

GRAMOPHONE

THE WORLD'S BEST CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEWS

A Pole apart: the remarkable music of Auschwitz survivor Szymon Laks



It is vital to record music that was once suppressed, works by composers who remain marginalised

A mixture of talent, training and luck usually determines a composer's success. But for Jewish composers banned during the Hitler years, the nature and quality of their music generally had little if anything to do with their exclusion. It was the Reich's unhinged 'racial' ideology that defined them as artistically worthless and, in their attempt to participate in a tradition to which they had no right to belong, fraudulent as well. The musical casualties were enormous. Literally hundreds of composers fled Germany, Austria and Nazi-occupied territories, and their exile was usually accompanied by a struggle to re-establish careers in a new and sometimes uncomprehending cultural environment, in a new language, often under financial pressure and acute emotional stress. Many died in their forties or fifties.

Over the last dozen years, the Canadian ARC Ensemble (Artists of the Royal Conservatory) has devoted itself to the appraisal and recovery of these suppressed and marginalised composers. The assessment, performance and recording of works by composers such as Mieczysław Weinberg, Walter Braunfels, Adolf Busch, Paul Ben-Haim and Jerzy Fitelberg has been an exciting and rewarding process. It has also become something of an artistic and moral obligation. Conversely, we see its neglect as something of a posthumous victory for National Socialism. But musical quality remains the North Star of the entire enterprise. A composer's murder or exile cannot qualify second-rate works.

Assessing music that hasn't been played in decades is a challenge. Composers are no longer available to consult, there is no performance tradition on which to draw, there are no recordings to reference, and scores are often a mess or replete with ambiguities. But the biggest challenge lies elsewhere.

While public institutions devoted to the visual arts relish historical examination, twenty-first century concert life, certainly in North America, recycles an ever-shrinking number of compositions. Unknown works, particularly unknown works by unknown composers, are seldom given an outing. A literary parallel would have us revisit and re-read a narrow shelf of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky and Dickens, consigning 'lesser' figures to specialists and academics. Dedicated to a never-ending celebration of 'the greats', the repertoire seems inherently resistant to expansion.



https://youtu.be/_1uK5_auyTw

Into this inhospitable climate the ARC Ensemble has released its sixth recording – the third of its Music in Exile series for Chandos – dedicated to the chamber music of the remarkable Polish composer Szymon (Simon) Laks. Born in Warsaw in 1901, Laks moved to Paris in the 1920s where, save for a period of three years between 1942 and 1945, he remained until his death in 1983. His account of those three years, which began in an internment camp south of Paris, followed by an extended imprisonment in Auschwitz and Kaufering 11 (a Dachau sub-camp), supply the detail for Laks's chillingly dispassionate *Music of Another World*, a slim memoir that has become a significant source for Holocaust scholars, especially those interested in the role of music in that most infamous of Nazi camps. Laks's account of his progress from slave labour, to violinist, copyist, arranger and orchestrator, and ultimately to conductor of the Auschwitz men's orchestra, reveals a resourcefulness, opportunism and intelligence that was doubtless complemented by huge musical skill and a fluency in several languages.

With the knowledge of Laks's wartime experience listeners are often tempted to hear Holocaust references in his works, and this can colour and interfere with the way in which we experience his music. In fact very little alludes to, or dwells on this dreadful period. Rather Laks's music reflects the best qualities of a loose group of foreign-born musicians – composers such as Alexandre Tansman, Tibor Harsányi, Bohuslav Martinů and Alexandre Tcherepnin – which made up the cosmopolitan *École de Paris*. It is elegant, witty, beautifully crafted, propulsively rhythmic, occasionally even jazzy, and generally optimistic in character. And although Laks's language evolved and developed, it never deserted these essential qualities. His works were seen as unfashionable after the war and indeed they are unashamedly backward-looking. But 50 years on this is as relevant as Brahms's supposed conservatism. Most of the works on the ARC Ensemble's new recording have been unavailable until now. Their scores are published by Boosey & Hawkes.

'Music In Exile Vol. 3: Chamber Works by Szymon Laks' on Chandos Records is out now. For further information, and to buy, please visit: chandos.net



Simon Wynberg

Simon Wynberg is the Artistic Director of the ARC Ensemble of Canada's Royal Conservatory