

THE ARNOLD SCHOENBERG INSTITUTE
Presents
A Musical Tribute to the Memory of
RUDOLF KOLISCH

SATURDAY, APRIL 12, 1980 at 8 P.M.

PROGRAM

THIRD STRING QUARTET, OPUS 30..... ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

Moderato
Adagio
Intermezzo
Rondo

ENCOMIUM

Michael Steinberg, Speaker

from *DIE WINTERREISE, D. 911*..... FRANZ SCHUBERT

Gute Nacht
Die Krähe
Letzte Hoffnung
Im Dorfe
Der stürmische Morgen
Tauschung
Der Wegweiser

PERFORMERS

The LaSalle Quartet
Walter Levin, first violin
Henry Meyer, second violin
Peter Kamnitzer, viola
Lee Fiser, violoncello
Peter Atherton, baritone
Gwendolyn Koldofsky, pianist

ENCOMIUM

By pleasing coincidence, just as I was about to leave for Los Angeles, I had a letter from a friend, a wonderful musician who had studied with Rudolf Kolisch at the New England Conservatory. She told me that the day before, she had turned on the radio and Beethoven's Opus 130 was going on. It was just before the beginning of the Cavatina, which reminded her joyfully and painfully of her times of working with Kolisch on various pieces, and in musing about this she suddenly realized that she had lost the entire Cavatina and the Finale was about to begin. Rudy would have disapproved, she said.

Rudy *would* have disapproved, and I am sure he would also have disapproved of this part of this evening. Schoenberg and Schubert would have been fine, wonderful. Words about himself he was not fond of. I found that out in 1967 when he had just joined the faculty of the New England Conservatory. Some sort of symposium on various aspects of music had been arranged at the Conservatory with a number of distinguished speakers, and so grand was this event that not only was each speaker elaborately introduced by some other speaker, but the introducers were also introduced, and it was my privilege that morning to introduce Rudy, who was then going to introduce Louis Krasner. I said all the obvious things about his role in the playing for the first time of so many of the masterpieces of the twenties and thirties, the Schoenberg and Berg and Webern and Bartók quartets, and so on, and I spoke about how precious a link he was with so much of what became a central part of our musical heritage, and I still recall how, in the few seconds of meeting at the stage door as I went off and he came on, he instructed me in a loud stage whisper that he was not a piece of history, he was a working musician. And that, I suppose, is the single most important thing to remember about Rudy.

That was the beginning of the last phase of the long and wonderful process of getting to know Rudy. The first of these came a long time ago, courtesy of KFYO in St. Louis, a station to which I owe a lot of my musical education and which used to play some of the Kolisch Quartet recordings. I am sure

that was my first encounter with the name. Really vivid and unforgettable, though, was my first experience, in fact my only experience, of hearing the quartet. It was no longer *the* Quartet; it was one of the many descendants of the great Kolisch Quartet, the Pro Arte Quartet at the University of Wisconsin. This was in 1947. I can tell you next to nothing about the performances, but I remember exactly what the program was, and given how many concerts I've heard since then about which I haven't got the slightest idea what was played, that does say something about the force of that experience. The Schoenberg quartet you've just heard, No. 3, was in the middle of the program, and it was preceded by Haydn's C major, Opus 54, no. 2, and followed by the Rasumovsky No. 2. I also recall that it took me about half the duration of the Haydn to figure out why that quartet looked so strange. As some of you perhaps don't know, Rudy played left-handed, which is to say, he bowed with his left hand and fingered with his right. He lost a tiny piece of the end of a finger in the door of a railway carriage when he was a small boy. He had been playing for a few years already and had to relearn. I remember he once said to me that this was perhaps the most fortunate event in his life since it preserved him forever from having to play in an orchestra, because if you sit in the string section of an orchestra, playing left-handed is a very antisocial act indeed.

That story tells something else about Rudy, about his humorous, absolutely non-disillusioned, non-bitter dealing with trials and disappointments and difficulties of which he had his share, certainly in the later years. He was one of the many refugees who came to this country in the 1930s whose careers were in some sense halted, derailed. To many of us who knew him in Boston, he was something of an underground hero, so that there was a certain air of "we happy few" among those who gathered around him (and that wasn't always altogether attractive either), and it sometimes took an effort to remember that a large and significant part of his life was the part when he was very much a public figure as a performer and when, by all of the most obvious criteria from the most exalted to the most vulgar, he represented everything that stands for success in this world. He enjoyed that part of his life; that was obvious on those rare occasions when one could get him to talk about it. He also lived happily without it. In those Boston years, which are the only ones about which I feel properly authorized to speak, he was no longer reaching out to the world very much, but he always welcomed those who wanted to reach in to where he was, and he was always infinitely generous with his time, with his energies, with his ideas, with his appetite for argument, with his appetite for conversation of any kind. Probably I shouldn't be up here speaking about him at all because I'm not a chess player, and if you weren't a chess player you were deprived of the primary line of contact with who Rudy really was and what was most central inside of him. And one had to have seen his bedroom, the enormous bed with all of the chess games which he conducted by correspondence all over the world spread out on it. I don't know when he ever slept or where he slept in the last thirty years of his life since that piece of furniture was totally given over to that essential element of intellectual and spiritual nourishment.

His was a wonderful presence in Boston and, in another realm, in another way, in another language, he really continued to do what he had done all those years in the twenties and thirties when he was leading his great quartet. He shook us up. He made us think anew about every subject, about every topic that came up. He had a wonderful capacity even for shaking himself up. The line of argument never went in an absolutely straightforward or predictable way. I always recall as something most characteristic an occasion of asking him a question. I don't remember what the question was, and it doesn't matter particularly, but I do remember that the answer, after much pipe-sucking and silence, came in three stages: "yes . . . no . . . of course not."

His thinking was always work-in-progress. And he looked at music in ways and understood it in ways that were highly individual and that were easily subject to misunderstanding. I was thinking about that in another context a few minutes ago while listening to that beautiful Schoenberg quartet because in the life, in the descent, in the history of Schoenberg's ideas we see so clearly how ideas can, in the course of transmission, be liable to an unhappy and unfortunate kind of stiffening. Wretched things could be done and were indeed done with the ideas that Schoenberg used with such fantasy and such flexibility, that were the tool that enabled him to do such extraordinarily beautiful and individual and passionate and warm and humorous things. And one could take, for example, the ideas that Rudy expressed in his revolutionary, still controversial 1942 article on "Tempo and Character in the Music of Beethoven," and if one only understood one corner of it or if one went to it looking for salvation in the form of dogma, one could come to absurd conclusions and arrive at meaningless and ugly performances of that music. (The tone of that article is definite, to say the least; yet his revision of it not long before he died progressed slowly because he was having trouble making up his mind about some of the tempi! Committed though he was to theory and principle, he was every inch the pragmatist and the practical musician.)

The essence of Rudy's idea of tempo was that it represented a context within which one moved freely; there, too, was an area, a realm, a category where flexibility and fantasy were absolutely the essence. He was an exceptionally demanding sort of teacher because he refused to hand out dogma and because all his teaching required the exercise of fantasy. And unfortunately, the way formal education goes, that is not a corner of people's minds and of their intellectual and spiritual equipment whose use is tremendously encouraged. And so the challenges to those students with whom I saw him work at the New England Conservatory were in all respects huge, not least because he believed that working on a performance was pointless if one didn't work on those that were themselves the most challenging, those pieces that are at the heart of all the reasons why all of us have found our way into this room tonight. I was astonished at the way he could take a quartet made up of four Conservatory freshmen and work them very rigorously on Beethoven Opus 127, which, even as late Beethoven goes, is a pretty hard piece. Once, while that was going on, I said something along the lines of "You don't kid around, do you?" And he looked at me with that sweet reproachfulness that

was so specially his own, looked at me for a long time in silence, and then he said, "but do you want me to teach them Mendelssohn? Or Borodin?"

Those words have many overtones for me. His presence was a beautiful moral presence. When I was writing newspaper criticism I always used to worry about whether it was good enough for Rudy. It never was. It never could have been, but it was good to have that prod. He believed profoundly and very givingly and generously in teaching and in the endless spreading of those ever-widening circles of which good teaching consists. I was very moved a few minutes before tonight's concert began to read in the exhibition case the little note that Schoenberg wrote about Rudy. He writes with great pride of Kolisch as a pupil, which he was literally, but also by extension. The process went on long after a formal teacher-pupil relationship had ceased to exist, and the quartet, and all the quartets that were successors or descendants of the original quartet, were in some sense Schoenberg's pupils too. He mentions that with real pride. And so it was with Rudy. To take just one detail tonight, it was lovely to see the La Salle Quartet playing Schoenberg from those monstrous cardboard sheets onto which the pages of dismembered miniature scores had been pasted, because that was something Rudy absolutely insisted on. The real Kolisch Quartet played from memory, but if that ideal and all that it presupposed about the depth of knowing the music was not attainable, the minimum acceptable compromise was for each player to have not just his own part but the complete score.

In a thousand ways Rudy touched the ways of musicians, changing forever the way we hear music, the way we feel about music and what it means to be musicians. And there are so many aspects of him there is no time to touch on here—Rudy, the friend of Adorno; Rudy the moviegoer, the animal-lover, the man who played tennis with Charlie Chaplin (another left-handed fiddler) and who used to stay up till three in the morning to watch matches on TV, who was surely the only faculty member of the New England Conservatory to have a picture of Bobby Orr in his office, the man who once confessed to wishing he were Derek Sanderson ("then I would know how to hit").

A couple of weeks after Rudy's death two summers ago, some of his friends gathered in a ceremony of both mourning and celebration to talk about him, to remember, to speak of what he had meant to us. At one point, the talk moved toward wondering despairingly of what would happen now that he was gone? What will happen to those ideas? Who will tell us how to live? We all moved out of that mood again quite quickly, but it was only afterwards that I found what I had been groping for at that moment and hadn't quite known how to say. But perhaps I can say it here in a room that is also full of people to whom he meant very much, to whose lives he made a profound difference, whom he crucially touched. I found myself remembering St. Paul's in London and where Christopher Wren, who built that great cathedral, is buried. In that building, set inconspicuously into a wall, there is a piece of marble not more than a couple of square feet. It has his name on it and four words of Latin: *Se monumentum requiris, circumspice*. "If you would seek his monument, look about you."

MICHAEL STEINBERG



Rudolf Kolisch, Vienna 1926.