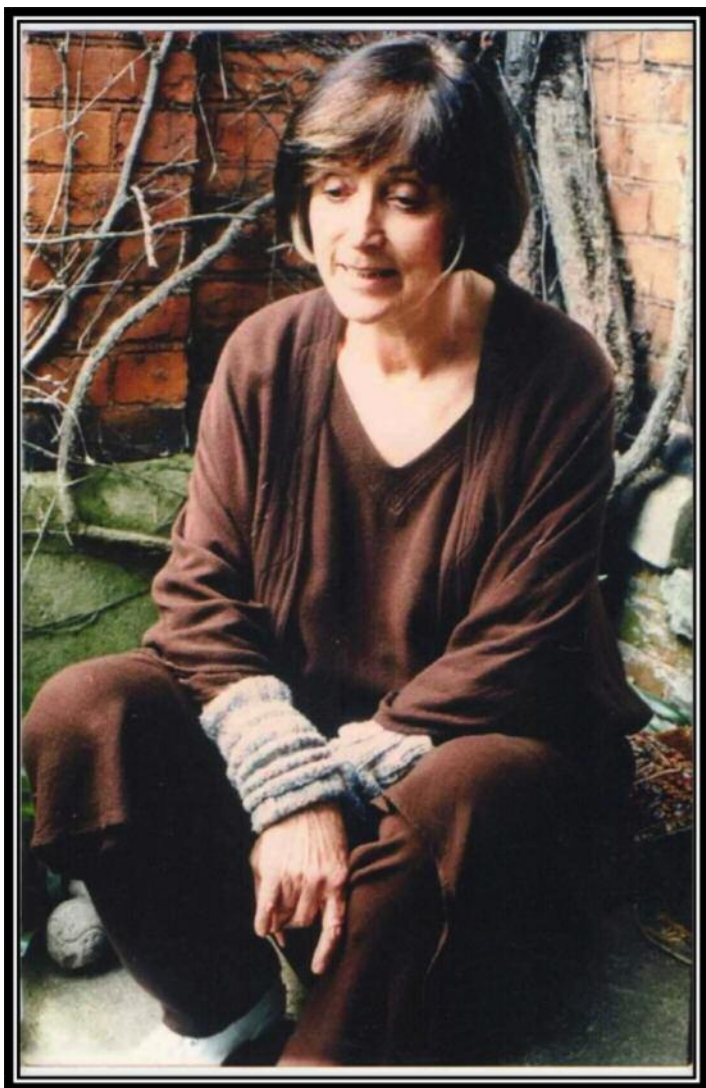


KATHARINA WOLPE IN MEMORIAM

In Memory of Katharina Wolpe

1931-2013

By Austin Clarkson



*Katharina in her garden
Photo, courtesy of Katia Colleran*

Katharina Wolpe passed away at her London home on February 9, 2013. Throughout a long and distinguished career as concert pianist and teacher, Katharina was renowned for the “radiance,” “finesse,” “eloquence,” “exaltation” and “mastery” of performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and the Second Viennese School. She championed the music of contemporary composers, especially that of her father Stefan Wolpe, taking part in many festivals of his music, and was honorary president of the Stefan Wolpe Society. On March 2 Katharina’s friends and family gathered at Golders Green Crematorium to celebrate her life. The “Adagietto” from Mahler’s Fifth Symphony and Schubert Impromptus played by Katharina were heard, her stepdaughter Jenny Leonard spoke, and long time friend Jess Jaray read these words:

Kathi’s thieving squirrels will miss her. So will her disagreeable cat. Her wild garden birds will, and the fox she regularly left food for, who sometimes came into her house at night. There will be no more of the funds that she sent every year for the welfare of animals. The beggars she always gave to – particularly the young ones – hiding in corners where sometimes she was the only one who knew where they were. They will miss her. As will the homeless – one of whom she once mistakenly took in, and who then robbed her blind. All these will miss her, as we will, although I’m not certain that I’ll ever believe she’s gone. We know that everyone is irreplaceable, but I can’t help feeling she was more so than most.

Seventy friends gathered at Katharina’s home for a reception. The coffin was of willow wood, as Katharina was a passionate environmentalist. Her ashes were interred in the garden of her home in Hampstead and in a plot in nearby Gainsborough Gardens that she designed and nurtured.

Michael Graubart in *The Guardian* paid tribute to the extraordinary range and depth of Katharina's artistry:

Her first recital, given after arriving in Britain, included the Piano Sonata 1910 by Berg; the composer she identified with most from her early years onwards was Schubert. She played the other great composers of the first Viennese school – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – and later, Romantic composers, notably Schumann and Brahms, with limpid tone, natural rhythm and clear phrasing. There was a sense of deep feeling, never imposed on the music, but derived from a profound understanding of its harmonic structure, polyphonic texture and form. Her perfectly shaped, eloquent playing of the Arietta from Beethoven's last piano sonata and the way the increasingly virtuosic variations built on it sticks in the memory. So do the controlled passion and the strange, almost expressionless serenity that alternated with it in Schubert's three posthumously published piano pieces, D946. . . . She was, for instance, one of the few pianists who could reveal the essential lyricism and continuity underlying the apparent fragmentation of Webern's Variations, Opus 27, and to make a single sonata-like structure out of the post-tonal expressivity of the first, the brooding introversion of the second and the virtuosity of the third of Schoenberg's Opus 11 piano pieces.



Ola Okuniewska, ca. 1923
Photo, courtesy Katharina Wolpe

They were extremely happy for a time, but then separated. Ola returned to Vienna to give birth to Kathi and was then in a relationship with the author Otto Hahn, while Stefan was involved with the Romanian pianist Irma Schoenberg. Stefan saw Kathi for the first time when she was two years old, after he arrived in Vienna in the fall of 1933 to study with Anton Webern. Wolpe was expelled from Austria in December of 1933 and with Irma went to her mother's home in Bucharest.

Kathi was born on Sept. 9, 1931 in her mother's home overlooking the vineyards surrounding the Viennese suburb of Grinzing. Ola was a painter who had followed her teacher Johannes Itten from Vienna to the Bauhaus. There she met Stefan Wolpe, who sat in on the studios of Itten. In 1927 they were married in the Vienna Town Hall and returned to Berlin.

From there they immigrated to the British Mandate of Palestine and were married in Jerusalem in 1934. Shortly before the German army marched into Austria, Hahn departed for Belgium, leaving Ola to look after herself and Kathi.



Stefan Wolpe, Berlin 1923. Photo, courtesy The Paul Sacher Foundation

On the morning of March 12, 1938, Ola and Kathi were arrested by the Gestapo. A policeman acquaintance of the family let them escape to the country, where they hid in a barn with other refugees, and where Kathi fell seriously ill with tuberculosis and scarlet fever. Eight months later they crossed the border into Switzerland and were placed in a succession of refugee camps. Stefan and Irma departed Jerusalem for America in November of 1938, and on the way passed through Zürich, where they spent a few hours with Ola and Kathi. Leaving Kathi in the care of foster parents in Berne, Ola immigrated to London and trained to be an art teacher, while Kathi was educated in Swiss schools and given music lessons. Growing up in Berne, Kathi felt very much alone. "My parents were alive, but in fact I could have been an orphan." She found solace in music, especially that of Schubert. "I was not just a stateless, homeless, miserable, penniless refugee, I also had Schubert." She made rapid progress, and by the age of sixteen was playing the Beethoven C minor Concerto and "Sur le nom de Bach" by Arthur Honegger.



Katharina and Stefan, Berne 1948
Photo courtesy of Katia Colleran

Stefan Wolpe's first trip to Europe after the war was in July of 1948, when he spent a few days with Kathi in Berne. In a letter to Irma he drew a picture of a beautiful young woman with a brilliant mind and a remarkable understanding of music, but who was in poor health. He seemed to treat her more as a gifted student than a daughter. He listed the extensive repertoire from which she played for him: Mozart D Minor Concerto, Weber Konzertstück, Schumann Études Symphoniques, Grieg Concerto and Toccata from Tombeau de Couperin of Ravel. Stefan spoke to Kathi's music teacher and judged him very good, if conservative.

In November of 1948 Kathi went to London on a visitor's visa, and the next year obtained a residence permit. She met and married the Scottish sculptor William Turnbull in 1949, joined him in Paris in and was delighted to meet his friends: Ernst, Braque, Léger, Giacometti and Brancusi. Samuel Beckett found her a studio where she could practice. Meeting Beckett, she said, "was a great moment in my life." They returned to London in 1950, Turnbull took a part-time teaching job, and Kathi worked as a fashion model and played the piano in a club patronized by stars of stage and screen. Humphrey Bogart came to the club, admired her playing and asked her what she should be doing. She said, she should be giving a concert at Wigmore Hall, but she didn't have the money. Bogart paid for her debut.

Kathi gave a concert of Schoenberg and Webern at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, preparing the program at short notice. Her interest in new music stemmed from the discovery of "what great composers these people in fact are." Ralph Vaughan Williams let her practice in his garden studio and William Glock, who was head of music at ICA (1954-1958) and the BBC (1959-1972) gave her many opportunities to perform over radio and television. Stefan Wolpe heard Katharina play his Passacaglia at Dartington Hall, where she also taught. Katharina's career blossomed in the later 1950s, but she continued studies with the pianist Edith Vogel, who also taught at Dartington Hall. Stefan lectured at Dartington Hall in 1958.

Katharina made her Proms debut in 1961 with John Barbirolli and the BBC Symphony at the Royal Albert Hall in the premiere of Elisabeth Lutyens' "Symphonies

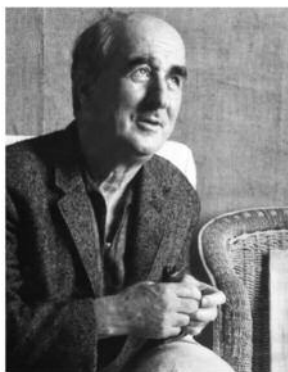
for Solo Piano, Wind, Harps and Percussion". She also played the Schoenberg Piano Concerto, which she prepared at very short notice. This established Katharina's reputation in the British Isles, and she was invited to appear with many of the provincial and major orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony Orchestra and English Chamber Orchestra. Katharina's penetrating understanding and brilliant presentation of contemporary music inspired Elisabeth Lutyens, David Bedford and Iain Hamilton to write for her.



Katharina divorced William Turnbull and later married Lawrence Leonard, who was assistant conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra and associate conductor of the Hallé Orchestra (1963-1968). They bought Well Side, Wellwalk, a house built on the site of Hampstead Wells. When Lawrence was principal conductor and music director of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Katharina joined him in Canada and was pianist-in-residence at the University of Toronto for two years. She often returned to Canada for master classes and made a half-hour film for the CBC. In 1987, as distinguished visiting artist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Katharina premiered Iain Hamilton's Second Piano Concerto, which Hamilton, who was professor of composition there, wrote for her.

Stefan Wolpe composed "Piece in Three Parts for Piano and 16 Instruments" for Katharina in 1961. After the New York premiere with the pianist Paul Jacobs, Stefan wrote: "Your Piece had a very wonderful success. Paul J. played with verve, fierceness and a great, sensitive élan, musical, in full possession of the text. The Piece celebrates you. Play it at the BBC in public everywhere. The music is our meeting." Part 1 begins with two muted trumpets chatting amiably within a narrow compass, while oboe, harp, piano and clarinet expand buoyantly through a wide pitch space. It is perhaps a vision of the family idyll that never was, before the catastrophe. Later in the movement Wolpe notes in the score, "traces of

Debussy”, “Tristan and Isolde”, and “a Jewish phrase (like a musical scar) commemorating all the slaughtered Jews.” With Jacques Monod conducting, Katharina played “Piece in Three Parts” for a BBC broadcast, and with Ralph Shapey and the Chicago Chamber Orchestra on a concert celebrating the 80th anniversary of her father’s birth. She included Stefan’s music on many concerts as she toured in the U.S.A. and Canada, England and Holland, Italy and Spain, Germany, Austria and Israel.



*Stefan Wolpe, Rome 1963.
Photo, courtesy The
Paul Sacher Foundation*

Katharina designed programs of great originality from her extensive repertoire. In 1997 she gave a series of concerts in Bristol as portraits of seven cities: Vienna, Leipzig, Dresden, Budapest, Prague, Warsaw and St. Petersburg. For the final concert she returned to her hometown, the Vienna of Brahms, Schoenberg and Berg. After 70 years of exile, Katharina gave a concert Vienna in

2003 at the Musikverein. The Volksblatt wrote, “Her playing was poetry, beauty and intensity – she renders unto Beethoven what is Beethoven’s”. Katharina teamed up with her friend the actress Vanessa Redgrave to give evenings of “Music and Readings” as benefits for refugee relief through the UNHCR and other charities. They gave joint concerts in Paris, Ljubljana, Kosovo, New York and San Francisco.

Katharina’s first compact disc, the piano works of Arnold Schoenberg, captures Schoenberg’s wry wit, tempestuous moods, obdurate humanity and beautifully wrought forms with masterly precision and grace (Symposium 1107). In “Remembering the Dancemaster” (Largo 5120), Katharina spans her father’s oeuvre from “Early Piece for Piano” 1924 to “Form IV” 1969, confirming indeed that the child is father of the man. The third CD (Symposium 1121) includes two works that Iain Hamilton wrote for her and that she performs with virtuosity, delicacy and power. Schubert’s Impromptus (Symposium 1213) captures her life-long devotion to Schubert’s genius, the fifth (Symposium 1214) is of Beethoven, Berg and Schubert, and the sixth (Symposium 1319), contains Mozart Sonatas and Fantasies played on the forte-piano.

Like her mother and father, Katharina was a dedicated and inspiring teacher. She taught at Morley College from 1958 to 2006 and at summer schools at Dartington Hall and York. The filmmaker Jayne Parker made three films with Katharina, two playing music of her father and one of Olivier Messiaen. A brilliant advocate of her father’s music, Katharina gave recitals, master classes and participated in seminars at Wolpe festivals in Toronto (1993), Freiburg (2000), Berlin (2002), London (2002) and New York (2003). For the London festival she produced five concerts with Ensemble SurPlus, Ensemble Double Image, and pianists Rolf Hind, Nicolas Hodges and herself. Of Katharina’s recital The Financial Times wrote: “There was special pleasure in hearing the dedicated interpretations of the composer’s daughter, as in describing the family likeness; but Ms. Wolpe’s performances stood on their own signal merit: her bright limpidity of touch, keenly intelligent formal sense, and instinctively classicist and restrained manner – subtle and radiant and many moods and fascinating. The concert was a triumph”. With extraordinary strength of mind and largeness of spirit Katharina overcame poverty, neglect and ill health to make a lasting contribution as a distinguished concert artist and teacher. With generosity and compassion she extended her hand to the homeless, to animal rights, and to the protection of the natural environment. She will be long remembered.

