

ERNST TOCH

“It’s true,” runs the melancholy joke with which the German émigrés, marooned in Southern California during the forties, used to solace one another, the one about the two dachshunds conversing while on a melancholy stroll along the Palisade, gazing out over the Pacific. “It’s true,” says the one to the other: “Here, I’m a dachshund. But in the Old Country I was a Saint Bernard.”

But it *is* true: Back in the Old Country—by which I mean Weimar Germany during the 1920s and early ’30s—my grandfather, the composer Ernst Toch, had been a giant figure, confidently striding the vital and teeming contemporary musical scene. And nowhere perhaps more evidently so than with the Piano Concerto, his first, featured on this album. Premiered by Walter Giesecking, with Hermann Scherchen conducting, in the spring of 1926, the “dynamic and transcendently modernist” (Slonimsky) piece proved to be the critical highlight of the following year’s Festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music (this time, the soloist Walther Frey and the Scherchen-led orchestra required—and were afforded—no fewer than seventeen rehearsals to master the strikingly complicated work). The concerto became a standard in Giesecking’s repertory, and in Elly Ney’s as well—she performed it with Wilhelm Furtwängler in Leipzig and Frederick Stock in Chicago; Pierre Monteux programmed the piece in Amsterdam; and Jesús María Sanroma performed it with Serge Koussevitzky in Paris, who in turn featured Toch himself at the keyboard for a subsequent performance in Boston. Toch, an accomplished pianist in his own right, had initially declined the challenge of attempting the part, deeming it way too difficult, until a psychiatrist friend in Berlin prevailed on him to reconsider: Why should all the other soloists be profiting at his expense? Indeed, into the early thirties, Toch’s Piano Concerto proved to be one of the most widely performed pieces in the contemporary catalog of B. Schotts Sohne, arguably the most important music publisher in Germany, if not the entire world.

Not bad for a composer, born in Vienna in 1887, who had been almost entirely self-taught. Actively discouraged from pursuing his interests in music by his petit bourgeois parents (Toch’s father was a middleman in unprocessed leather), the young boy nevertheless persisted in his uncannily acute interest. The brief tenancy of an amateur violinist in the Toch household gave the child his first exposure to sheet music: From him, the boy inferred the fundamentals of musical notation. A few years later, he made “the decisive discovery,” as he later put it, of miniature editions of the ten so-called famous string quartets of Mozart—one of which he bought—that he happened to notice propped up in a music shop window. “I was carried away when reading that score,” he recorded, years later. “Perhaps in order to prolong my exaltation, I started to copy it, which gave me deeper insight.” Eventually he managed to buy all ten of the scores. After having copied three or four of them, he began to make out the structure of the individual movements; when he started to copy the fifth, he decided to try improvising the development—thereafter comparing his efforts with the original: “I felt crushed,” he later recalled. “Was I a flea, a mouse, a little nothing, when I compared what I did with what Mozart did; but still I did not give up and continued my strange method to grope along in this way and to force Mozart to correct me.” And indeed, Toch would receive no other formal musical training. Mozart would remain his god, followed by Bach, and no matter how innovative and bracingly modernist he would subsequently become, Toch always considered himself “placed as but a link in the chain” that wended its way back to such old masters.

Although Toch had resigned himself to a career in medicine, his triumph in 1909 in the quadrennial Mozart Prize competition, which he had entered a few years earlier as a sort of forlorn lark, permitted him to move to Germany and to throw himself into composition. His early style might be described as lush neo-Romantic/late Brahmsian, but as with many others, things changed markedly with the coming of the war, which Toch experienced in the trenches on the Austrian army’s Slovenian front and from which he emerged, transformed, stunningly modernist upon his return to Germany in 1919.

The ensuing Weimar years were to prove a phenomenally prolific period for Toch, featuring in addition to his Piano Concerto, a cello concerto and a second piano concerto, several quartets and sonatas, three operas, choral pieces, numerous other works for orchestra, and (perhaps most famously, in retrospect) such experiments as the “Geographic Suite,” the world’s first piece for spoken chorus—Weimar Rap, as it were—a work subsequently championed by the young John Cage.

But, of course, all of that came to a sudden end with the upsurge of Hitler. Schott summarily canceled his contract. Giesecking and Frey canceled scheduled performances of the Toch Concerto (the former, with the London Symphony Orchestra, slated for 1934). Meanwhile, his other champions were themselves being increasingly persecuted: William Steinberg was preparing a performance of a Toch opera when Nazi storm troopers burst in to lift the baton from his hand. Toch himself, otherwise relatively apolitical, had sized up the situation remarkably quickly and already fled the country by April 1933, taking advantage of his selection that year to represent Germany at a musicological conference, alongside Richard Strauss, in Florence, Italy. He simply never returned to Berlin, heading instead to Paris, whence he cabled my grandmother the all-clear signal: “I have my pencil!” (As if it was going to be that simple, as if that was all he was going to need.) She joined him, along with their six-year-old daughter (my mother), and the small family resettled in London by the end of that year, where Toch secured work scoring films (among them the Bertold Viertel vehicle, *Little Friend*, whose creation formed the basis for its scenarist Christopher Isherwood’s short novel *Prater Violet*).

“The suggestion for the *Big Ben Variations*,” Toch would subsequently write (in an English remarkable for one who came to the language only after his fortieth year) “came to me during my stay in London during the winter of 1933–34. Once, on a foggy night, while I was crossing the Westminster Bridge, the familiar chimes struck the full hour. The theme lingered in my mind for a long while and evolved into other forms, always somehow connected with the original one. It led my imagination through the vicissitudes of life, through joy, humor and sorrow, through conviviality and solitude, through the serenity of forest and grove, the din of rustic dance, and the calm of worship at a shrine; through all these images the intricate summons of the quarterly fragments meandered in some way, some disguise, some integration; until, after a last radiant rise of the full hour, the dear theme, like the real chimes themselves that accompanied my lonely walk, vanished into the fog from which it had emerged.” (In these notes, Toch barely glances on the geopolitical component of the “vicissitudes of life” which were consuming him on that walk, though it is hard not to register them as one listens to this piece, no less than a celebration, after all, of the famous BBC Radio’s hourly clarion theme from that time.)

Toch actually began composing that piece on the boat to New York (my grandmother used to tell the story about how, on their last night in London, Toch had headed out with music paper to register the exact sixty-note theme, provoking the suspicions of a passing constable who apparently took him, with his strange notebook and agitated scribblings, for some kind of spy). Toch had been summoned to join the founding faculty of Alvin Johnson’s University in Exile—the germ of what would eventually become the New School for Social Research. And it was indeed Johnson’s gift of a lovely picture-book edition of the Italian folk tale to Toch’s daughter Franzi that first brought the character of Pinocchio to the composer’s attention (Walt Disney’s version was still another five years off). The “merry overture” seems to cut completely against the grain of the dark historical context of its composition, except perhaps to the extent that Toch himself identified with the protagonist of the little poem he penned for the title page of the score:

Italian lore would have us know
That gay marionette Pinocchio!
With deviltry and gamin grace
He led them all a merry chase.

The piece at any rate exudes the felicitous energy and sophistication—albeit within a considerably more tonal and conventional idiom than his Weimar work—which was soon to endear Toch to musical directors in Hollywood, where he himself was headed within a year, at the behest of his new friend and champion, George Gershwin. The *Pinocchio* overture, as a matter of fact, was premiered by Otto Klemperer with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in December 1936 (and subsequently issued in a popular recording by Stock in Chicago, which may have been how Disney himself became aware of the story).

The ensuing decade, alas, proved to be ever more difficult for Toch. Increasingly typecast as a specialist in horror and chase effects (for example, the sleigh chase in Shirley Temple's *Heidi*), the remainder of his time increasingly consumed by teaching at USC (he needed to be earning as much money as possible to help secure affidavits for friends and family still left behind in Germany), the resonant support system of his Berlin years all but eviscerated, Toch felt his own native inspiration drying up. Indeed, he came to worry that, his pencil notwithstanding, he might have lost it altogether.

Then, after suffering a massive heart-attack, which Toch took as a sign to reform his ways, the composer quit teaching and film scoring and threw himself into a final creative surge which lasted until his death in 1964, and would prove to be almost as productive as his Weimar period, yielding seven symphonies, a final opera, and numerous other solo, chamber, and orchestral works. His first symphony in 1948–49 took its motto from Luther, of all people: “Although the world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God has willed his Truth to triumph through us!” The second symphony, dedicated to Albert Schweitzer—the prototypical Good German, and with his legendary love of Bach, likewise placed, in Toch's estimation, as “a link in that chain”—took as its motto lines from the Old Testament, Jacob's wrestling with the angel, “I will not let Thee go except Thou bless me.” For the final work in this magisterial autobiographical trilogy, the Third Symphony, Toch drew on Goethe: “Of course, I am a wanderer, a pilgrim on this earth, but can you say that you are anything more?” (the classic German and the wandering Jewish strands of his life thus brought into alignment: a merry chase, indeed!). That symphony, premiered by William Steinberg in Pittsburgh, went on to win the 1955 Pulitzer Prize.

It was immediately afterward that Toch, at the MacDowell Colony during the winter of 1955–56 and under a commission from the Koussevitzky Foundation, set about composing *Peter Pan*, or “A Fairy Tale for Orchestra,” as it was originally, and somewhat more aptly, titled. Toch himself subsequently explained that original title as “indicating the realm of phantasy from which it sprang and to which it tended. The surroundings of the MacDowell Colony in the hills of New Hampshire, a landscape of singular beauty, breadth and enchantment, remoteness and silence, especially at that time of year, winter, which I had never experienced before, as well as the life of the Colony, aroused in me a reaction somehow detached from reality. Though the work is far from any kind of programme-music, a state of mind caused by such extraordinary circumstances might well have had its imprint on the work.”

It is hard to exaggerate the love Toch felt for the MacDowell Colony, and its founder, Mrs. Edwin MacDowell—indeed, he was to characterize his next symphony as a celebration of her—and the succor which the place afforded him. Indeed, the relative quiet of this piece registers in retrospect as a pastoral idyll, a sublime surcease, in the wake of the fury of composition which had preceded it: an ode, if anything, to Pan. It was his son-in-law, my father, who, though likewise an immigrant, albeit of the successor generation, was a considerably more canny observer of the American scene and who pressed the “Peter Pan” title on Toch—in this instance some three years *after* the Disney movie. Toch went along with the scheme, retrospectively discovering an “Homage to Tinker Bell” in the middle movement.

Following *Peter Pan*, Toch's productivity continued unabated until his passing in 1964, generating dozens of pieces that have yet to experience a truly worthy hearing. During his final years, Toch would sometimes refer to himself wistfully as "the world's most forgotten composer," and his melancholy joke—a dachshund's plaint, after all—betrayed a painful validity. But if Toch's music seemed in temporary eclipse, this was in part because of the integrity and independence of a lonely artist, leader or follower of no school, who insisted on striking the proper balance between innovation and tradition, and hence found himself dismissed simultaneously as too old-fashioned by the avant-garde and too modern by the traditionalists.

There are signs, however, that such artificial distinctions are beginning to fade. Especially in Germany, Toch's work is undergoing a considerable revival—there are conferences, premieres, new recordings every few months. These days Toch's *oeuvre* is being reassessed in terms he would have preferred, as that single link in a chain. And as such, Toch's music is being prized for the mastery of its craftsmanship and the depth of its inspiration. —*Lawrence Weschler*

Lawrence Weschler, a longtime staff writer at *The New Yorker*, is the author of more than ten books, including *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and is the new director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University. His long piece on Toch, "My Grandfather's Last Tale" (December 1996) can be found on the Web site of *The Atlantic* magazine (www.theatlantic.com).

Toch's atonality in the Piano Concerto was cutting-edge for its day—1926—and sounds today more like a work of the 1940s. Schoenberg had begun composing atonal music in 1911, and latched on to the twelve-tone technique only in 1921. Toch never adopted twelve-tone technique to any great extent, though he eventually flirted with it in his Thirteenth String Quartet of 1953. Instead, he developed a well-defined strategy for writing atonal music in a listenable and lively way. The music is very chromatic, running for long stretches at a time without referring to any tonal center, but the melodic contours are smooth and clear, and the rhythms full of propulsive energy. Particularly in the Piano Concerto, the momentum rarely pauses, even though the constant pulse is spread throughout the orchestra for a varied rhythmic layering. The work opens with a recurring motive that implies two unrelated keys—C G A-flat B-flat B F-sharp—and the perpetual motion gives an air of neoclassicism, quite in contrast to the anguished expressionism of the prewar years.

Peter Pan (1956) is not so different in style, but shows tremendous advances in orchestrational sophistication. An airy, immaterial piece as befits its subject matter, one might consider it Mendelssohnian, or perhaps a modern companion piece to Berlioz's "Queen Mab" Scherzo. The leaping melodies in the strings and winds are remarkable for their lithe abandon and their quasi-twelve-tone avoidance of pitch repetition. The second movement, reduced to elfin textures of solo instruments, is indeed tonal, but in such a way that the tonality constantly evolves despite the simple melodic materials. A poised halfway point between tonality and atonality is achieved in the third movement by drawing melodies from distantly related common triads.

The similarly fairy-tale-inspired *Pinocchio* (1935) is more harmonically conventional-sounding, with melodies that seem Bartókian, and surprise cadences that call Prokofiev to mind. Touches deliberately reminiscent of the nineteenth century are found, including a waltz and martial figures of pentatonic melody. It is the *Big Ben Variations*, though, that remains Toch's best-known work (aside from the inventive *Geographical Fugue* based on exotic place names, beloved of choruses). This is a compositional tour de force: a set of variations on the familiar chimes of Westminster Abbey. While it is necessarily one of Toch's more tonal works, it is remarkable how much harmonic variety he wrings from those four simple pitches, E C D G. Here as in the other works the orchestration is feather-light, never bombastic or pompous. The chime

theme is heard punctuating chromatic melodies; hiding in the timpani; serving as cadences for long, wandering chorales; hiding in accompaniment patterns; even warped into an almost twelve-tone fugue subject. Perhaps not since Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* has such a simple tune been pressed into such diverse service, and waiting for it to creep up in surprise moments is like a musical game of "Where's George?"

It is not your standard theme and variations, but the unprecedented product of a well-developed musical mind. Toch's reputation has doubtless suffered not only because of his forced emigration, but because he was born too early to feel compelled to convert to twelve-tone technique, which became the reigning ideology after World War II. A number of talented German composers (including Boris Blacher, Wolfgang Fortner, and Harald Genzmer) became part of a "lost generation" in this way, and Toch was the oldest and perhaps the best of them. All the more, though, his music sounds fresh today, a well-defined musical personality that history somehow missed.

Kyle Gann, composer of operas and electronic works, has been the new-music critic for *The Village Voice* since 1986 and has taught music at Bard College since 1997. His books include *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge) and *American Music in the 20th Century* (Schirmer).

Leon Botstein is music director and principal conductor of the American Symphony, which performs at Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall in New York. He is also the founder and co-artistic director of the Bard Music Festival at Bard College in the Hudson Valley. Among the many orchestras he has conducted are the NDR—Hamburg and Hannover, the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic, the Düsseldorf Symphony, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, the Bern Symphony, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Jerusalem Symphony, and the Budapest Festival Orchestra.

Among his other recordings are Reinhold Glière's Symphony No. 3, "Ilya Muromets," with the London Symphony Orchestra; music of Max Reger; Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra; music of Karol Szymanowski with the London Philharmonic Orchestra; and Max Bruch's *Odysseus* with the NDR—Hannover. He has also recorded music of Karl Amadeus Hartmann; Ernő Dohnányi's D minor symphony; and Bruckner's Fifth Symphony (Schalk edition) with the London Philharmonic. A highly acclaimed live recording of Strauss's opera *Die Liebe der Danae* with the American Symphony Orchestra released in 2001 will soon be joined by another live recording of Strauss's *Die ägyptische Helena*, available in June 2003.

Leon Botstein has been president of Bard College in New York since 1975, and is also an active scholar of music and history. His articles have been published in *19th-Century Music*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*. He is also a contributor to the latest edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, as well as editor of *The Musical Quarterly* and of a volume titled *The Complete Brahms* (Norton). He was recently awarded Harvard University's prestigious Centennial Medal for his achievements in music history.

Todd Crow has been acclaimed for performances in North and South America and Europe. In recent years he has appeared as soloist with orchestras in the United States, England, the Czech Republic, Venezuela, and elsewhere, and in recital or chamber music at the Berlioz/Dutilleux Festival in Manchester, England, Washington's National Gallery of Art, London's Wigmore Hall, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as at Avery Fisher Hall and Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. He made his Carnegie Hall debut as soloist with the American Symphony in 1992 and his London orchestral debut at the Barbican Centre with the London Philharmonic in 1986. He performs regularly on BBC Radio in both live and recorded performances.

Todd Crow is Music Director of the Mt. Desert Festival of Chamber Music in Northeast Harbor, Maine. In addition to annual appearances at the Bard Music Festival, he has been heard at the Casals Festival, Music Mountain, Maverick Concerts, and other festivals. His recordings include works by Schubert, Mendelssohn, Berlioz/Liszt, Sergei Taneyev, and others on the Bridge, ASV, Golden String, and Musicians Showcase labels. Born in Santa Barbara, California, he is a graduate of the University of California and The Juilliard School, where his teachers have included Irma Starr, Erno Daniel, Emanuel Bay, and Ania Dorfmann. In 1986 he received the University of California's Distinguished Alumni Award, and is currently Professor of Music at Vassar College.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Cello Concerto. Susanne Müller-Horbach, Mutare Ensemble, Gerhard Müller-Horbach conducting. CPO 999 688.

String Quartets 11 & 13. Buchberger Quartett. CPO 999 687.

String Quartets 8 & 9. Verdi Quartett. CPO 999 686.

Symphony No. 2. Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, A. Francis conducting. CPO 999 705.

Symphony No. 3. Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, A. Francis conducting. CPO 999 705.

Symphony No. 5. Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, A. Francis conducting. CPO 999 389.

Symphony No. 6. Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, A. Francis conducting. CPO 999 389.

Symphony No. 7. Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, A. Francis conducting. CPO 999 389.

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Toch, Ernst. *The Shaping Forces in Music: An Inquiry into Harmony, Melody, Counterpoint and Form*. 1948. The 1977 Dover edition (still in print) includes a biographical essay by Lawrence Weschler, prefatory letter by Thoman Mann, and complete checklist of works.

———. *Placed as a Link in This Chain: A Medley of Observations*. Friends of the UCLA Library, 1971.

Weschler, Lawrence. "My Grandfather's Last Tale." *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1996, www.theatlantic.com.

The Ernst Toch Archive at UCLA in Los Angeles, California, is a comprehensive collection of materials relating to the Austrian-American composer. The core of the collection consists of manuscripts—including the *Kammersymphonie* and the *Fuge aus der Geographie*—and papers of the composer, generously donated by his widow, Lilly. The Archive was formally created in 1967 and has since collected, through donations and purchases, additional archival materials, printed scores, published writings, recordings of Toch's compositions, and other papers and documents relating to his life. The Archive's website —www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/music/mlsc/toch—affords a comprehensive resource on all things Tochian, including an inventory of the Archive's holdings and a complete checklist of works.

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Engineer: Günther Beckmann

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ERNST TOCH (1887–1964)

NDR—HAMBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, LEON BOTSTEIN, CONDUCTOR
80609-2

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 38 (1926)

1. I. Molto pesante. Piu allegro. Allegro 11:32
 2. II. Adagio 11:40
 3. III. Rondo disturbato 6:04
- Todd Crow, piano

Peter Pan, A Fairy Tale for Orchestra, Op. 76 (1956)

4. I. Allegro giocoso 4:47
5. II. Allegretto grazioso 2:55
6. III. Allegro vivo 5:48

7. *Pinocchio, A Merry Overture* (1935) 7:33

8. *Big Ben, Variation Fantasy on the Westminster Chimes, Op. 62* (1934) 16:16

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