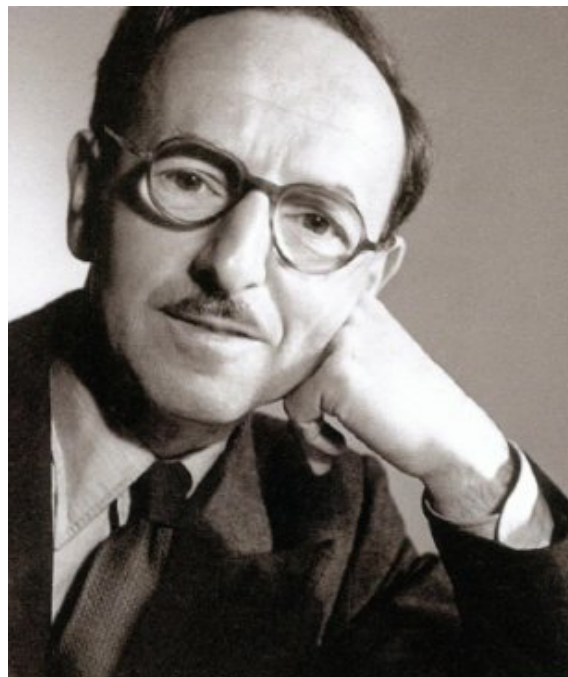


MÁTYÁS SEIBER

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Peter Racine Fricker referred to Mátyás Seiber as the greatest teacher of our time. Because Seiber was Hungarian and knew Bartók, Fricker's subsequent study of the music of Bartók was the foundation of his own early successes. Seiber wrote a short treatise *The String Quartets of Bela Bartók* stating that 'they will be looked upon as the most outstanding works of our time'. The Swedish composer Ingvar Lidholm produced some startling works after his studies with Seiber including the powerful orchestral work *Ritornelli*. Another pupil, the British composer Hugh Wood, writes that Seiber 'played an important part in musical life not only as a teacher, but as a distinguished composer whose knowledgeable sympathy for the music of Bartók and Schoenberg alike did much to form the post-1945 generation of composers'. The composer Francis Routh speaks of the excellence of Seiber's teaching. "He was a complete teacher equally at home in the disciplines of Bach and Schoenberg. He particularly loved Bach. His teaching methods encouraged students to realise the reasons for every note that they wrote and every harmony that they produced. He was a genuine inspiration," he told me.



Seiber was a complete musician. He had no strong points because he had no weak ones

He was born in Budapest on 4 May 1905. He had a musical home. His mother taught the piano and both his brother and sister became professional musicians. He began to study the cello when he was ten years old. Between 1919 - 24 he studied at the Budapest Academy; he studied the cello with Adolf Schiffer and composition with Zoltan Kodály who, sadly, remains a most under-rated composer. After the Academy, Mátyás Seiber settled in Germany at Frankfurt teaching at a private school. Later, he joined a ships orchestra and travelled, visiting the Americas. He had become a little disillusioned with music in Europe. Unfair criticisms were being made about Kodály but the most famous incident was when Seiber entered his Sextet of 1925 in a competition. Among the jurors were both Kodály and Bartók. Seiber's delightful piece did not win the prize and Bartók led the protest by resigning from the jury.

Two of Seiber's early works date from 1924. The *Missa Brevis* for unaccompanied choir has a Kyrie that is stylistically like an updated Gregorian chant but a little quicker and more active. A real sense of wonder is expertly caught. The *Agnus Dei* uses musical imitation to great effect and, at times, the music soars and has a telling spirituality. Often the sound is ravishing.

The *String Quartet No 1* is another very mature work for a 19-year-old and, while it may show Kodály's influence, it displays an early individuality. The thematic content is well-defined and his understanding of this medium is exemplary. As already implied, it is not a 'typical young man's work' out to impress. It has both a vigour and almost sad character. The slow movement is very beautiful, strangely haunting and of impeccable craftsmanship. Here is a longing expressed simply. Paradoxically, it has a warm coldness, it is music of rare quality. The finale is a movement of energy which some may claim to suggest gypsy music.

In 1928 Seiber joined the teaching staff at Hoch's Conservatory in Frankfurt where he stayed until 1933. Here he taught many subjects including jazz. During 1933 to 1935 he travelled visiting Moscow and Leningrad.

In 1934 he composed a one-act opera *Eva Spielt mit Puppen*. He also composed two operettas, *A Palágyi Pekek* and *Balaton*.

He came to England in 1935 and worked for a publisher. In 1942 he joined the teaching staff at Morley

College and was the founder and conductor of the Dorian Singers. Also, in that year, he co-founded the Committee for the Promotion of New Music. He composed his Bassardo Suite No 2 in 1942, the first suite dates from 1940, his Pastorale and Burlesque for flute and strings, and the Four Greek Folk Songs for soprano and strings. These are notable because the accompaniment captures the drowsy Mediterranean climate, particularly in the opening song. The second has a rustic and infectious feel about it, the third song is quasi-declamatory lamenting loneliness and the final song seems to conjure up both Spain and Carmen rather than Greece which may suggest a similarity of cultures.

But to return to the time of his arrival in Britain, this saw the completion of his String Quartet No 2 which uses the twelve-note technique at its most Schoenbergian. The first movement is angular, sometimes frenetic and uncomfortably intense. The slow movement is a little more relaxed and is a blues, which, by definition, is a jazz lamentation. The frenetic music of the opening movement returns in the brief finale.

In 1951 he arranged his Divertimento for clarinet and string quartet of 1928 as his Concertino for clarinet and strings. The first movement is one of controlled energy and florid passage work and, at times, the soloist and the strings seem to be at odds with each other but this adds to both the argument and the interest. The slow movement does not drag (none of Seiber's do) but has a simplicity of utterance. It is strangely beautiful with a memorable theme which might suggest a sad Hungarian folk song. A scherzo of good-natured high spirits with a 'spitting' clarinet clowning about follows. The composer wisely avoids brilliance for the sake of it but the dry wit explodes at the end. A brooding section follows and a robust finale ensues with an often striding base line adding to the conflict. The clarinet tries to lead the music into the playground whereas the strings want to stay in the classroom. Who is going to win?

Seiber was inspired by literature and, in particular, by James Joyce, setting excerpts from two of the Irish writer's works. Ulysses of 1947 is a cantata for tenor, chorus and orchestra and employs the twelve-note technique and other methods. It is not an heroic work as the title may suggest and is, in the main, a reflective work. It contains some still and evocative music, wonderful harmonies, brief moments of exquisite beauty and rare moments of excitement. The music, or its style, has been purloined by the cinema to accompany science-fiction films.

Three Fragments From A Portrait of An Artist As A Young Man of 1967 is scored for narrator, chorus and orchestra. In this fine score, Seiber copied the genre created by Schoenberg and Humphrey Searle. It is a work of tremendous atmosphere. The wordless chorus has an eerie beauty, the sound world that the cinema has appropriated and, of course, Seiber wrote many film scores including Animal Farm.

The second movement of Fragments is apocalyptic and dramatically compelling. The last section has a quiet optimism of a new world. It is one of those rare works that is beyond praise.

In the last six years of his life, Seiber composed some outstanding pieces. The Elegy for viola and small orchestra of 1954 is an expressive piece of great distinction with exquisite scoring. For example, the three trumpets, often muted, are very sinister and bars 96 to 99 have a spine-tingling beauty being scored for three solo violins and three solo cellos. It is a very fine piece. The Three Pieces for cello and orchestra of 1957 is an amazing work. The first movement has a poetic solo line but is rugged; it is warm and lyrical but without sentimentalism. The composer's complete understanding of the cello is evident; the balance with the orchestral texture is exemplary. It is 'deep' and satisfying music; there is not a note out of place, no weakness in the orchestration and a rich texture which is always expertly judged. The second movement is more animated and has a controlled vigour and fascinating interplay. It sounds 'more modern' and serves as an excellent contrast to the outer movements. Again, the thematic material is memorable; the percussion is used to great effect without the weakness of being bombastic. The cello writing is concertante and the craftsmanship is flawless. There is some intriguing pizzicato work and a staggering climax! The final piece returns to the profound and intense lyricism of the opening piece. Here is quasi-nostalgic music, perhaps autumnal music without the ghastly Edwardian wallowing. The music has that glowing Bergian warmth. This is music of profound unequalled quality... dark, rich and intense and one famous composer told me it was incredibly sexy!

Altogether it is a very special work and, while nothing is perfect, this approaches that.

The Sonata for violin and piano of 1960 is a powerful and demanding work combining brilliance and lyricism. It captures the very best of the Second Viennese School with its economy and radiance. The scherzo has memorable material as well with stunning writing for both instruments. This is followed by the most fragmentary movement but, as usual, every note counts. There is no padding, note-spinning or empty gestures. Seiber's compelling music is never pompous, arrogant or overweight. The final slow movement has a few surprises including a throwaway ending and is there a nursery rhyme here?

All composers and musicians like to relax and to do so some deliberately choose to listen to and take an interest in a composer who is so different from their own style. Schoenberg took an interest in Johann Strauss and both Webern and Seiber examined the music of Schubert and his extraordinary and seriously lax methods of composition. He once said that if Schubert had lived longer he might have become the greatest traditionalist of all time. In Seiber's String Quartet No 3 (Quartetto lirico) the scherzo has some affinity with the scherzo of Schubert's Quartet in G but the strength of the Seiber work is in the free use of serial technique and an individual rhythmic vitality.

He was an honest man. He once said that there was nothing great about Schubert's Symphony No 9 in C nicknamed The Great. He was a practical man and would turn up at a recording session for a film with his orchestral score and parts written in three different coloured inks, and if the director complained that a passage was too dense he would say, for example, "Play the blue parts." He was versatile, equally at home with Bach and Haydn, Bartók and Schoenberg, jazz and light music, playing the cello in the Lenzewski Quartet and composing Improvisation for jazz band and symphony orchestra with Johnny Dankworth. He was not a snob. If he liked a work it was for sound musical reasons; if he disliked a work it was equally for sound musical reasons. He was not a blotting-paper person blindly following public opinion about a composer or his work. This is a vital lesson that I have learned from him and, however much it may upset some, if a composer and his work are sub-standard we should be honest and say so. Conversely, if an unknown or neglected composer has written just one work that is excellent in its craftsmanship we should be equally honest and say so.

Mátyás Seiber's death was a dreadful tragedy. He died in a car crash in Kreuger National Park, South Africa, in 1960. He was 55.

Undoubtedly the greatest teacher of the 20th century, although Boris Blacher was also deservedly admired, one can only conjecture what influence Seiber might have had, had he lived another twenty years. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that his like will not be seen again.

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