

KATHARINA WOLPE

Dr David C. F. Wright

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How soon we forget! How prejudiced we can be! We are so quick to erase things from our minds and overlook great artists of the past. We devalue the legacy they have left us and some who are still happily with us must reflect on their days of approbation and now mourn their neglect!

But it goes deeper than that. Some of our best performers are not household names. Those performers and conductors who are international stars are not always the best performers or conductors and it is only marketing that elevates them, not their skill or talent!

Katharina Wolpe is a stunning pianist. The Daily Telegraph wrote that her performance of the Mozart Piano Concerto K595 had a moving eloquence in the larghetto and crisp playing in the outer movements and that she showed great musical insight. The Times spoke of another performance being of noble breadth of phrasing and that the song-like tenderness of her cantabile which made this a performance to treasure. The Sun in Vancouver commented on one of her recitals showing her gifts as a master with a keyboard command of fascinating evenness, power and polish. Her performance of Beethoven's Opus 111 rose to the level of exalted interpretation. The Guardian spoke of her Mozart, K491, as being played with superb finesse and quality and that in every way her interpretation, exquisite in tone and breadth, took in the subtlety of phrasing which made this Mozart memorable.

She was born in Vienna, her father being the distinguished composer, Stefan Wolpe who was born on 25 August 1908. He became a very clever 'modern' composer who had a passion for chocolate. The Nazi regime made her family refugees and her people to be people without a country.

She is incredibly versatile. Her playing of the classics is legendary. She has recorded all the piano works of Schoenberg on Symposium, piano works by her father on the German Largo label, the Schubert Impromptus, D899 and D935 on Symposium and two works of Iain Hamilton namely Palindoes and Le Jardin de Monet on Symposium with an Arts Council Grant.

Elisabeth Lutyens wrote her Symphonies for piano wind and percussion for her as well as the Bagatelles and the Music for Piano and orchestra. David Bedford wrote his Piano Piece 1 for her and Iain Hamilton wrote his Piano Concerto no 2 for her as well as the two solo pieces already mentioned. Her father wrote three pieces for her to play namely Form 1959, For piano and 16 instruments and Toccata.

One of the grossly unjust attitude among some who call themselves music-lovers is their hostile and repugnant attitude to 'modern' music. I can hear people say that because she has played Schoenberg and these other moderns (can't you hear the cynicism?) she must be a pianist lacking in taste. What people do not understand is that these modern works are far far more difficult to play than most of the classic and romantic repertoire and calls for a higher degree of skill, interpretation and technique. I was playing Mozart concertos before I was in my teens but Schoenberg is so very difficult it took many more years for me to play his music and I am not sure I played it that well then. This does not decry Mozart or any other classic or romantic composer nor do I lessen them. The point is that the moderns are far more demanding to play and there are many pianists who say that they dislike these modern composers whereas the truth is not so much a dislike but the fact that these pianists are unequal to the skill and demands these newer works require.

I suspect that Katharina's favourite concertos are Mozart K271 in E flat and K595 in B flat as well as Beethoven 3 and 4 and the glorious first concerto of Brahms. She admires Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Berg, Webern, Bartok, Varese and Messaien all exceptionally fine composers. She points out that a composer's function is "to astound us to move us and to inspire us and every composer's way is different at various stages of his life. The division of intellectual versus emotional is, in my view, a false one. We are one and the same person whether we are thinking or feeling particularly in the creative field."

She adores Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms because they "transcend the purely pianistic limitations of the instrument and take it beyond itself".

I once asked her if she suffered from nerves before a performance. She replied, "Generally less now than when I was young and playing everything for the first time. The remedy lies in preparation since a concert is as good as the preparation for it. If the mind is free for imagination and fantasy there is no room for nerves."

I also asked her what makes a good performance. She answered at once, "Realising the composer's

intentions. Once you play it your way it is not the composer's way. Too many soloists and conductors want to perform music their own way and the composer 's wishes are secondary".

How true that is but I will not give examples here although examples are legion.

Notwithstanding those remarks, Katharina went on to say to me, "I detest superficial mechanical playing". What I think she meant was the performers are not to be machines so technically perfect and precise that the music is only clinical.

She is a very courteous speaker. She did not criticise any performer, composer or conductor but did admit that she would have given anything to have been born earlier so that she could have worked with Furtwangler who is her ideal conductor. She did say that some conductors were unsympathetic in concertos (how right she is) but did not name them. Her honesty is also noted when she admitted to have given a few disastrous performances.

She is an admired teacher having piano classes at Morley College, given masterclasses in many universities and colleges as well as summer schools and festivals in England, the USA and Canada. For two years she was artist in residence at the University of Toronto and similarly at the University of North Carolina.

But what of her neglect? Stoically she says, "The public is the victim of huge industries of Public Relations, sales technique and the mistaken theory that classical concerts can only be to make money if they are vulgar enough. The music public is treated like any other consumer and great music marketed like shampoo or margarine and if music lovers can't tell the difference between margarine and butter one can't blame them."

To take up her point, PR says that Elgar is a wonderful composer, the alleged best butter you can buy, whereas Schoenberg is a cheap margarine and people are so naive as to believe this propaganda, this false information and virulent promotion. I should add that this example is not hers but one tendered by another famous musician.

Another point she made was that the Tchaikovsky violin and piano concertos had rocky beginnings and so it is hoped that in time shallow music lovers will value the modern concertos. Edgar Varese once said that "composers are not ahead of their time but, rather it is music lovers who are so far behind".

She also makes another salient point about reviewers. All reviewers of music and performances whether live or on record or CD must be musicians themselves, must be someone who you can take seriously as a musician. If a review of any of her performances, or anyone else for that matter, whether live or on CD, is written by a non-musician that review is worthless. She prefers to play live rather than in the recording studio. If you were to review a book, you would have to read it. If you are to review a CD of music you must be able to read the dots on paper i.e. the score. How can you review any piece of music when you have not 'read the book'.

Katharina does not smoke or drink. She loves gardening, viewing art and reading. She told me that the people who have most impressed her in the arts are not musicians but the sculptor Alberto Giacometti and the writer Samuel Beckett. She opines that both carried an aura of spiritual strength and both were unaffected and kind, Beckett in particular. Her other interest is the environment, conservation and the protection of animals and their habitat rather than politics. She is a vegan and a member of the Green Party but is disappointed that the party is not more successful or supported. She has no religious persuasion.

I warmed very much to this wonderful lady who went on to express another vital truth. She said, "The performer, or performers, is the path between the composer and the listener and this road must be clear. Often it is full of junk and debris like the vanity of the performer/ conductor, or nerves or bad technique or a lack of rehearsal or understanding of the piece. I would like to think that my performance is always an uncluttered road that leads the listener to the genius of the composer whether it be Mozart or Schoenberg, Beethoven or Berg".

After one concert the Vienna Express wrote, "Katharina Wolpe played the Beethoven of one's dreams, pure, profound and passionate." Another concert resulted in this review from the Toronto Star, "A most extraordinary recital. There is no doubt that she has complete mastery over her medium. Her nuances are exquisite, her pacing and sense of rubato are quite wonderful, her musical line clear through every bar." Music and Musicians of London wrote of yet another concert, "Having listened to inexcusable performances by three internationally famous pianists on the South Bank this month, it was both refreshing and indeed humbling to hear playing from Katharina Wolpe of the most striking sensitivity and perception".

It is amazing how music lovers can be so naive on many issues. Some honestly believe that an internationally famous pianists can only perform well and, as with some of these modern conductors, can do no wrong.

In the first months of 1997 she gave a grand romantic tour of Saturday morning coffee concerts at St George's, Brandon Hill, Bristol in which she highlighted music associated with Vienna, Leipzig, Dresden, Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, St Petersburg respectively and the final concert took us back to Vienna. She played Beethoven (op. 109) the Schubert Impromptus (D935) the Variations Serieuses by Mendelssohn, Davidsbundler Tanze opus 6 by Schumann, Petrarch Sonnetts 104 and 126 by Liszt, On the seashore by Smetana, In the Mist by Janacek, Chopin mazurkas Op 17 /4, Op 24/ 4 and Op 67/2 and the Ballade no. 1 in G minor. By the time she had reached Russia she played Tchaikovsky's Barcarolle and Christmas from The Seasons, the Nocturne no 5 in B flat by John Field and the 24 Preludes op 11 by Scriabin. The final concert returning to Vienna heard the E flat Intermezzo from Brahms's Op 117, the Berg Sonata, the Three Pieces op 11 of Schoenberg, and the Fantasy Pieces op 116 by Brahms.

Vienna, which is highly critical of pianists, loved her. The Volksblatt wrote, "Miss Wolpe was the star of the evening. Her playing has poetry, beauty and intensity — she renders unto Beethoven that which is Beethoven's".

Another naivety of some music lovers is their view that great pianists only play great music and that is the criterion for allowing what is great music. The same misconception is attributed to other instrumentalists and conductors with this selfsame notion that great performers only perform great music and this is the nonsense perpetrated by PR. Katharine Wolpe made her London debut with the Schoenberg Piano Concerto, which she learnt at short notice — an amazing feat, and this was not appreciated. Even when Alfred Brendel recorded this concerto the naive music lovers were stunned because it contradicted their preconceived and ridiculous ideas.

Early in 1998 she appeared with Vanessa Redgrave in five evenings of literature and Music at the Theatre des Champ Elysees in Paris and in the summer took part in the International Stefan Wolpe Festival in Toronto.

She was married to the conductor the late Lawrence Leonard.

Katharina is both a splendid artist and lady and more people should take an interest in her playing. They will not be disappointed.

She is appreciated and highly valued by the professionals and deserve all this approbation but music lovers, affected or infected by PR and the opinion of the less informed, have, apparently, yet to discover this stunning pianist.

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