrasiveness and volume (Cholij 1996: 28–30). The negative critical reaction to this very modern production of Shakespeare points not only to conservative tastes in music and aesthetics amongst critics at the time but has implications for how we understand Gerhard's score for *The Prisoner*. Most reviews of *The Prisoner* decline to mention Gerhard's soundtrack. One review that does mention it only in the final sentence: 'Incidental music by Roberto Gerhard, played between the scenes, matches the mood of the play' (Myro 1954: 60). The use of electronics at the time was highly unusual, and certainly not the norm. Were it that sounds of musique concrète made up any perceptible element of the soundtrack, one would imagine it would spark some reaction from critics of the time. That no such reaction is evident, either positively or negatively, seems to indicate that Gerhard's tape element was either unnoticeable or unremarkable. Many of the sounds contained on Tape 171 would have, in 1954, been perceived of as highly unusual; if not a challenge to a mainstream audience then they certainly would have stood out as different to the more conventional instrumental cues. As such, we must question how prominent these electronic elements may have been. The tape looping effects identified on tapes 500, 529 and 586, assuming that they are indeed electronic mediations of the tape, blend more subtly with the ensemble, yet still advance the total range of sounds that Gerhard had access to for composition. As such, this lack of critical response might strengthen the idea that this was how tape was utilised in Gerhard's soundtrack to *The Prisoner*.

### 3. THE FRENCH CONNECTION

It appears that Gerhard became involved with *The Prisoner* for its run at Globe Theatre from April 1954. This raises the question of what the original plan for the soundtrack to *The Prisoner* would be. A magazine clipping from *Plays and Players* magazine, taken

from the Peter Glenville collection at the Harry Ransom Centre, indicates that the plan as of publication in March 1954 was to use French practitioners of musique concrète:

Musique Concrete [*sic*]: Peter Glenville, who will direct Bridget Boland's new play, *The Prisoner*, tells me that he will be the first director in England to use this new group of French artists. This group uses sound to heighten effect. It is not music in the accepted sense of the word, but draws on various noises, some familiar, such as the closing of a door, a motor horn or a breaking glass and some electrical vibrations. They have had a great success in Paris. (Anon 1954a)

Letters from the Harry Ransom Centre indicate that Pierre Henry, Pierre Schaeffer and Peter Glenville were in communication from at least December 1953. From a letter sent to Glenville on 19 December, Henry indicates that he is sending Glenville copies of recordings they listened to previously, potentially in the Studio d'Essai. Henry states that 'I would be grateful if you could send me the additional notes and explanations rather quickly, so that I can start researching the elements, in view of the stage music for: "I Confess"' (Henry 1953a).

This from this letter we can observe a few key points. The correspondence between Glenville and the GRMC frequently refer to a play titled *I Confess*, which appears to be a working title for *The Prisoner*.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps worth considering that Alfred Hitchcock's *I Confess* was released in 1953. This film is wholly unconnected to Boland's play, and so a name change might have been made to avoid any confusion.

The second point to note is that Pierre Henry is initially engaged to work on incidental sound and music for the stage production only. There is some ambiguity in later letters that suggests that discussions expanded to include not just the theatrical production but also potential engagement with the planned film version. At this stage there is no mention of a film version, only the theatrical production. Nonetheless, a letter from 29 December 1953 provides an idea of the thought Glenville and Boland had given to possible implementations of the GRMC's musical techniques, as well as his apparent enthusiasm for their involvement:

In fact she [Bridget Boland] is doing an entirely new scene at the beginning of Act 3, in which the newspaper reading is cut to a minimum, and the man then brings on the wireless for a short time. He then exits, and this is followed by the real hysteria of the Cardinal, battling with the echoes and sounds of his own voice at the trial, church singing,

<sup>6</sup>There are three observations that point to this: 1) there is no record of another Glenville production being made under the title *I Confess*; 2) discussions in these letters frequently refers to characters in *The Prisoner*; and 3) *I Confess* is described as a forthcoming script by Boland for production in 1954.

fish-market noises, etc. This is an idea she has always had for the scene, but never quite dared to write. It should be a field day for Schaeffer! (Glenville 1953b)

There is some ambiguity here with earlier letters addressed to Pierre Henry, while this letter refers to Pierre Schaeffer's involvement. This might speak to some confusion as to who specifically would undertake the role of composition. In 1953, Pierre Schaeffer was commissioned by the French Radio and Television Organisation (ORTF) to work on radio and television broadcasting in French Overseas Territory, delegating the direction of the GMRC to Philippe Arthuys and Pierre Henry until 1958. As such, this ambiguity as to who was being commissioned to produce the soundtrack for *The Prisoner* might speak to this changing organisational structure.

#### 4. THE QUESTION OF MONEY

A letter to Peter Glenville from Michèle Henry, on behalf of Pierre Schaeffer, dated 30 December 1953, includes the quotation for the work to be undertaken by Pierre Henry for production of 'stage music':

The usual rate for the production of Concrete Music is around frs. 10,000.- per minute. Given the particular conditions and the sound project of the film, we submit the price of frs to you. 2,500.- per minute. Mr. Pierre Henry envisages that the duration of Concrete Music is of the order of 15 to 20 minutes, or an amount of 37,500 to 50,000- francs. In addition, provision should be made for the possible trip of Mr. Pierre Henry to London for the technical set-up and the first performances. (Henry 1953b)

It is clear from this letter that Glenville was interested in hiring Henry not just to soundtrack the stage production but the film version as well. Being involved in both elements seems to have resulted in a reduced fee.<sup>7</sup>

#### 5. THE CREATIVE VISION

With such a lack of information regarding the specifics of how music and sound functioned in the final production of *The Prisoner*, Glenville's letters to the GMRC provide some valuable insight into his creative

<sup>7</sup>The fee of 37,500 to 50,000 francs is somewhat difficult to quantify, as two sources of conversion provide radically different figures. The Saunderson School of Business provides an average exchange rate of 9.799 French francs to the British pound in 1954 (Antweiler 2019). This would translate to a fee of £3,826–£5,102. An alternative, the Historical Currency Converter (Edvinsson 2016), estimates that this figure converts to a fee of £38–£51. By way of comparison, Gerhard's fee for his work at the Royal Shakespeare Company during this time was around £60–£65 per production, with his fee doubling in 1955 to £125 for his electronic score for *King Lear* (Llano 2013: 119) As such, a fee of £38–£51 for 20 minutes of music seems to be roughly accurate.

vision for the implementation of recorded sound in live theatre. Not only this, but his letters demonstrate how the GMRC's musical language might engage a prominent creative individual in England at the time.

In a letter from Peter Glenville to an unidentified recipient<sup>8</sup> dated 9 January 1954, Glenville outlines how he and Boland envision the use of the GRMC's concrete sounds in the play. He outlines that the first two acts of the play should provide sounds that the Cardinal would hear objectively in the scene and which 'must have some logical cause in the action of the play' (Glenville 1953a). Glenville also notes that these sounds may be elaborated upon in the scene transitions in a more rhythmical and musical manner. Pierre Henry is further directed that sounds should be used sparingly throughout the scenes to 'accentuate the frightening silence' (ibid.). Glenville provides the following list of suggested sound sources present in the scene:

##### In the Interrogator's room

Electric ventilator fan

Coffee percolator (a noise capable of being artificially amplified)

The whirring of rusty works of the castle clock, and an occasional striking of the hour

The persistent yelling of starlings

For scenes I.1 and II.2 a pneumatic drill in the courtyard below

Occasional hooters on the river, when someone looks out of the window

##### Occasional noises for the Cell

(Note: Normally, conspicuously, none. But at moments when we have the prisoner alone there, and want to give him things to listen to, and exclude the quiet)

Footsteps running down stone stairs

Footsteps approaching and fading on stone floor

A food trolley clattering by

Very distant male laughter

Steel gates clanging shut. (Ibid.)

Glenville outlines that the sounds in the third act would become more subjective in the Cardinal's ensuing madness, extrapolating on the idea originally proposed in his letter to 'Denise' eleven days earlier:

the first scene of the third act, which has been re-written so as to make the scene with the actual wireless set shorter. But it is then followed by a passage in which the Cardinal almost goes mad, and we hear the various motifs that are going through his mind – the mother

<sup>8</sup>Presumably Pierre Henry.

going to bed, the fish market, people going to confession, church singing, etc. This should be a really fascinating opportunity for your music and sound effects. It will, of course, have to be scored and timed with enormous accuracy as it is used, in the writing, in counterpoint to the Cardinal's actual voice in soliloquy.

...

The author's idea, with which – after careful consideration – I am now inclined to agree, is that we should not have any subjective noises that suggest an inner state of mind, or tension, until the third act, when we really see inside the mind of the Cardinal. Until then we should only see and hear, objectively, what the Cardinal himself sees and hears. I am telling you these things now, not as final directions, but as a hint of the sort of direction in which our ideas are going. (Ibid.)

This letter provides the best outline of the way Glenville envisioned the electroacoustic music of the GRMC working in *The Prisoner*. It is clear that the work Glenville was commissioning leaned far more towards what we would term today as 'sound design' than the far more radical compositions emerging from the GRMC.<sup>9</sup> Considering the work produced by Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer at the time,<sup>10</sup> Glenville's ambitions are unremarkable. Henry's response to these notes and ideas is not known, outside of the fact that his soundtrack, to the best of our knowledge, never materialised. Yet within the context of the cultural climate of England at the time, Glenville was evidently conscious of not alienating an audience that could prove hostile to the avant-garde:

Bearing in mind the alert but somewhat bourgeois nature of English audience reactions, I am more than ever inclined to think that the audience should be introduced very carefully to your music, in its more concrete form, and that the Overture should be very near to ordinary music, as the audience will not be prepared for anything too strange or unusual before the play begins. (Ibid.)

As the critical response to Gerhard's electronic soundtrack to *King Lear* a year later would demonstrate, these fears were not unfounded. Glenville's vision is thus difficult to ascertain. It is hard to believe that he would go to the trouble of engaging with Pierre Henry and the GRMC without being aware of the breadth and history of their creative practice. Regardless, Glenville's openness to commissioning the music of Pierre Henry demonstrates a remarkable ambition for the time.

<sup>9</sup>By contrast, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry's opera *Orphée 53*, a fusion of concert performance and musique concrète, had its controversial premiere at Donaueschingen Festival in October 1953.

<sup>10</sup>Not to mention the composers they were working with at the GRMC during this period, including Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Darius Milhaud, Edgar Varèse, Michel Philippot and more (Gayou 2007: 206).

## 6. THE QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

There is no further information available at this time that might explain why Pierre Henry's soundtrack to *The Prisoner* did not go ahead. As of Glenville's letter from 9 January 1954, he indicates that Henry's fee and the costs of bringing him to London to finalise the music have been accepted by management. So, between the final letter in January, the article in *Plays and Players* magazine in March confirming the GRMC's involvement, and Gerhard's correspondence with Boland in May, Henry removed himself from the project. Roberto Gerhard would go on to produce the soundtrack for the theatrical production's run at the Globe, London while the soundtrack to the film production would be composed by Benjamin Frankel, a then 20-year veteran of the British film industry.

It is ultimately not possible yet for us to know why Pierre Henry withdrew from this project, considering there appeared to be a willingness from both sides to participate, and the budget for his fee had been approved. Assuming that money was not a problem, the three most likely reasons would be creative differences, scheduling conflicts, or a lack of appropriate equipment at the venue with which to realise his music satisfactorily. However, no claim to these reasons can reasonably be made – these reasons are pure speculation but ultimately not outside the realm of possibility. What is not speculative, however, is the amount of energy both Glenville and Boland appear to have put into thinking about the use of recorded sound in the production. Gerhard at the time had established a reputation for producing music for theatre, having composed several soundtracks for the Royal Shakespeare Company.<sup>11</sup> At this point in his career, Gerhard was interested in, and starting to actively pursue, electronic composition – an interest to which Boland and Glenville were clearly open. As one of the few composers in England familiar with and interested in electroacoustic music, who was in the process of obtaining the equipment necessary to compose electroacoustic music, if Glenville wanted to continue the creative direction he had embarked on with Pierre Henry, Gerhard would well have appeared to be a logical replacement. However, there is no clear link that has yet been unearthed that explains Gerhard's subsequent involvement in *The Prisoner*.

So why does all available evidence point towards Gerhard's resulting soundtrack, reportedly the first ensemble work to include magnetic tape in England, being so unimpactful? Gerhard himself confirmed in cataloguing his electronic music that his soundtrack

<sup>11</sup>These were *Romeo and Juliet* (1947), *Cymbeline* (1949), *The Taming of the Shrew* (1953) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1954) – all of which Gerhard recorded musical scores for playback via the panotrope. However, none of these consisted of music concrète.

to *The Prisoner* was for ensemble and tape, yet the contents of that tape remain a mystery and appear to have had little impact on audiences at the time.

*The Prisoner* must have represented a period of learning and experimentation for Gerhard in both the kinds of sounds that were possible through tape manipulation and what sorts of musical contexts he was happy implementing these sounds in. It seems unlikely however, given the diverse range of sounds he produced for the soundtrack to *King Lear* a year later, that Gerhard would have been unable to produce a tape component that would have not been clearly noticeable to an audience at the time. While Gerhard's experimentation might have been more limited in 1954 than it was a year later, it is hard to imagine his work for *King Lear* presenting a drastic change from what was produced for *The Prisoner*.

Similarly, it is unlikely that Gerhard would have met some unforeseen limitations with the sound equipment in the theatre used for music playback. The Panotrope at the Globe would have been familiar to Gerhard from his prior work for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Memorial Theatre that utilised a similar system and Gerhard, ever the attentive composer, would undoubtedly have composed with knowledge of the particularities of the system in mind. As such, it is unlikely that there were any unforeseen technical restrictions in the production of Gerhard's soundtrack for *The Prisoner*.

It is possible that the materials on Tape 171 were presented to Glenville for *The Prisoner*, but that they were turned down. We can see a clear disjunct between the materials found on Tape 171 and the vision for sound outlined in the letter from Peter Glenville on 9 January 1954. There is no evidence of any of the sounds on Glenville's list in Gerhard's Tape, instead we can hear Gerhard formulating abstract, fantastical sounds that allude to his work for radio in later years, such as *Asylum Diary* (1959) and *The Anger of Achilles* (1963). As such, one can imagine a situation whereby Glenville turned down these more extreme examples of musique concrète, favouring a more traditional ensemble soundtrack with tape loops of recorded materials forming the basis of the reported tape component. This seems the most likely explanation, especially when we consider Glenville's suggestion that the overture should be 'very near to ordinary music'. However, these points are purely speculative responses to why the first work to utilise acoustic ensemble and magnetic tape in England did not make more of an impact. There remains no clear answer.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*The Prisoner* remains an important missing link in the fossil record of England's history of electronic music.

That correspondence took place between one of England's leading theatre directors and prominent international proponents of electroacoustic music for collaboration is a significant new development in our knowledge of how electronic music was perceived of at this time, particularly given broad cultural scepticism of such practices. As such, *The Prisoner* stands as a fascinating lost opportunity, and one cannot help but wonder what might have been had this collaboration taken place. Nonetheless, we can see how discussions with the GRMC might have led to Gerhard's involvement with the production and anticipate his later, groundbreaking electronic music.

Unfortunately, how the tape interacted with the music written for ensemble in Gerhard's final score is unknown. As such, it is impossible to fully chart this starting point of Gerhard's thinking in matters of electronic music, or the degree of contribution this composition made in the development of an electronic music practice in England. As we can see from his soundtrack to *King Lear* a year later, Roberto Gerhard had a vision for what electronic music could achieve in a theatrical context, and we can only assume that some aspect of this vision was present in *The Prisoner*.

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