

FRIDAY, APRIL 9, 2010

Homage to Ernst Toch at the Villa Aurora

Villa Aurora, Pacific Palisades, CA
Tuesday, April 6, 8pm

Review by Rodney Punt

The LA Opera's Recovered Voices project may be the most prominent local tribute to composers persecuted by mid-20th century fascism in Europe, but it is not the only one. Another series, low on the radar of the L.A. music scene but earnestly pursued, has been helmed for several years by two musical pedagogues from eastern Germany. Their efforts have brought to light piano compositions by composers once displaced from their homelands, and in some cases even erased from history.

Volker Ahmels and his wife Friederike Haufe, a piano-duo team from the Schwerin Conservatory of Music in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, have shuttled to and from Los Angeles for an impressive eight years, working with local institutions on the revival of works by German and Austrian composers of Jewish heritage. Their latest outing, this past Tuesday at the Villa Aurora, was a tribute to émigré Austrian composer Ernst Toch, active in Los Angeles as a film and art-music composer and educator from the mid-1930s until his death in 1964.

Toch's place of honor has for some years been on prominent physical display at the Villa Aurora, where his personal Blüthner piano graces the living room and where his bust, crafted by Anna Mahler - daughter of Gustav and Alma Schindler Mahler - hovers like a battered but proud saint just over it. The Blüthner has conveyed the works of many an émigré composer to the ears of the home's guests, but curiously just a smattering of Toch's works have sprung from its keys.

Even on this occasion, only one of Toch's works was featured on a program promoted as a tribute to the composer: his slender but charming *Sonata for Piano Four-Hands*, Op. 87. Composed in 1962, it is a late work that begins with a whimsical Mozartian *Allegretto*, followed by a languorous, dissonant *Andante espressivo*, and concluding with a sassy, almost Poulencian, *Allegretto amabile leggiero*. Following a tradition established a century earlier by composer Arnold Schoenberg in his Viennese salons for new music, the virtually unknown Toch piece was performed twice, to ingratiating effect, as the first and last selections on the program.

The rest of the evening's fare was a tribute of sorts to composers, working within traditional tonality, who influenced or were influenced by Toch's music. An autodidact *in excelsis*, Toch never had a formal teacher of composition, but learned by studying the many masters that had preceded him. His first exercises consisted of copying out late at night, and under the covers of his bed to avoid the disapproving eyes of his father, quartet scores of Mozart. In that self-taught sense, he resembles fellow émigré composer and friend, Arnold Schoenberg, one of whose works was also on the program.

Schoenberg's *Six pieces for piano four hands* (his only composition for these forces) is a charming, minor-keyed compendium of classical and romantic styles including those of Schubert and Brahms. Later on, Hans Gál, best known as an author on musical issues, was represented with *Three Marionettes for piano duet*, Op. 74, accomplished character sketches in a late-romantic style of the familiar characters, Pantalone, Colombina, and

Arlecchino. The only living composer on the program this evening, Wolfgang Rihm, was featured with several of his light-hearted *Mehrere kurze Walzer*, also under the influence of Schubert and Brahms, but with touches of Kurt Weill and Toch himself.

The work that towered over all the others, including that of the evening's guest-of-honor composer, was the centrally placed *Fantasy in f-minor for piano four-hands* of Franz Schubert. Perhaps the greatest work for duo piano ever composed, it proved to be the most moving performance of the evening.

The Haufe-Ahmels duo are not high-powered virtuosos in the flashy sense, but they know a thing or two about constructing an effective, thematically linked program. It was enjoyable music-making, but it also whetted the appetite for a more substantive exploration of Toch's piano compositions, of which there are many. Toch himself was a masterful pianist.

The recital had been preceded by introductory words on the life of Toch from his grandson (and eventual executor), the noted author Lawrence Weschler, who shared perspectives and wry anecdotes of his childhood interaction with his illustrious grandfather. Weschler later sent me a link to an article he wrote on Toch in 1996 for the Atlantic Monthly with many other engaging stories. It's well worth a read:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96dec/toch/weschler.htm>

In recent years, there has been significant institutional support around the world to memorialize Toch's life and music. This evening's program, organized by the Villa Aurora Foundation, had assistance from the German Foreign Office & Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Austrian Consulate in Los Angeles, and the Ernst Toch Society.

In Europe, Toch's music is enjoying something of a revival, and there will be a noteworthy exhibition devoted to his life and works at the Jewish Museum in Vienna this summer.

Incidental info: I once met Toch in person, toward the end of his life and at the beginning of my serious interest in music. As a teenager in the fall of 1963, I attended a performance of a Toch symphony at Bovard Auditorium, on the USC campus where he taught for many years.

It was an intriguing but challenging listen for my then novice ears. At its conclusion, the conductor turned to acknowledge the composer in the audience. To my embarrassment, all eyes in front seemed to turn toward me. I was relieved when a short, elderly man, rather gaunt and formal in appearance, stood up from the seat just behind me. It was, of course, Toch.

Approaching the great man at the later reception, with gauche adolescent enthusiasm I asked for his autograph. He looked at me with mock seriousness and declared, "I have come to enjoy this evening, not to work." And with a twinkling eye, "But for you, I make exception."

Unbeknownst to me at the time, Toch was already seriously ill and would die only months later.

So for him and his music, I now make heartfelt advocacy.

Source: <https://www.laopus.com/2010/04/homage-to-composer-ernst-toch-at-villa.html>