

HEINRICH SUTERMEISTER

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To my mind, there is something very spiritual about the music of the Swiss composer, Heinrich Sutermeister just as there is in the music of Bruckner. Is it because Bruckner was a devout religious man and that Sutermeister was one of four children brought up in the home where his father was a vicar? Of course, the fundamental meaning of the word spiritual is the awareness of the God of the Bible although the word has been used and misused to mean other things.

Sutermeister was the youngest of the four children. He was born on 12 August 1910 in Feuerthalen in the region of Zurich close to the town of Schaffhausen. His upbringing was enhanced because his family were cultural and intellectual. In the home, chamber music was played regularly and Heinrich went to the nearby town of Schaffhausen for piano lessons with the organist, Paul Binde.

In 1921, the family moved to Binnigen on the outskirts of Basle to accommodate his father's new church. On leaving school, Heinrich went up to Basle University and studied philology German and French which showed his interest in literature and stood him in good stead for when he composed operas. He visited Paris where he saw Debussy's opera *Pelleas et Melisande* which is still generally regarded as a very poor work. He also was introduced to the music of a fellow Swiss composer, Arthur Honegger whose music impressed him.

Sutermeister went to Munich in 1931 to take up composition with Walter Courvoisier but he died later that year. His successor was Gustav Geierhaas and Hugh Rohr taught the young student the art of conducting.

It has been said that Carl Orff and Hans Pfitzner were Sutermeister's teachers and yet the evidence is that he only heard one lecture on Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* from Pfitzner. He only had five lessons with Orff but they did become lifelong friends. Sadly, Sutermeister was not an admirer of Wagner or his music. He preferred Verdi. The composer that did influence Sutermeister was Werner Egk but, nonetheless, he found his own musical language. Egk wrote five operas including *Peer Gynt* (1938) which was banned by the Nazis because of its satire on this evil regime.

For the 1933/34 season, Sutermeister was the repetiteur at the Basle City Theatre and took the brave step of becoming a freelance composer. In 1936 his opera, *The Black Spider*, was premiered by the Radio Studio of Basle and the publishers Schott of Mainz began to publish his work beginning with the *Divertimento no. 1* for string orchestra commissioned by Paul Sacher. The opera *Romeo and Juliette* was a very great success from its premiere under Karl Bohm. It had to be translated into five languages for performances in other parts of Europe. Bohm was so impressed that he told Sutermeister to compose more operas and *The Magic Island*, after Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, was premiered by Bohm in 1942 at the Dresden State Opera.

The war was a difficult time for all serious artistes. In 1942, Sutermeister moved to Vaux-sur-Morges near Lake Geneva where he composed most of his remaining works. He was president of the Swiss Performing Rights Society from 1958 to 1980 and from 1963 he taught a composition class at the Hanover Conservatory.

He was a composer's composer. He did not write primarily for the public in order to please them and gain a good reputation such as shallow composers like Elgar and Britten. Sutermeister is said to be mainly an opera composer taking his texts from such writers as Shakespeare, Wilde (*The Canterville Ghost*), Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*) and Dostoevsky (*Raskolnikoff*). It was his love of literature than lead him to compose these operas:

The *Black Spider*, an opera for radio (1936 revised for the stage in 1948)
Romeo and Juliette (1939)

The Magic Island (1942)
Raskolnikoff (1945-7)
The Red Shoe (1951)
Titus Feuerfuchs (1957-8)
Seraphine(1959) after Rabelais
The Canterville Ghost (1972-3) for television
Madame Bovary (1966-7)
Das Flaschenteufel (1971) for television
Le roi Berenger (1985) after Ionesco

But he also wrote concertos. There are three for the piano (1944, 1954 and 1962), two for the cello (1955 and 1971) and a clarinet concerto of 1976. He wrote eight cantatas, songs and piano pieces and his spirituality is shown in his Requiem (1952) and in his Te Deum (1975).

Much of his orchestral work is meditative such as the Poeme funebre written in memory of Paul Hindemith. Parts of the Divertimento no 1 for string orchestra has some bitter melodies and promotes his spirituality. His Piano Concerto no. 2 was first given by Adrian Aeschbacher and Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt in October 1954 and is a rugged work.

Sutermeister's music is tonal but with a few glimpses of a progressive style and daring harmonies. His Serenade for Montreux was written in 1970 for the 25th anniversary of the Montreux-Vevvey Festival and dedicated to his daughter.

He died in Vaux-sur-Morges on 16 March 1995.

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