

Music Notes: a vital slice of Chicago history

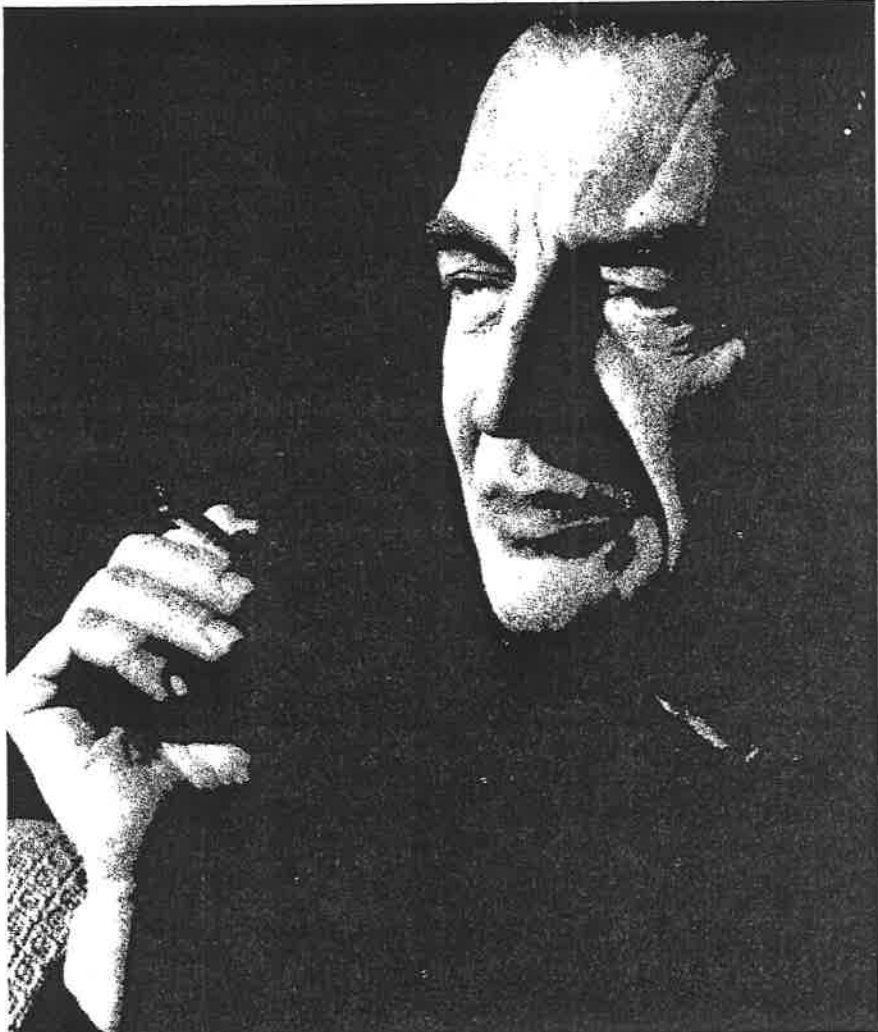
No other composer of such international reputation has been so much a part of Chicago history as Alexander Tcherepnin. A warmly regarded teacher, an exciting pianist, and a jovial, colorful personality, he taught composition, theory, and piano at DePaul University from 1949 to 1964. More significantly, he was one of the few composers ever allowed the privilege of playing an active role in Chicago's official concert life.

Born in Saint Petersburg in 1899, Alexander was the son of the eminent Russian nationalist composer Nicholas Tcherepnin, as well as (later) the father of two of today's most advanced electronic composers, Ivan and Serge Tcherepnin (the former of whom tells me that yet a fourth generation has already shown a precocious interest in making music). Not long after the 1917 revolution the family moved to Paris, and by 1922 Alexander had started making appearances both as pianist and composer throughout Europe, America, and the Far East. Especially frequent were trips to the Orient, where he encouraged local talent and, in Tokyo, began a firm for the publication of serious Japanese music. In 1927 his Symphony no. 1 caused a riot in Paris with its scherzo for percussion alone. (I think in those days Parisian audiences rioted as a matter of course, more out of social habit than out of any real artistic indignation.)

Remaining in Paris through World War II, Tcherepnin received a job offer from Arthur C. Becker, dean and founder of the DePaul music department, who was in the process of building an impressively cosmopolitan faculty. Not expecting to like Chicago, Tcherepnin came over alone in 1949; pleasantly surprised, he brought his wife (the Chinese pianist Lee Hsien-Ming) over in 1950, and his children in 1951. (Ivan remembers, as a boy, attending every concert by the CSO, often being let in free by no less than Mrs. Fritz Reiner, much to the chagrin of certain ushers.) Here Tcherepnin consolidated his musical style and wrote several of his most important works, though they have remained overshadowed by some of the earlier works with which he had made his reputation. After he retired from DePaul, he spent his remaining years in New York, Paris, and in travel.

While he was here, Tcherepnin's was not the usual sob story of the neglected Chicago composer: he was too well connected. His friends included Rafael Kubelik, who, as principal conductor of the CSO, premiered his Symphony no. 1 in 1952; Russian conductor Nikolay Malko, whom he had known in Russia and who programmed his works when he conducted the Grant Park Symphony; Fritz Reiner, who commissioned his **Divertimento**; new music sponsor Paul Fromm, for whom Tcherepnin reviewed scores, and was paid in bottles of wine; Walter Patcke, founder of the Aspen Music Festival, who premiered his opera **The Farmer and the Fairy** there in 1952; CSO conductor Jean Martinon, who conducted his Fourth Symphony in 1965; Fabien Sevitzky, Russian conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony and nephew of Serge Koussevitzky; Felix Borowski, composer, critic, former music editor for the **Sun-Times**, and writer of the CSO program notes; and many other influential pianists, conductors, and scholars, many of whom saw to it that his music was frequently played.

Tcherepnin's musical innovations,



Alexander Tcherepnin

in themselves, are of little interest. He made frequent use of a fertile and exotic nine-note scale, made up of the augmented triads on (e.g.) C, D-flat, and E-flat. In his counterpoint he used a technique he called "interpoint," wherein the notes of one line fill in the rhythmic gaps of another (not really so different from what Bach did in his solo cello suites). His real musical interest stems from his unusual mixture of diverse influences, which he nevertheless fused into a unified and well-defined musical personality: impressionist harmonies, Prokofiev's biting dissonance, Eastern exoticism, Russian folk music, avant-garde percussion usage, and pitch structures that ventured toward serialism without abandoning their generally joyous accessibility.

Since his death in 1977 Tcherepnin's music has finally fallen into general neglect; the only major performance here has been of his 1927 **Magna Mater**, op. 41, by Solti and the CSO in January of 1983. Friday night, though, steps will be taken to correct this situation by one of Tcherepnin's more prominent students, William Ferris, composer and director of the William Ferris Chorale. The chorale has made an unusual habit of presenting programs devoted to works of one composer, usually from this century: last month's concert featured Vincent Persichetti, and a retrospective for Howard Hanson will follow on May 17. But tonight will provide Ferris with an especially gratifying opportunity to honor a fondly remembered teacher with a wide-ranging program that includes almost all of Tcherepnin's choral music, none of which has ever been performed in Chicago.

Tcherepnin wrote most of his choral music in the late 1960s, partially spurred by a visit to his homeland. The chorale will perform his **Four Liturgical Chants**, op. 103, sung and published in English though originally written in

Russian, and the **Four Russian Folk Song Settings**, op. 103. Also featured will be the Mass, op. 102, of 1966, which Tcherepnin wrote as a "thank-you" to a convent of nuns in Iowa, whom he had visited for the purpose of giving some residency workshops. Though written for three equal voices, Ferris has rearranged the parts to be suitable for a four-part choir. Instrumental works will focus on the earlier part of Tcherepnin's career, notably the 1913-18 Bagatelles for piano, played by Robert Morrison, with which Tcherepnin concertized and which helped establish his early reputation. Mr. Morrison will accompany Arnold Roth in the Violin Sonata of 1921-22, and Thomas Weisflog will perform the 1962 **Processional and Recessional** on the historic E.M. Skinner pipe organ at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church—organ connoisseurs take note.

William Ferris, who began studying with Tcherepnin as early as 1955, remembers him as a big, colorful figure who taught by asking questions rather than answering them, and who stressed imagination over the ability to conform to an existing model. Dedicated to his students as individuals, Tcherepnin encouraged them to familiarize themselves with the other arts, taught orchestration from his own scores, and generally instilled a professionalism that one can ultimately gain only from an artist who is actively involved in professional concert life, outside the walls of the academy. Tcherepnin added one of the most exciting chapters to the history of Chicago's music; certainly there has not been anyone else here before or since quite like him.

You can hear a vital part of Chicago's history tonight at 8 PM at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, 690 W. Belmont. General admission is \$12, students and seniors \$7. For reservations or information, call 922-2070.

— Kyle Gann

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