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## Karol Rathaus, the Transplanted Composer

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Composers who did not live in their native country but remained outside it, dispersed in many parts of the world, yet who continued to emphasise their bond with the homeland in their work and in their attitudes, were also contributors to the history of Polish culture during various epochs. One of such artists was Karol Rathaus, one of the few Poles who, in the first half of the twentieth century, studied and achieved success as composers in those centres of the German-speaking countries which were most significant in shaping new concepts of sound and new musical sensitivity. These, at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the interwar period were, consecutively, Vienna and Berlin. Rathaus reached maturity within the sphere of influence of two outstanding composers, Arnold Schönberg and Franz Schreker, teachers of the excellent, highly talented young people who were creating modern music (Guzy-Pasiak 2007).

Rathaus, born in 1895 in Tarnopol, studied composition at the Music Academy in Vienna (1913–1915 and 1919–20) and at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin (1920–23), with an interval during the First World War, when he was conscripted into the Austrian army. Alongside composition he studied history at the University of Vienna, where in 1922 he was awarded a doctorate. He achieved his greatest successes during the years 1922–32.<sup>1</sup> The ten-year

<sup>1</sup> Among the most important pieces of the period one can count *Symphony* no. 2 op. 7 and a ballet *Last Pierrot* op. 19a and an opera *Foreign Soil* op. 25a.

contract for the ongoing publication by Universal Edition of all his works composed after 1920, proposed to him by Emil Hertzka, undoubtedly contributed to establishing his position in Europe during the interwar period.<sup>2</sup> Works written during the 1920s confirmed Rathaus's standing in German-speaking circles, and the turning point in his career was the world première of his one-movement *Symphony No. 2* op. 7 at the closing concert of the festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1924 in Frankfurt. He owed to this his reputation as a "radical" composer, and "one of the greatest hopes of the new music" (Schrenk 1924: 215), although at the same time he was a victim of attacks by some reviewers, who objected to the advanced sound language of his compositions, and even more to the ethnic origins of their author. As evidence, one might quote the comment by Alfred Heuss, a music critic who later became known for promoting Nazi slogans; referring to *Symphony No. 2*, he wrote: "the orchestra played an unbearable, ultra-modern (...) symphony by Karol Rathaus, from somewhere in the Balkans (...) The music of the Zulus is unquestionably of a higher standard (Schüssler 1999: 19, footnote 22). Alongside composing works for concerts and for the theatre, Rathaus was a very successful composer of film music.

With the intensification of Nazi attitudes in Germany, the composer left the place where his talent blossomed and found an exceptional degree of appreciation, and moved to Paris (1932–33), hoping for employment in the film industry. The crisis in French cinematography forced him to seek opportunities in London (1934–38), but Great Britain also proved to be a difficult place for a refugee without British citizenship to find work. The next location where Rathaus could have expected to obtain commissions owing to his international status as a composer of film music was Hollywood in Los Angeles (1938–1940). However, the style of work in American production was so different from the standards to which he had become accustomed in Europe that he left the West Coast of America and moved to New York. He lived there until the end of his life (1940–54). His work in the field of teaching composition and theory at Queens College, City University of New

<sup>2</sup> Such contracts were offered also to Schönberg, Schreker and Mahler.

York, where he created the foundations of the Music Department, earned him enormous renown. Like many other refugee composers, such as Arnold Schönberg, Ernst Křenek, Ernst Toch, Darius Milhaud and Paul Hindemith, he made a significant contribution as a teacher in the process of transferring European music culture to the United States.

He held American citizenship, but never renounced his Polish citizenship.

The question of the interdependence between artistic creativity and the external circumstances in which it takes place is posed particularly frequently by researchers who examine creative art in the twentieth century. The fate of musical culture, and art and science in general, became entangled with political and social events to a degree not encountered previously. Writing a history of contemporary music, Robert Morgan proposed inserting caesurae between the fundamental stages in the periodisation of 20th-century music on the basis not so much of changing stylistic tendencies, but that of historical events – the two world wars which interrupted the normal development of culture.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay on Schönberg, *Arnold Schönberg – Portrait of a Century*, Hermann Danuser makes the claim, with reference to historical, artistic as well as personal events, that the creator of dodecaphony, who lived through the “golden days”, as well as through the disasters and the rescues, may be regarded as a paradigm of his epoch (Danuser 1998). Schönberg’s fate epitomises the life and work stories of many other artists of his generation and younger – those who survived the nightmare of wars, the growth of Fascism and the enforced emigration which saved their lives. This common denominator applies to the biographies of Paul Hindemith, Bela Bartók, Igor Stravinsky, Bohuslav Martinů, Darius Milhaud, Ernst Křenek, Kurt Weill, Ernst Toch, and, among Polish musicians – Karol Rathaus, Aleksander Tansman, Jerzy Fitelberg, Tadeusz Zygfryd Kassern, Michał Kondracki or Feliks Łabuński.

It is impossible to estimate the number of émigré composers, victims of Nazi policies, even though for nearly 40 years now scholars and musicians

<sup>3</sup> See Morgan R. (1991): Part I. *Beyond Tonality: From 1900 to World War I*, Part II. *Reconstruction and New Systems: Between the Wars*, Part III. *Innovation and fragmentation. The World after World War II*.

have been making efforts at an international level to make reparations to the victims of totalitarianism and to return to musical life the forgotten artists and their works (Dümling A. 2002). According to some scholars, the number of musicians who emigrated to the United States from all the European countries was around 1,500 persons (Gay 1999: 21), but the internet database “Lexikon verfolgter Musiker und Musikerinnen der NS-Zeit”, created in 2005 by Claudia Maurer Zenck and Peter Petersen at the University of Hamburg, which includes émigrés from various countries, at present includes some 5000 names.<sup>4</sup> The divergence is thus high, since we know that emigration to the United States was the most numerous.

So far, the extent of the emigration of musicians of Polish origins has also not been established. One of the reasons for this is that most of them were born during the period of the partitions, and thus in German- or English-language sources they are often regarded as citizens of one of the three states which ruled over the Polish lands until 1918. References to Polish émigrés represent a miniscule proportion in foreign-language writings on the subject of musicians in exile (Röder, Strauss 1983). Things do not look much better in the basic Polish lexicographical works concerning emigration, from which a number of composers’ names are missing, including those who held state posts alongside their musicianship (Judycka, Judycki 2000). The passage of time makes it more difficult to reconstruct the fate of those no longer living who left Europe nearly eighty years ago.

A noticeable feature of the writings on the subject is the gradual replacement of the term “exile” by the word “emigration”. The latter implies the possibility of choice, which in fact was not available to the majority of the victims. A number of authors draw attention to the ethical and methodological problems which result from this tendency (Maurer Zenck 1980: 24).

The difficulties of finding oneself in a strange land and a strange continent experienced by people (particularly of Jewish origin) who were forced to flee to save their lives have been thoroughly described and analysed in literature. Superficially, one might conclude that, among émigrés, musicians

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm\\_lexmperson\\_00002643](http://www.lexm.uni-hamburg.de/object/lexm_lexmperson_00002643).

would have had a greater chance of successful professional integration in their new homeland than those representing other professions, in view of the language of music being – to a degree – universal. However, in the opinion of musicologists, composers, whose situation requires separate analyses, could not preserve their European musical identity in the American reality, since the creative process has specific characteristics which, to a lesser or greater degree, bind it to a particular cultural context. They thus had to lead a double life (having a “double parallel biography” in the words of Danuser) on the intellectual-emotional level (Danuser 1999).

The description of the Polish musician given in the title of this text – the transplanted composer – was taken from the title of an article by Ernst Křenek, written in the year of his arrival in the United States (Křenek 1938: 36), and used by Albert Goldberg in the title of a series of articles published in the *Los Angeles Times* (See Goldberg 1950). The music critic intended to collect and compare statements by prominent European composers who had been working in the United States for around 10 years, on the subject of changes in their compositional style after losing their homeland and settling in America. Those to whom the question was addressed included such figures as Ernst Křenek, Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schönberg, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Eric Zeisl and Eugene Zador.

It is worthwhile quoting the opinions of eminent European composers about the changes in their compositional style as a result of moving from Europe to the United States, collected by Goldberger in 1950. These can be grouped into three categories (Youngerman I. 2009):

1. those belonging to the first group did not observe any change in their creative work;
2. those from the second group admitted that changes were forced on them by the different level of cultivating music in the United States in relation to Europe;
3. representatives of the third group did not observe a particular American influence on their music, viewing exile from Europe as a form of alienation of an artist from his/her environment which can be observed in any

society, regardless of whether one lives in one's own country or a foreign one.

The first group was represented by Arnold Schönberg, who expressed the view that he had not observed any changes in his music dependent on any external circumstances. Although in his output created after 1934 one can easily observe a tendency towards traditional musical quality, according to Schönberg himself he had preserved the autonomy of his art.

Among the composers surveyed, only Eric Zeisl admitted that he had noticed changes, consisting, however, in his deeper experience of art and attributed by him to emigration. All the remaining artists inclined towards the third solution, i.e. the view that internal emigration, "splendid isolation" was written into an artist's fate.

A comparison of the responses to the questionnaire from sixty years ago, and confronting these with contemporary writings devoted to the respondents, who are no longer living, gives pause for thought. The composers' statements undermine one of the most firmly established stereotypes, repeated in many works: namely, that the changes in the musical language of European artists, which consisted in invoking the traditional musical qualities of romantic expression and classical order, resulted from their desire to integrate into the culture of the "new homeland", for ideological or material reasons. There can be no doubt that a number of issues were simplified during the effort to rehabilitate the authors of music which was forbidden in Germany ("Entartete Musik"), as, for example, when artists who differed significantly from each other began to be combined into one group, that of émigré composers, purely on the basis of comparing their biographies. This levelled out the features which made them distinct and stressed the shared experience of the enormous tragedy which touched them all. People who were not familiar with each other's work and had no influence on each other at all were ascribed common stylistic features, while citizens of different countries were bracketed together on the basis of their use of the German language.

It would be a mistake for us to look at all the émigré composers as a group. They are only a group when viewed from our outside perspective. The conductors—Klemperer,

Reiner, Szell—were competing for the same jobs in Germany and then they were competing for the jobs in America. We probably do note that Hindemith didn't particularly like Kurt Weill, and Weill lived in New York while Hindemith lived in New Haven. Schönberg was living in Brentwood. Korngold was living in Toluca Lake. They didn't all have tea together and it is well known that although Stravinsky and Schönberg lived perhaps two miles from each other in Los Angeles, they apparently never saw each other. There was one concert at which both were present, but they sat on the opposite sides of the auditorium. What an interesting conversation that would have been! Miklos Rózsa was Hungarian, and although he studied in Leipzig, he was not part of the Austrian or German group. The Germans, like Franz Waxman, were separate from the Austrians" (Cf. Mauceri 2005).

An authoritative opinion was formed at the same time that giving up musical experiments, apparent in a number of artists, resulted from the impossibility of bringing the unprepared American audiences around to accepting such works; Ernst Křenek drew attention to the risks associated with such simplifications on a number of occasions (Křenek 1959).

Karol Rathaus belonged to that group of composers whose professional life can be divided – in brief – into two stages: the European one, devoted to composing, and the American one, dominated by pedagogical activity. Polish publications prior to the start of the Second World War established his image as Poland's outstanding representative abroad, as Rathaus left Galicia (then under Austrian rule) as an eighteen-year-old and never again lived in Poland. The question one might ask when trying to describe the links between his emigration and the changes in his works concerns primarily the point at which Rathaus – who permanently lived abroad – came to regard himself as an émigré. Undoubtedly he must have perceived his status differently when he lived in Vienna as an Austrian subject, or even in Germany, where he continued his education and gained his early professional experience. His few surviving letters suggest that he tried to stay as close as possible to the main artistic trends, and did not choose any particular location; he realised that abandoning Vienna or Berlin for Tarnopol would have meant the end of his career as a composer. After his enforced departure from Germany, expecting that the National Socialists would come to power, he began his peregrinations through Europe and the United States, which lasted a number of years. Being a foreigner and a Jew, he found that his search for the

opportunity to practise his profession everywhere met with restrictions imposed at that time as a result of the arrival of the large wave of refugees.

Like many others, he chose the United States as his new homeland, and it was there that, for the first time, he faced the problem of a conscious decision to settle in a foreign country. He wrote about it in cautious terms to an unidentified Madame:

Of course, all [this] needs time [...] I mean by it the question of emigration, which is not settled yet (...) We live in a country where the continuation of my occupation does not seem absurd, while my boy can grow and develop freely. We are entitled to share the free life of a democratic country. And, we are perfectly aware of what this means.<sup>5</sup>

In the letter, written from New York, he included much enthusiastic praise for the country where he was living with his family. The extraordinarily optimistic tone of this letter indicates that Rathaus could see a chance of creating a relatively stable environment for himself and his family in his new homeland.

It is important to note that, when escaping from Europe and starting his new life overseas, Rathaus was not fully satisfied with the course of his professional career, and that America represented for him both salvation and another chance of success. As has already been mentioned, the Polish artist won acclaim as “the hope of new music” in 1924, but fulfilling the expectations placed upon him turned out to be a serious challenge, since his artistic development coincided with the period of increased importance of the National Socialist Party.

Rathaus was regarded as a representative of the “new music” (*Neue Musik*) because of the originality of his sound language, the inclusion of dissonance in quasi-tonal structures. Although he did not feel himself to be a dodecaphonist, contact with Schönberg’s ideas left a trace in his thinking, in his acceptance of the emancipation of dissonance. The ideology of the “new music” was promoted by such institutions as Universal Edition, a publishing house which offered contracts to outstanding musicians, or those regarded as the most promising, and the International Society for Contempo-

<sup>5</sup> Karol Rathaus’s letter to an unidentified Madame of January 20, 1940 (Karol Rathaus Archives, City University of New York).

rary Music, at whose festivals Rathaus appeared on a number of occasions, and where he was the secretary of the German section. Rathaus's work was judged very highly at a particular concert organised by ISCM, where the programme was arranged by Arnold Schönberg, and which also saw performances of quartets by Szymanowski, Wellesz and Casella (Wolfsohn 1925: 28). However, in spite of the enthusiasm of a group of professionals, the anti-Semitic reviews of his most radical work, *Symphony No. 2*, made him distance himself from advanced tonal experiments even at the beginning of his professional development. Conscious of the limitations placed on him by political reality, he wrote: "As an artist I am now redundant (...) There is nothing left for me to do but the romantic trick, escape on the wings (...) to the kingdom of art" (Schüssler 1999: 20). One is reminded here of the statements of the surveyed refugee composers regarding the inescapable conflict between the artist and society, the lack of communication between internal and external worlds.

However, Rathaus, whose views were close to those of the left wing, found an ethical justification for combining serious art and the expectations of the general public while he still lived in Germany:

Today, no artist should be allowed to claim from a pedestal that his alleged aim is far from the aims of the "little" people. Radical socialism looks askance at art which lures it into distant spiritual spheres, far from its ideological struggle, far from that life which it must not be allowed to forget, lest it betray the class struggle and the revolution. The new factuality is merely a sign of the times, a cleansing of the hypocrisy left by the earlier era. Expressive music is limited, it reflects mankind (Rathaus 1928).

Of the composer's two "committed" works: the ballet *The Last Pierrot* (1927) and the opera *Foreign Soil* (1930), the first achieved significant success.

The change in Rathaus's compositional style, which took place as early as the 1920s, involved a "softening" of the harmony and a simplification of texture. It reflected a turning towards "populism", apparent during the 1930s in the work of artists in the Third Reich and Stalinist Russia, as well as in democratic countries.

Most of the contributions tended to romanticize the 1920s and view 1930s as an artistic low point, but they did not restrict these negative characterizations to Nazi Germany or

other repressive regimes. Dahlhaus speaks of a compositional “regression” and turn toward “populism” not only in the Third Reich and Stalinist Russia but also under democracies (Potter 2005: 444).

A separate issue is that of the popularity and recognition in the field of film and stage music, which Rathaus regarded as less valuable. The dizzying career of the 1930 film *Brothers Karamazov* (directed by Fedor Ozep), produced in close collaboration between the composer of the soundtrack and the director, ensured a sufficient number of commissions to keep Rathaus employed for the next few years. In his book on the subject of film music, Kurt London described Rathaus’s film soundtrack as the model combination of the art of music and of film (London 1946). Prior to 1939 at least eleven films were produced, with such eminent directors as Alexis Granowski (*The Trunks of Mr O.F., Adventures of King Pausole*), Fedor Ozep (*Großstadtnacht, Mirages de Paris, Amok, The Queen of Spades*), Julien Duvivier (*Halloh Berlin - Ici Paris*) or John Brahm (*Broken Blossoms, Let Us Live*). The composer was deeply committed to his work on film music, but regretted the fact that his concert compositions were not equally popular:

I must admit – not without a feeling of depression – that it was the performances of my music for the stage that provided me with a position incomparably higher than that which I succeeded in achieving during the whole 11 years devoted to ‘absolute’ music. *Die Ehe*, after its success in Munich, was performed in Leipzig and then over fifty times in Berlin; it focused on me the attention of those circles of the intelligentsia who access music only through the mediation of the word, and for whom in Berlin there existed only these composers: Holländer and – Weil. The extraordinary success of the *Karamazov* film is a mystery to me. *Foreign Soil* – my opera, the child of my suffering, was not a success.<sup>6</sup>

The changes in compositional technique, becoming more widespread starting from the 1920s, manifested themselves in a selection of technical means which were more accessible to the general public, under the slogans of *Gebrauchsmusik*: art which is ambitious but comprehensible.

The question comes to mind whether the separation from Europe, the actual emigration, did influence the musical language of the Polish artist, when

<sup>6</sup> Karol Rathaus’s letter to Hans Heinsheimer of January 4, 1932 (Universal Edition Archiv).

the process of moving away from advanced experimentation had already begun after the premières of the earliest works? Those who favour the view that contact with the American music scene caused the return to composing in the major-minor system should take into account the fact that it is only the educational pieces, written by Rathaus mainly for academic choirs and instrumental ensembles, which are tonal. On the other hand, using untypical instrumentation in these compositions probably resulted from didactic needs, and would only have enriched, rather than limited, the composer's invention in the area of shaping sound qualities (Guzy-Pasiak 2009). Among his concert works, which include all the genres initiated by the composer while still in Europe (symphony, quartet, sonata), those which stand out are his *Piano concerto* op. 45 (1939) and, written towards the end of the composer's life, *Rapsodia notturna* (1950) and *String quartet No. 5* op. 72 (1954). What deserves mention is the fact that, in the last of these works, for the first and only time he made use of "the method of composing using twelve notes". The type of twelve-tonality used by the Polish artist is closest to the solutions used by Alban Berg. One might conclude that in the case of Rathaus this was not a turning point, initiating a career as a dodecaphonist, as in the case of Stravinsky, but merely employing dodecaphony as an "additional" technique. An interest in dodecaphony during the mature phase of creative development in the 1950s can also be discerned in other Polish artists, such as Roman Palester (*Symphony No. 4* (1948–52), *Passacaglia* (1953) and *Variazioni* (1955)) or Konstanty Regamey (*Musique pour cordes* (1951–53), *Cinq études pour voix de femme et piano* (1955)) (Lindstedt 2001).

What is striking in the works of Rathaus are the new extra-musical inspirations which influenced the style of compositions written during his émigré period in America, which are evident in vocal (texts), as well as instrumental music (programmatic titles of the pieces). Scholars researching emigration literature have observed certain regularities in the legacy of poets and writers separated from their homeland, and one can, with some reservations, try to transfer these to the area of musical creativity. The trends in question appeared in the work of Rathaus only after he had settled in America, which seems to confirm the claim that, in the places where he had lived and

worked earlier, he had not felt totally separated from his own country. All the categories listed below are linked to various aspects of discovering and manifesting one's own identity; they are:

1. missing one's family home,
2. defining one's national identity,
3. acceptance of parallel existence of two or more identities (Guzy-Pasiak 2011).

A return to the real or imagined childhood homeland when becoming an émigré is the result of the compensation mechanism at work. Such a creative effort is evident in Rathaus's private correspondence, where he reminisces about Galicia with nostalgia, while a type of musical creation based on the familiar sound landscape might be discerned in his piano miniatures – stylised folk dances, in major-minor tonality, written in the style of works which he might have come across during the first years of learning music at home.

Life as an émigré during the war years crystallised in Rathaus an awareness of himself as rooted in the Polish soil, and the fact that his wartime works draw inspiration from Polish folklore, as well as his choice of forms, texts and titles, testify to that. It is very significant that in his previous works the composer avoided the use of folk themes, and all the prewar compositions with text were arrangements of German-language lyrics. Evidence of his attachment to Poland is provided by works such as *Polonaise Symphonique*, commissioned by the conductor Artur Rodziński and performed in 1943 at the Carnegie Hall, later broadcast by a radio station in New York "to give comfort and succour", *Mazurka* and *Polish polka* for piano from 1941, and *Three Polish dances* from 1942 (1. *Oberek*; 2. *Kujawiak – in memoriam Ignacy Paderewski*; 3. *Mazurka*); also the arrangement of the hymn *Gaude Mater Polonia* for four-voice choir and piano from 1943, and *6 Polish folk songs*. During the period of Hitler's aggression against Poland, Rathaus, like many others, tried to confirm through his compositions the existence of the country which had been wiped off the map. He also became involved in the work of the Music Com-

mittee of PIASA – Polish Institute of Arts and Culture of America, together with Jerzy Fitelberg and Bronisław Huberman.

That unusual period of engagement, both as a composer and activist, in Polish affairs, came to a close with the end of the Second World War. During the years which followed the composer became known as a sympathiser of the Zionist movement, expressing his enthusiasm for the forthcoming establishment of the state of Israel, again in this way returning to the question of his roots. Examples of Rathaus's works expressing his commitment to that cause can be found in the music he composed for two documentary films from 1945 and 1946: *Histadruth / Gateway to Freedom*, directed by Paul Falkenberg, and *The Song of Israel*.

A sense of belonging to the Polish-Jewish community did not preclude his forming a bond with the culture of his new homeland, which found its expression in music by turning to vocal forms with English text.

To an extent, the works of Rathaus reflect the changes in the direction of his life. Tracing this evolution is made more difficult by the heterogeneity of his style (Guzy-Pasiak 2007) – a feature emphasised by all the researchers who examine his legacy – and the absence of aesthetic stabilisation (on the other hand, the search for novelty was a requirement of the times in which he composed). It is above all the selection of texts, and the seeking of inspiration in folk music, which confirm the conclusion that, during certain periods, it might have been particularly important to the composer to assert his own identity, as also happened during his period of emigration in the United States.

Although music composed in different cultural spheres may vary stylistically, the actual idea of creating music remained unchanged for Rathaus, regardless of where it was created: throughout his life he wanted to “reach the widest public through simple but artistic means” (Schüssler 1999).

The issues sketched here involve the relationship between compositional work and the experience of its creator as an émigré; they show that this part of our musical culture, regained quite recently, demands much further intertextual and source research.

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