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RICHARD FLURY AND THE POLITICS OF THE UNPOLITICAL

Abstract: During the Second World War, composers in neutral Switzerland were not faced with the same difficult choices as their colleagues in occupied Europe, but most nevertheless refused to do anything to antagonise the neighbouring fascist regimes. The Swiss composer Richard Flury (1896–1967) was an exception: he worked with numerous anti-fascists and Jewish emigrés and even offered a job to his friend, the conductor Gottfried Kassowitz, in an (unsuccessful) effort to get him out of Nazi-occupied Vienna.

Keywords: Richard Flury, Gottfried Kassowitz, Jewish emigrés, Music in Switzerland

For many years after the Second World War, the composers of Central Europe who had lived through it were largely divided into proverbial sheep and goats. Some found themselves on the “right” side of history by virtue of having been banned by the fascists and/or having been forced into exile; but those who stayed and accommodated themselves to the ruling parties found themselves excoriated for years to come. Because the former group was generally progressive in its aesthetic and the latter conservative, the divide between them had a major impact on the history of art music in the post-War years, with the late-Romantics tainted in the eyes and ears of many, and the progressives absolved of any guilt from collaboration. As we know today, however, the real state of affairs was far less clear-cut. Some progressive exiles would have rather stayed and worked within the system, some conservative Romantics allied themselves with those under duress, and others whose music was declared *non grata* remained in Germany and defied all logic by staying devoted to their *Führer* to the end.¹

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¹ We refrain here from naming and shaming because it would be unjust to accuse individuals without allocating the necessary space to assess the pros and cons of their conduct. But the

In neutral Switzerland, composers were not faced with the same harsh choices as their colleagues across the border in Nazi-occupied Europe. Nevertheless, the majority took care not to antagonise the German authorities, just in case Hitler should tire of his independent Alpine neighbour and march in to occupy it too. Some prominent Swiss even took active steps to make sure refugee musicians were prohibited from taking on work that they felt should have been reserved for the natives.² To be sure, none of the main Swiss composers of the day was truly sympathetic to the Nazis. But hardly any of them made any public statements against the evils of fascism either. They preferred instead to keep their mouths shut and their pockets open, especially if they received major royalties from Germany. Neither Othmar Schoeck, Frank Martin, Heinrich Sutermeister nor Arthur Honegger did or said anything to upset the regime next door (while Honegger lived mostly in Paris, he kept his Swiss passport throughout).³ There were only a few exceptions, all of them from a younger generation. The composer Adolf Brunner (1901–1992), a former Schreker student, became one of the leading members of the *Gotthardbund*, a conservative organisation that sought to intensify moral resistance to the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini;⁴ and Edward Staempfli (1908–2002), a former Dukas and Scherchen student, went so far as to publish open criticism of Germany at the height of the war (in an article on Debussy for the *Schweizerische Musikzeitung* in April 1943, he wrote of the “waves of Teutonic barbarism” washing over Europe, which was registered with open displeasure by the German authorities).⁵

recent literature on the major composers of the first half of the 20th century shows that – unsurprisingly – none of them was as “free from sin” as the post-War generation sometimes made them out to be.

² See, for example, Thomas Gartmann: “Der Schweizerische Tonkünstlerverein 1933 bis 1945. Ein Berufsverband, der sich nicht mit politischen Fragen befasst (?)”, in: Chris Walton and Antonio Baldassare (Eds.), *Musik im Exil. Die Schweiz und das Ausland 1918–1945*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2005, 39–58.

³ See, for example, on Honegger, Roman Brotbeck: “Prekäre Ambivalenzen. Arthur Honeggers Anpassungen nach 1941”, in: Andreas Eichhorn (Ed.), *Kurt Weill und Frankreich*, Münster & New York, Waxmann, 2014, 9–23; on Frank Martin and others, Gartmann: “Der Schweizerische Tonkünstlerverein”; on Othmar Schoeck my *Othmar Schoeck. Life and Works*, Rochester NY, University of Rochester Press, 252–56, and on Sutermeister my article “Black or brown? Heinrich Sutermeister in apartheid’s web” in: *Tempo*, vol. 61, No. 239 (January 2007), 41–51.

⁴ See Adolf Brunner, ed. Chris Walton: *Erinnerungen eines Schweizer Komponisten aus der Schule Philipp Jarnachs und Franz Schrekers*, Chris Walton (Ed.), Zurich, Allgemeine Musikgesellschaft, 1997.

⁵ Edward Staempfli: “Militär, Radio und Claude Debussy”, in *Schweizerische Musikzeitung* vol. 83, No. 4 (April 1943), 125–6, here 126.

There is one case, however, that has remained unnoticed until now, mainly because it took place out of the public eye, and because the composer himself remained silent about it. But it offers us both an example of a man who did what was morally right for no reason other than it seemed to him the natural thing to do, and proof of the spuriousness of the argument, often made by his Swiss peers (such as Othmar Schoeck),⁶ that they had no choice but to remain acquiescent in the face of world events if they wished to avoid damaging their careers.

Richard Flury (1896–1967) was a native of the Canton of Solothurn. After attending school in the city of Solothurn itself, he studied composition with Hans Huber in Basel, then counterpoint with Ernst Kurth in Bern, orchestration and composition with Joseph Lauber in Geneva, and finally – for just two months in late 1921 – composition with Joseph Marx in Vienna. He thereafter returned home to Solothurn, and apart from a brief peripatetic existence conducting the Zurich Academic Orchestra and a mixed chorus in Bern, he spent the rest of his professional life teaching the violin to school pupils in Solothurn, conducting the local amateur orchestra (the Stadtorchester Solothurn) and composing on a freelance basis. His idiom was late-Romantic, his prime influences Strauss and Bruckner, though in the mid-1920s the influences of Schreker and even of the free-atonal Alban Berg made their presence known – in works such as Flury’s First String Quartet of 1925, there are even passages where tonality becomes indeterminate. Like many a composer before him, Flury spent his early years trying to tick off one genre after another – thus in the 1920s he wrote a piano sonata, then a First Symphony (a rather Brucknerian but remarkably assured effort), then the aforementioned First Quartet, then a First Piano Concerto, and then a first opera. For the last of these, he chose to set Oscar Wilde’s *A Florentine Tragedy* in the German translation by Max Meyerfeld (the model, incidentally, for “Uncle Julius” in Judith Kerr’s *When Hitler stole pink rabbit*). Flury was unaware that Alexander Zemlinsky had set exactly the same text a decade earlier. When Zemlinsky’s publisher Universal Edition found out, they protested because they were under the impression that they possessed the sole rights to the text. Flury vented his frustration in a letter to Joseph Marx in October 1926 in which he engages in anti-Semitic, anti-Modernist vitriol, lumping the two together in a manner that would become distressingly common among his peers less than a decade later. Zemlinsky in fact proved generous and collegial, making it clear to Universal that he had no desire to damage the career of a fellow composer. The problems seemed to resolve themselves, but after Flury’s opera was first performed in Solothurn in April 1929, Universal wrote to him, demanding that he hand over all his royalties. It soon turned out, however, that

⁶ See the chapters on the period 1933 to 1945 in my *Othmar Schoeck. Life and Works*.

Universal had made a grievous miscalculation and had no exclusive rights to the text whatever, and so they backed down immediately.

Given the content of Flury's ugly letter to Marx of autumn 1926, it is not a little ironic that he became firm friends with the conductor who had been hired for his work's first performance in Solothurn, for this was Gottfried Kassowitz (1897–1969), a man both of Jewish extraction and an intimate member of the very Modernist circles that Flury had decried. Kassowitz was a former pupil of both Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, and had even helped to edit the orchestral parts for the world première of *Wozzeck* in Berlin.

Kassowitz liked Flury's music as much as he liked the man. He conducted a suite by Flury on the Vienna Radio a year later, and they remained in contact throughout the 1930s, with Kassowitz regularly asking to see Flury's newest scores, and writing back to offer his praise for them. When Flury wrote his next opera, *Die helle Nacht* (1935), Kassowitz even tried to have it produced at the city theatre of Baden bei Wien, where he was working as a Kapellmeister at the time. But Kassowitz's position was as precarious as the general economic situation in Austria, and nothing came of it. In fact, *Die helle Nacht* – which the present writer believes to be both Flury's finest work and one of the best Swiss operas of its time – has never been seen on stage. Even at the time Flury wrote it, it had no chance of being performed in Germany, because it was a setting of a play by the Austrian writer Paul Zifferer (1879–1929), a friend of Hofmannsthal and a Jewish, Francophile journalist who even during his lifetime had been an object of racist abuse in the right-wing German press.⁷

Kassowitz's career seemed to be taking a turn for the better in early 1938, when he conducted the first Austrian performance of Janacek's *Makropoulos Case* at the Theater an der Wien on 5 February. But just over a month later, Hitler annexed Austria, and Kassowitz was forbidden from working as a conductor on account of his father having been Jewish. Flury's letters to Kassowitz have not survived – they were inadvertently thrown away by Kassowitz's nephew after his death, along with all his other papers. But Kassowitz's letters have survived in Flury's archives to this day. On 16 April 1938, Kassowitz wrote to Flury and offered his apologies for not having written for a long time. He sketched out his present miserable career prospects and asked if Flury knew of any professional possibilities for him in Switzerland, where his sister already lived. Flury must have written back straightaway, because Kassowitz's next letter is dated 30 April 1938. He thanks Flury for his letter, and says he had already learnt (presumably via his own sister) that there was no possibility of getting work in Switzerland

⁷ See my *Richard Flury: Life and Music of a Swiss Romantic*, London, Toccata Press, 2017, especially 138–9.

at present. Kassowitz then adds: “The fact that you even wanted to pass on your orchestra to me shows that you are truly *the* friend I always saw in you, but I assure you that I would never, ever accept such a sacrifice on your part.” We know nothing more of this. Flury’s orchestra was typical of many in Switzerland then and today – it was a collection of amateurs with a paid conductor that was able to add a few professionals to boost its numbers (and its quality) for its concerts, and was also able to engage professional soloists. Conducting it did not bring in enough money to live on (hence Flury’s other job teaching the violin), though since Flury was going through a painful marital separation from his wife and four children and he was seeking to divorce and remarry, he needed every penny he could get. It would indeed, as Kassowitz wrote, have been a considerable sacrifice, in financial terms, to pass on his orchestra and his income from it to someone else. We also cannot rule out the possibility that Kassowitz felt it would have been beneath him. After all, he had recently enjoyed a major conducting success in Vienna, the city of music, and he probably felt things were not yet bad enough for him to contemplate swapping the metropolis for the amateur scene of a charming but tiny, provincial town in northern Switzerland.

Kassowitz’s next letters chart his increasing depression, though punctuated by hopes that life might after “normalise” after all – the effect is chilling, reminiscent of de Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s story “Torture by hope”, in which the persecuted hero ultimately even has hope taken away from him. Kassowitz’s letters cease without warning in March 1940. But he survived the War – after the conflict was over, he related how he had managed to earn enough to live on by editing Nazi choral music for a Viennese publishing house.

Flury was never politically active, though as a good Catholic in conservative Solothurn his sympathies seem to have been typically centre-right (the terms admittedly have little meaning in the broader European context, as Swiss politics have long been a strange mish-mash to the outsider, with the parties of left and right adhering to policies that in other countries would normally belong to the opposite side of the political spectrum). Nevertheless, before and during the Second World War Flury worked closely with numerous refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe as well as with prominent Swiss antifascists. His first two operas – the *Florentine Tragedy* and *Die helle Nacht* – both had libretti by Jewish writers (Meyerfeld and Zifferer respectively, as mentioned above), and so had no chance of performance across the border. Flury’s comic opera *Casanova e l’Albertoli* (first performed in 1938) had a libretto by the Swiss-Italian writer and antifascist activist Guido Calgari; and his next operatic venture was a wartime *Mysterienspiel* entitled *St. Urs und St. Viktor* to a text by the emigré writer and director Peter Lotar, a native of Prague and a former student of the

Max Reinhardt School in Berlin, who had fled to Switzerland in 1939 because he was Jewish. Lotar found work at the theatre in Solothurn, as did many other refugees under its then director Leo Delsen. This ‘mystery play’ by Lotar and Flury was planned as a large-scale open-air event but was never staged because the economic situation at the time of its completion – spring 1945 – made it un-fundable. But writer and composer found each other highly congenial, both professionally and personally. In his diary, Lotar wrote on 10 May 1943, near the start of their collaboration, that Flury was “an exceptionally upright, decent fellow. Just to have got to know him is a good thing in itself”.⁸

Shortly after the end of the War, Kassowitz succeeded in re-establishing contact with Flury, who promptly invited him to Solothurn so that he might recuperate after the ravages of wartime Vienna. He organised Kassowitz’s visa, and his friend accordingly spent several weeks with Flury and his family in early spring 1946. A year later, Flury invited Kassowitz again, this time officially to conduct a summer concert in Solothurn with Flury’s orchestra, but again primarily to help him build up his strength again. This time, Flury needed the help of his brother Adolf to get a visa for Kassowitz – Adolf was a successful engineer and an officer in the Swiss Army, and he had contacts in the federal authorities in Bern that meant strings could be pulled successfully. In the years to come, after the borders had become porous once again, Flury and Kassowitz visited each other several times. Kassowitz resumed his career on the Austrian conducting scene, and made a point of programming Flury’s works at the Viennese Radio. He also attended the première of Flury’s last opera, *Der schlimmheilige Vitalis*, in late 1963. Flury’s final orchestral work was an *Andante sostenuto* dedicated to Kassowitz on his 70th birthday; he did not managed to orchestrate it by the time he died of cancer in December 1967, but it was later scored and performed by his son, the composer and conductor Urs Joseph Flury.

As mentioned above, Flury’s music of the mid-1920s demonstrates an awareness of the trends in the New Music elsewhere; but it is in the five or six years after the première of his *Florentine Tragedy* that we find Flury’s most advanced forays into a latently Modernist aesthetic. There are piano pieces from this period that display a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards (a-)tonality, and there are whole passages in his opera *Die helle Nacht* (most notably the opening of the second act) that are devoid of any tonality whatsoever. We have no concrete proof that Kassowitz was in any way responsible for this stylistic shift in Flury’s music, but given his close connections to the Second Viennese School,

⁸ Peter Lotar, manuscript diary, 20 May 1943. Held by the Swiss National Library in Bern, shelfmark: SLA-Lotar, C-3-a.1. *St Urs* was finally performed – in concert – in 1996, and was subsequently released on CD.

it seems reasonable to suppose a link. We can probably be sure, however, that it was Flury's close friendship with Kassowitz that made him realise the absurdity of his anti-Semitism as expressed in his correspondence with Joseph Marx in 1926. Flury's fondness for Kassowitz the man and his admiration for him as a musician will surely also have convinced him that the Viennese Modernists were far from being the charlatans he seems to have assumed them to be, before he actually got to know any of them.

After the Second World War, Flury never mentioned his efforts to help Kassowitz in the wake of the *Anschluss* (not even his son Urs Joseph was aware of it), nor did he ever discuss his wartime work with antifascists and emigrés. Flury seems to have seen himself as a thoroughly "unpolitical" person. At a time when the bigger names in Swiss music were careful to position themselves to cope with any fallout, should the tide turn against their country, Richard Flury displayed no hesitation in working with kindred spirits, regardless of their religion, politics or nationality. While others sought to justify their inaction during the War by insisting on their "unpolitical" nature,⁹ Flury provides us with concrete proof that an "unpolitical" stance did not have to prevent anyone from showing basic human decency towards his fellow men. This is surely a lesson that has lost none of its topicality in our world today.

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⁹ See the literature by Gartmann, Brotbeck and Walton mentioned in footnotes 1 and 2 above.

Summary

During the Second World War, composers in neutral Switzerland were not faced with the same difficult choices as their colleagues in fascist-occupied Europe – between collaboration (passive or active), silence, emigration, or ‘inner exile’. Nevertheless, their frequent dependence on German publishers and/or audiences, and a fear of a possible Nazi invasion prompted most Swiss composers to avoid any activity – political or musical – that could be construed as in opposition to the status quo across the border in Germany. The Swiss composer Richard Flury (1896-1967) was an exception. He was never active politically, but his works for music theatre at this time were all written in collaboration with anti-fascists and/or Jewish emigrés. When his friend Gottfried Kassowitz, a former student of both Schoenberg and Berg, was banned from conducting after the Nazi annexation of Austria, Flury even offered him a job in Switzerland in an effort (albeit in vain) to get him out of Austria. After the War, Flury never spoke of his attempts to help Kassowitz, and his story is only now being told.