

# Flashes and Stirrings



## CONTEMPORARY CHAMBER PLAYERS

with Katharina Wolpe  
at Mandel Hall  
January 21, 1983

By Kyle Gann

A friend of mine who had studied with Stefan Wolpe once told me the composer kept a large fish tank in his living room that he would watch for hours on end for inspiration. The connection to his music is disarmingly obvious: he wrote pieces that sit motionless, then dart without warning, trill, sputter, sparkle, freeze in position, bang a couple of chords, run through some staccato notes, and then suddenly vanish like the edge of a Japanese watercolor. Though Wolpe's atonality is now the officially sanctioned idiom of America's musical academia, he always had sincerity, unpredictability, and vi-

brant energy—the lack of which will consign his host of imitators to historical oblivion. This is the man whose tombstone reads “And when I die, a thousand birds will fly out of my mouth”; his music makes it hard to doubt that the prophecy was fulfilled.

Between his birth in Berlin in 1902 and his death (of Parkinson's disease) in New York in 1972, there were three Wolpes. The first studied with Busoni and Webern, and wrote politically conscious *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music) in a Germany that was rapidly turning Nazi. He wrote some monumental works in this period, such as the *Passacaglia* (1936), which, even when overlong, seem to possess more raw power than the works by Hindemith they sometimes call to mind. The second Wolpe lived in Palestine in the 1930s and wrote the haunting *Songs From the Hebrew* (1936-9), part of a series of works that absorbed Semitic musical influences into a modernist idiom. The third Wolpe moved from the Old World to the New, and from a dense polyphony to a sparser and sparser, yet more lyrical, musical landscape. If you judge him by his music from the 50s and 60s, Wolpe became disillusioned with politics, and moved further and further from an earth busy with human affairs to the flashes and stirrings of a remote galaxy. During this last phase, Wolpe became a warmly regarded teacher; his students included such diverse personalities as Morton Feldman, Ralph Shapey, Charlie Morrow, and Elliott Carter.

Katharina Wolpe, the composer's daughter by his first marriage,

visited the University of Chicago recently to perform four piano works of the third Wolpe (one with ensemble) and one work in transition from his early period. The program began with *Form* (1959), possibly Wolpe's best-known work (I know of four recordings still in print), and its “sequel,” *Form IV: Broken Sequences* (1969). These two works are showplaces for all the quintessential marks of the Wolpe style: close-ranged, chromatic lines that suddenly take an unexpected turn at the end, continuous loud and soft notes within a single melody, one note sustained through a number of dense chords as if determined to survive through immobility. The key to Wolpe's music is unexpected contrast, a difficult business, since the continuity must be handled dramatically enough to ensure the unexpectedness. I have always been struck by the way a Wolpe piece ends. Not for him were the tragic dying away or the rousing summation. His works typically end with a brisk, matter-of-fact phrase that leaves no question as to its function, like a tactful hostess ushering her guests out the door the moment the food and drinks have run out. Sometimes, as in the *Piece for Solo Trumpet* and *Broken Sequences*, this ending is replaced with a humorously grandiloquent gesture, which serves to make the foregoing all the more ambiguous. In Wolpe, even the atonal and abstruse can suddenly turn tongue-in-cheek.

Unfortunately, Ms. Wolpe's performance was not as scintillating as her father's music, but was rather languid throughout. Where languidness was appropriate, as it

often is in Wolpe's music, the playing was beautiful; but one missed the contrast that is the essence of his art. The performer seemed aware or appreciative of only one or two aspects of these kaleidoscopic works, and although the playing was often poignant, only a fraction of the spectrum was audible. Two works from the 1940s, part three of the *Compositional*

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*Studies* and the *Toccata*, were in an older, less volatile style, and suffered less from a monochromatic rendering. The *Studies* are short bursts of ideas similar to the enigmatic musical examples Wolpe loved to intersperse among the paragraphs of his theoretical essays. The three-movement *Toccata* (1941) did not, fortunately, live down to the unceasing technical display that the term has led us to expect at the hands of so many composers. This was a dense, ambitious work, complete with fugue, and the only glimpse on the program of the first, Germanic Wolpe.

Ms. Wolpe's original intention, according to the program, had been to repeat the *Toccata* at the end of the concert. Instead, she repeated *Form*, *Broken Sequences*, and the *Compositional Studies*, perhaps because she thought she had given

them less than fair treatment in the earlier performance. The second time through, each piece was more colorful, and Wolpe's personality more apparent. Still, one felt that Ms. Wolpe understood her father's snow and rain, and perhaps his thunder, but not his lightning.

The one ensemble work on the program was *Piece for Piano and Sixteen Instruments*, which, under the demanding baton of Ralph Shapey, fared better than the solo piano works. Essential contrasts were more apparent, and the orchestration, juxtaposing muted trumpets, harp, percussion, flutes, and electric guitar in endless variety, was arresting. Several memorable lines were given to the baritone saxophone, an instrument which cannot but be conspicuous in an ensemble of fewer than 30 players. Dating from 1961, the work was a fine example of the middle of Wolpe's final phase, dense, demanding, and unpredictable.

Admired by a diverse range of composers, and an inspiration to three generations so far, Stefan Wolpe is a composer whose time came some time ago. All praise to the Contemporary Chamber Players for allowing us a full evening of his work. Thanks must go to Katharina Wolpe as well for the happy idea of repeating three of the most complex works on the program; upon repeated hearings, each surprising note in these mercurial works begins to take on the inspired inevitability of the notes in a late Mozart sonata. It is unfortunate that not all of the thousand birds sang at this retrospective concert, but the few hundred we heard had powerful voices.