

STEFAN WOLPE

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IN America today there are several newcomers who not only have brought us the fruits of their early development in Europe, but are still young enough to be completely absorbed in our national life and play a vital part in its musical future. Such a figure is Stefan Wolpe. Not yet widely known here he has, however, deeply impressed a number of musicians with his vigorous music and the dynamic sense of great promise he arouses. He was born in Berlin in 1902, and the chronicle of his life could serve as a summary of the experience of all contemporary German youth. There are the typical restless years of wandering from end to end of his own country, the constant search for unattainable goals, that cynicism and distrust which were the reactions to abrupt post-war change and the breakdown of accepted regimes, and finally the post-Hitler journeys through many lands in a constantly broadening quest for self-realization. Against this background, so typical of the spiritual ferment of the time, are to be observed his brilliant and original mind, versatile technical equipment, great range of musical experiment, and the development of markedly individual methods. It will be interesting to see how America shapes this composer who is the product of such a significant experience and the bearer of such extraordinary gifts.

Wolpe's father came from Russia, his mother from Hungary and neither was musical. His first studies were with Richter, Taubman and Juon. At fourteen he had written a complete opera, an octet for winds and several piano pieces. Bored by routine musical education he began to seek the secret of art in other fields — painting, architecture and poetry. At sixteen, in passionate revolt against his environment, he left a comfortable home, with a rucksack on his back holding chiefly his manuscripts, to join one of those groups of painters, poets and philosophers who were cropping up all over the country and wandering hither and yon at will. His hit-or-miss living he earned doing errands, working as gardener, and walking on as an opera super. Meantime he composed on street corners, railway stations and stairways. This casually written music was important enough to catch the attention of Herman Scherchen who published some

of it in *Melos* and from then on for the next five years exerted an important influence over him. To Scherchen, and Busoni also, Wolpe owes much for advice and instruction. At twenty-one he destroyed all his manuscripts and made a fresh start. But although the physical pattern of his life changed and he settled down temporarily, his intellectual and spiritual journeys had only begun. First, like his contemporaries Weill and Krenek, he responded to the lure of jazz. In 1927 he wrote three operas; two of them centered around Zeus, the other, *Schöne Geschichten*, was a group of "shorts," in the form of farces and shockers, for actors, singers, chorus and jazz orchestra. These attempted to treat concrete realities flippantly and to draw philosophic axioms out of entertainment. Next, still following the pattern of his time, he succumbed to the current political and social obsessions. He joined the Youth organizations which were working with large choral groups in the theatre, and enlisted in the crusade to release music from its established formalism. Let the musician express his own world! Let music be a moral force! In 1930 he was writing songs for school choruses and for amateurs, reducing his language to a simple vocabulary with which he could reach the people. The titles of works written in this period are indicative: two oratorios *The Passion of a Man*, *On the Education of a Man*, and a setting of Heine's *Silesian Weaver*.

Then the lightning struck. On Hitler's advent to power Wolpe moved to Russia. After a brief stay there and in Rumania he went on to Palestine. In Palestine he spent five years absorbing the exotic music of that country, maturing his powers as composer and as teacher. Arabs and Jews brought him their folksongs; through their native art he was himself re-educated. He undertook to interpret this folk material, to write songs to Biblical texts, to make new musical experiments and to work out his tonal material in new directions. With his eternal quest for self-expression still unsatisfied he left Palestine and in 1938 came to New York where he is once more teaching and abundantly writing music.

III

Wolpe's composing methods have little relation to the accepted rules of romantic or classic literature. Again symptomatic of his time, he uses all forms with greatest individual freedom. Even in what is left of his earliest works, *Nine Songs* to the text of Tagore's *Gitanjali*, there are the essential characteristics of his more mature technic — a dualistic polyphony, a synthesis of two themes one growing out of the other, long breathed phrases, and the working out of motives through their inherent energy. In

Wolpe's music, although two or three themes or musical facts may be used in a work, one theme is more generally the nucleus of a movement. Variation is the basic principle. A short rhythmical idea grows into a long composition by use, in whole or in part, through variations, expansion of intervals, crab inversion, rhythmic change. When new thematic material is needed, fresh elements are introduced but they must come out of the variations. He developed his method of working out transitional variations from the allegro movements of the Bach and Handel suites, which, though restricted to few motives, showed him limitless possibilities for development. Balance is generally acquired by combining themes simultaneously. The themes are usually short but they unfold slowly. The first chord often determines the entire harmonic scale.

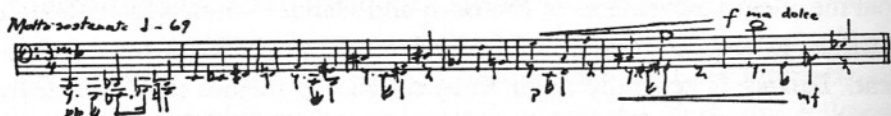
An important experiment in the control of rhythmic and melodic energy is incorporated in the *Andante in C-minor* from a piano sonata of 1924. Using a basic rhythmic idea with a minimum of melodic movement, he attempts to reduce the natural flow of tone, in order to create a picture of motion in suspense. The tonality, which is based neither on chord nor on scale, appears in intervallic combinations of seconds, thirds, fourths and so on, employed both as contrapuntal and harmonic units.

By 1924 Wolpe was feeling his way toward a deeper self-expression. At that time under the influence of Schubert, Busoni and Gluck, he wrote a setting of five poems by Hölderlin. Although these lack the tense striving energy so characteristic of his style, they have great simplicity and beauty. Shortly after that came *Two Fables*, to texts by Hans Sachs and La Fontaine, in which twelve tones are used with such facility as to give the work the character of folk music.

Wolpe's approach to the twelve-tone system, a basic principle of his art, was not primarily through Schönberg or Hauer, but through his own study of tone-relationship; it was, he feels, the result of the effect of sonorities on him. "Chromaticism" he points out, "imposes no sense of restriction within itself. In the classical era the chord had its consciousness in the triad. Today we have no such tonal bounds. Each composer tries to establish his own world of sound. A chord is a functioning organism. The more endless the combinations of tone, the more necessary it is to invent or develop a system to evaluate sounds in order to give them sense."

Although much of his music is linear, counterpoint is not separated from harmony; it is merely another presentation of the same thing. The chord structure grows out of his melodic line. This is illustrated in the

group of *Four Pieces on Grundtonreihen*, a work which has appeared in a piano, a two-piano and an orchestral version (1936). The first is a *Study of Fundamental Groups*, variations on a subject constructed from twelve tones in minor seconds and minor thirds, thus: C-E \flat , C \sharp -E, D-F, F \sharp -A, G-B \flat , G \sharp -B. The second, an *Adagio*, is based on the tritone. The third is a *Passacaglia*, the theme of which is constructed of all the intervals of the twelve-tone scale shown once, thus:



The variations are made from various fragments of the theme combining all scales and working out many rhythmic designs. The fourth is a *Scherzo Furioso* whose theme is based on a major seventh, major sixth, a perfect fifth, a perfect fourth, a major third and major second. Only one theme is used; it is broken into parts, developments are made out of developments. The treatment of form is canonic. New materials are brought forth out of the old.

Wolpe's works have been written, played and published in the four corners of the world. They include many songs from the simplest lyrics to the most complex structures with large orchestral accompaniment; incidental music for the theatre; orchestral dances, and, among his most important scores, a *Nonett* for flute, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, violin, cello and piano. During his stay in Palestine, he produced a *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*, a *Song of Songs* for alto and piano and instrumental obligati, two *Chinese Epitaphs*, *Four Songs after the Prophet Micah*. These have great dramatic power and originality of treatment.

The Oriental influence recognizable even in his pre-Palestinian work, is still strong in the music that he has written since arriving in New York. He has recently made arrangements of Yemenite, Arabian and Palestinian songs for voice, piano and chorus. He has also written a *Dance Symphony* for orchestra. In *Jeremiah* (1939) he has used both the singing and speaking voice and piano for a *Song*, *Fugue*, *Complaint*, *Furioso*, and *Jubilation* with three dances – *Chaconne*, *Variations* and *Sarabande*. Other recent Biblical works are his settings of the *Sixty-fourth Psalm* and the *Thirty-fifth Chapter of Isaiah* and an oratorio, *The Prophets*, for chorus, soli and orchestra.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to record that the first American note has been sounded in a new *Cantata* for chorus, solo and orchestra, on texts by Walt Whitman.