

Stefan Wolpe (1902 – 1972)



Born at the turn of the 20th century, Stefan Wolpe belonged to a generation of composers in the German cultural orbit who believed that modern art was a means of transforming both the individual and society. Wolpe was imbued with the idea that avant-garde art can serve the man on the street and the audience in the concert hall, and he dedicated himself to forming an entente between new music and the ordinary listener. He sought to incorporate elements of the vernacular and traditional musics of his successive homelands in an inclusive language. His forceful personality and transgressive music perplexed many listeners, and he remained an outsider for much of his career, but his deeply held optimism sustained him through a continual struggle for livelihood and for recognition of his wide-ranging gifts. In 1951 he affirmed

in his diary: “The world has to get conscious of my way of making music...a thoroughly organized but proud, erect, hymnic, profoundly contained, human evocation.”

On his father’s side Wolpe descended from Sephardi Jews who settled in Kovno, Lithuania (Kaunas). His father was born in Moscow, and as a young man he emigrated to Berlin, where he built up a successful business manufacturing leather goods. Wolpe’s mother, née Hermine Strasser, was born in Vienna to a Hungarian-Jewish family from Trieste. The Wolpe family was living in comfortable circumstances in Berlin’s upper-middle-class district of Charlottenberg when Stefan, the youngest of the four children, was born.

He began piano lessons at a young age and at fourteen had theory instruction with the distinguished pedagogue Alfred Richter. Wolpe spent the summer of 1920 in Weimar, where he became friends with students and teachers of the Bauhaus, the progressive art school founded by Walter Gropius, which stressed an egalitarian dynamic and dialogue between students and teachers. From then on, Wolpe’s ideas about new music were colored by the concepts of design and form, construction, and expression of the Bauhaus masters. In the autumn of 1920 he entered the diploma course in composition at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, but after the experimental atmosphere of the Bauhaus, the Hochschule seemed irrelevant to him. He quit the school in the spring of 1921 and applied to enter the master class of Ferruccio Busoni. Though he was not accepted, Busoni invited him to attend his student gatherings. Wolpe regarded Busoni as his most important mentor and always kept a photograph of the master on his piano.

During the 1920s Wolpe was fascinated by the Dadaists, whose artistic credo attacked coherence, order, and the bourgeois structures of modern society and instead embraced uninhibited creative processes—an art of collage, chance, and provocation fueled by primal instincts, doubt, and irony. Wolpe’s interpretation of the Dada spirit led to experimental combinations with, in his own words, “extreme innovations, suddenness, contradictions, shocks, simultaneities, and

dissociations” as concepts that were as valid for contemporary art in the 1960s as they had been for the original Dadaists. Wolpe had been in Weimar for the Dada Congress in 1922, where he witnessed a performance by Kurt Schwitters during which the artist released several white mice from his pockets onto the stage, to the consternation of the audience. Later, in 1929, Wolpe set Schwitters’s poem “An Anna Blume” as a theatrical scene for a singer in clown costume riding a bicycle.

Wolpe was also a member of the Novembergruppe, an association of communist as well as other left-wing artists and writers, so named after the Bolshevik Revolution (October on the Julian calendar in use in Russia, but November on the western, Gregorian calendar). He was active as a pianist and composer in their concerts. In 1924 he began a new set of opus numbers with a cycle of Songs on Friedrich Hölderlin. Further settings on poems by Kleist, Rilke, and Tagore indicate that, for Wolpe, composing was a spiritual quest. His next works were for the musical stage, with chamber operas that favored the fantastic world of puppets, clowns, and political satire. In the 1920s he earned money from time to time playing the piano for silent films, fairs, and cabarets, and he enjoyed improvising in the latest dance styles. His first marriage was to the Viennese painter Olga Okuniewska. Their daughter is the British pianist Katharina Wolpe.

In 1929 Wolpe, allied with the composer Hanns Eisler, an overt Communist, joined the Workers’ Music movement. During the next four years he supplied dozens of songs, marches, and anthems for labor unions and agitprop groups. In 1931 the director and playwright Gustav von Waggenheim formed a group of communist and communist-leaning actors and actresses into Die Truppe 1931 and invited Wolpe to direct its music and compose for its productions. When the National Socialists emerged victorious from the elections of 1932 and 1933 that led to Hitler’s appointment as chancellor, Die Truppe 1931 was banned. With the help of the Romanian pianist Irma Schoenberg, Wolpe left Germany. Eventually he made his way to Vienna in the autumn of 1933, where for a brief time he studied with Anton Webern, the ardent serialist composer and one of the leaders of the so-called Second Viennese School. When Wolpe was threatened with deportation, Irma took him to her home in Bucharest. By that time he was single again, his first marriage having ended in 1933. In 1934 he and Irma emigrated to Palestine and settled in Jerusalem, where they were married.

Wolpe suffered greatly from the trauma of exile. He composed incidental music for a production of the Habima theater, but he was otherwise unable to compose for several months. He was uninterested in Zionist political activity, but he responded deeply to the landscape, cultures, and musics of the Near East. Rather than adapt folklore to European styles of concert music, the so-called Mediterranean style, he adapted “oriental” concepts, such as the maqam of classical Arabic music, to counter the rhetoric of European modernism. Theodor Adorno remarked on Wolpe’s nonsubjective, “oriental” espressivo and described him as “an outsider in the best sense of the word. It is impossible to subsume him.” Wolpe’s settings of Hebrew texts from the Bible and by contemporary poets contributed to the creation of the modern Hebrew art song. But the music community in Jerusalem did not appreciate his radical music and politics, and he decided to emigrate to the United States.

After the Wolpes settled in New York City in late 1938, Stefan felt homesick for Israel, which he had come to regard as his ancestral homeland. In his music of the 1940s he demonstrated that diatonicism, octatonicism, and dodecaphony are not mutually exclusive systems, but belong to a continuous spectrum of resources, as illustrated in *The Man from Midian*. For *Battle Piece*, Wolpe looked to Picasso's *Guernica* mural as the model for an epic protest against war that was on the cutting edge of modernism. Critics found it difficult to place Wolpe's powerful and variegated music, for it eluded the categories of twelve-tone and neoclassicism, folklorism and experimentalism.

Wolpe became an American citizen in 1945. During the later 1940s he composed numerous studies that are collected as *Music for Any Instruments*. One of them bears the title *Displaced Spaces, Shocks, Negations, A New Sort of Relationship in Space, Pattern, Tempo, Diversity of Actions, Interactions and Intensities*. This sets the agenda for replacing traditional thematic space with a constellatory, abstractionist space in which nonfigurative shapes, masses, and planes of sound move freely and independently. To achieve this objective, Wolpe developed the techniques of spatial proportions and organic modes. To demonstrate these techniques, he composed *Seven Pieces for Three Pianos*, which he dedicated to his friend, the composer Edgard Varèse.

Many jazz musicians came to Wolpe to learn how to compose concert music—among them Eddie Sauter, George Russell, and Tony Scott. As a result, his ideas circulated in the New York jazz community, when Gil Evans and Miles Davis were exploring new paths. John Carisi, whose *Israel* is on the pathbreaking recording *Birth of the Cool*, gives Wolpe credit for helping with the piece. In turn, Wolpe modeled the scoring of his *Quartet for Trumpet, Tenor Saxophone, Percussion and Piano on Carisi's Counterpoise no. 1*.

With the poet Hilda Morley (who became his third wife), Wolpe began in 1950 to attend meetings of the Eighth Street Artists' Club, where he became close friends with Franz Kline, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jack Tworkov, and Esteban Vicente. As music director at Black Mountain College (1952–56), Wolpe enjoyed a milieu of artists, craftsmen, and poets that reminded him of the Bauhaus. While at the rural campus in North Carolina, he composed several of his most important scores—*Enactments for Three Pianos; Piece for Oboe, Cello, Percussion and Piano*; and the *Symphony*—in which he said he aimed for “a very mobile polyphony in which the partials of the sound behave like river currents and a greater orbit-spreadout is guaranteed to the sound, a greater circulatory agility (a greater momentum too).” These works of exuberant complexity mark the high point of musical actionism.

During the 1950s Wolpe wrote a series of lectures in which he discusses music in the imaginative and constructive manner of the Bauhaus masters. He proposes that the theory of music should be concerned with fantasy as much as with technique, because the material is as much a product of the creative imagination as it is of the rational intellect. At the Summer Course for New Music at Darmstadt in 1956 he presented a survey of current trends in the United States. After tributes to Varèse and Copland he discussed the music of Milton Babbitt, Earle Brown, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. Wolpe responded to the Webern revival by

studying closely the later scores of his former teacher, and he became greatly interested in the music of Boulez and Stockhausen. He summed up his poetics in the lecture “Thinking Twice,” in which he presents his ideas on serialism, organic modes, and the interplay of complementary qualities as the basis for a nondevelopmental discontinuum—“the ever-restored and ever-advancing moment.”

After the exuberant and extensive scores of the Black Mountain period, Wolpe began to refine and focus his means, as in his *Form for Piano*, and like some painters of the period, he titled many works simply as *Piece* or *Form*. Images, shapes, and gestures are succinct and sharply contrasted in fully notated yet intuitively composed moment form. Many of the pieces from the 1960s are in two parts, thus projecting complementarities on both the micro and macro level. One part is generally slower, with a gathering centering action; the shapes are well formed; the exposition is sometimes reprised; and the mode of thought is directed, orderly, and stable. The other part, however, is generally faster, with the action scattering and dispersing, and the mode of thought disruptive and dissociated. Disorder is included as the limiting case of order, but the chaotic passages are written out and not left to chance. In his last pieces Wolpe revisited historical forms. *From Here on Farther*, subtitled *Concerto*, has a ritornello design, and *Piece for Trumpet and Seven Instruments* includes elements of the solo concerto form.

For Wolpe, composing was a process of discovery. Precompositional charts prepare for the spontaneous outflow of the creative imagination. His music thus evades rational criteria of form and style, for he engages varied types of syntax and “levels of language”—from the colloquial to the poetic, from the quotational to the personal, and from the orderly to the dangerously chaotic. He trusted his unique form-sense to combine disparate images into structures that have an intuitive coherence.

Wolpe, like Busoni and the masters of the Bauhaus, regarded teaching as an obligation, not merely as a livelihood. In Palestine and thereafter in America he passed on his unique vision of music to succeeding generations of composers. Some had careers in radio, television, film, and musical theater (Stanley Applebaum, Elmer Bernstein, Kenyon Hopkins, Mike Stoller); others in modern jazz; and still others in concert music (Herbert Brun, Morton Feldman, Ralph Shapey, David Tudor). In 1957 Wolpe took up the position of professor of music at C. W. Post College, Long Island University. On returning to New York City, he was “discovered” by a younger generation of composers and performers as a vigorous and masterly practitioner of a radically modernist tradition. His music was championed by the Group for Contemporary Music, founded in 1962 by Harvey Sollberger and Charles Wuorinen, as well as by several other New York ensembles. Wolpe at last received many long-overdue awards and honors, including two Guggenheim fellowships and membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The final decade of his life was clouded by Parkinson’s disease, which hampered his ability to notate music, and by a fire that damaged his papers and destroyed his collection of paintings. Despite these adversities, he continued to compose, completing his last piece only a few months before he died.

By Austin Clarkson, one of the foremost authorities on Stefan Wolpe, professor emeritus at York University in Toronto, director of the Stefan Wolpe Archive, and author and editor of several books and monographs, including *On the Music of Stefan Wolpe*.

<https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/stefan-wolpe>

<http://www.wolpe.org>