The rediscovered music of Erwin Schulhoff

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On a recent weekend in New York, three concerts were devoted solely to the music of one little-known twentieth-century composer, Erwin Schulhoff. Schulhoff, a German-speaking Czech Jew, was born in Prague in 1894 and died of tuberculosis in a Nazi concentration camp in 1942.

Schulhoff is perhaps the most significant among a number of composers who began their careers in the period between the First and Second World Wars and whose music has been almost forgotten following their early deaths or, in some cases, exile in relative obscurity. In recent years, his compositions have been heard more frequently. The concerts that took place from April 30 to May 2 are part of a broader effort to revive interest in this work.

James Conlon, the American-born conductor whose career has been largely based in Europe for the past 20 years, and who is just completing a 10-year stint as the principal conductor of the Paris Opera, is one of the most prominent advocates of the music of Schulhoff and his contemporaries.

Conlon, who is returning to the U.S. as his main base of conducting activity, wrote in the program notes for the April 30 concert of Schulhoff's orchestral works at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, "I intend, in the coming years, to perform this music regularly, in the hope that it will find its place in the standard repertoire. I am devoting 2004 to the programming of works by this group of composers with as many American and European orchestras as possible. This includes works by Alexander von Zemlinsky, Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Haas, Bohuslav Martinu, Erich Korngold, Karl-Amadeus Hartmann, and, lastly, Erwin Schulhoff." Among this group, it should be noted, Zemlinsky, Martinu and Korngold are not at all forgotten, but their music rarely gets the attention it deserves.

Even a first hearing of Schulhoff's Suite for Chamber Orchestra (1921), his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1923), and his Symphony No. 5 (1938)—all on the April 30 program—shows that Conlon's goal is indeed a worthy one. Schulhoff's work can be appreciated in both a musical and historical sense, and the two elements are of course closely connected. It is impossible to hear this music without considering the context in which it was written, the decades of political and cultural ferment, and the ways in which many artists tried, during those years, to find an audience for their work as well as to comprehend it as a reflection of the broader struggles. This is certainly music that should not be forgotten.

Schulhoff was born into a prosperous and cultured family, and quickly emerged as something of a child prodigy. When Dvorak heard him perform on the piano in 1901, he predicted a great musical future for the seven-year-old. Schulhoff went on to study in Prague, followed by the conservatories in Leipzig and Cologne. Among his teachers were the composers Max Reger and Claude Debussy. As he entered his 20s, he displayed enormous talent in both performance and composition. A Prague critic said he was "a distinguished virtuoso pianist, especially bred for new music, with a splendid technique, unequalled memory and radical interpretational will; a revolutionary composer, with both feet firmly planted on the ground."

The young musician spent the war in the army of the doomed Austro-Hungarian Empire, and emerged from this experience embittered and radicalized, as did so much of his generation. In January 1919, he moved to Dresden, and he spent the next four years in Germany.

Schulhoff turned away from traditional musical forms, associating them with the decadence of the old order that had thrust the world into the catastrophe of world war. He briefly embraced Dadaism, but soon distanced himself from its more nihilistic expressions. His friends and associates included the artist George Grosz, with whom he shared his enthusiasm for jazz and ragtime, and to whom he dedicated his above-mentioned Suite for Chamber Orchestra.

During these years, Schulhoff plunged into the music of his time. He was influenced by and often performed the music of various contemporary schools, including the atonality of Schoenberg and Alban Berg (with whom he corresponded) and the neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Hindemith. Other influences included Bartok and especially Czech composer Leos Janacek. Janacek was Schulhoff's senior by 40 years, but he composed some of his greatest works during this period, when he was nearly 70. Schulhoff wrote an essay about Janacek's life and work.

Schulhoff's own compositions were not simply derivative of these early modernists. Although his work clearly shows their influence, he was able to find his own distinctive voice—in some fashion a combination of expressionism and neoclassicism.

This owed something to the fact that he was immensely curious and eager to absorb everything he could. His originality is demonstrated in both the Suite and the Piano Concerto, both written before the composer turned 30 years old.

Jazz played a particularly important role in Schulhoff's composition. Unlike other composers—Stravinsky, Ravel and Darius Milhaud, for example—there was no sense in which Schulhoff approached jazz as an outsider looking in. He worked as a jazz pianist during this period. His jazz-influenced classical compositions predated those of his near-contemporary Kurt Weill. His "jazz concerto," a one-movement piece performed in New York by Conlon and the Juilliard Orchestra with pianist David Greilsammer, was completed several months before the premiere in New York, in February 1924, of another "jazz concerto" that was to become much more famous—George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

It is certain that the two composers knew nothing of each other's work at the time, and the works, despite their common jazz influences, are very different. Gershwin's, lyrical and tinged with romanticism, has deservedly remained one of the most popular works of its kind. Schulhoff's concerto is far more raucous, provocative and experimental. This original and arresting work deserves a far wider hearing.

There is no element of what has come to be called "crossover," in the contemporary music scene, in Schulhoff's work. This is not "light" classicism, typically forsaking spontaneity and originality in the search for quick popularity. Schulhoff's concerto is full of surprises, but it emerges as a cohesive musical statement. The last section, for instance, is marked *Allegro alla Jazz*, and uses siren, car horn, anvil, cowbells, rattle, tam-tam, Japanese drum and "other percussion paraphernalia beyond the wildest imaginings of any actual jazz band," as summed up in the April 30 program notes of David Wright.

The Dada-influenced Suite for Chamber Orchestra, composed two years

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before the concerto, begins with a short nonsense poem, in true Dada style. The poem concludes with words that can be seen as partly anticipating events of 20 years hence:

Grant me unheard-of-powers,
I will eat you all,
Into the sausage machine with you,
Band of pigs!!!
Then, then comes the moment in the Cosmos,
When I will be transformed in “BAYER Aspirin”!

There is nothing ostentatiously shocking or purposely obscure in the music that follows. The suite is composed of six delightful and original sections, titled Ragtime, Valse Boston (a popular dance of the time), Tango, Shimmy, Step and Jazz. The music recalls that of Ravel or Francis Poulenc.

Schulhoff’s musical trajectory underwent a major change in the early 1930s. In the upheavals of the late 1920s and early 1930s, with the rise of Fascism and, in January 1933, Hitler’s accession to the German chancellorship, Schulhoff turned more and more to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, which he saw as a bulwark in the fight against Nazism. This tragic political confusion was not an individual error. It emerged from the whole world situation in which the isolation of the USSR and the growth of the Stalinist bureaucracy coincided with the Depression and new revolutionary crises that were betrayed by the Communist International. Millions of workers and intellectuals turned to the Soviet Union, associating it with the Russian Revolution, just as the Stalinists were preparing to exterminate virtually the entire leadership of the October 1917 struggle.

These were the circumstances under which Schulhoff voluntarily and enthusiastically embraced the doctrine of “socialist realism,” discarding his previous work in favor of an aesthetic that was overtly political and didactic and avoided the experimental or avant-garde.

The composer went so far as to compose a cantata based on the Communist Manifesto. He turned to large-scale works, composing his last five symphonies between 1933 and his death. The Third Symphony was dedicated to hunger strikers in Slovakia, the Fourth to fighters in the Spanish Civil War. The Fifth, while it has no formal program, is very much in the “heroic” mold acceptable to the Stalinists. Its four movements consist of two slow movements (an *Andante* followed by an *Adagio*), followed by two *Allegro* movements. The symphony is mostly martial, solemn, and tragic throughout. To this listener, it lacks the spark of the earlier works.

But there is also much to admire in this music. Disoriented though he may have been, “socialist realism” in the hands of this enormously talented and self-sacrificing artist is not the same as that which found expression in the work of Stalinist careerists and toadies. It is the difference between the powerful works composed by Dmitri Shostakovich that found favor with the Kremlin—the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, for example—and the completely forgettable and abysmal work churned out by the “official” practitioners of socialist realism in the Soviet musical establishment.

Schulhoff’s Fifth Symphony was composed between February 1938 and May 1939. The composer took Soviet citizenship, but hesitated to emigrate to the USSR. He was unable to find work after the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia, and was arrested the day after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. He died in the Wulzburg concentration camp 14 months later, on August 18, 1942.

The recovery of the musical heritage of Erwin Schulhoff and some of his contemporaries involves more than simply the opportunity to appreciate forgotten compositions. As James Conlon explains in his program note: “I believe this entire ‘lost generation’ embodies a spirit that needs to be heard. The creativity of the first half of the 20th century is far richer than we think. Alongside Stravinsky, Strauss and other major and more fortunate figures, the varied voices of those composers, from Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest, whether Jewish, dissident or immigrant, reveals much about the musical ferment of their time.... [Schulhoff] reflects the artistic milieu of the young Socialist, Jewish intellectuals of the period spanning from the First World War to early 1940s.... By keeping alive the music of the victims of totalitarianism, we deny those regimes any posthumous victory. The revival of this music can serve as a reminder to resist any contemporary or future impulse to define artistic standards on the basis of a racist or exclusionary ideology....”

Conlon is raising some extremely important and complex issues. The triumph of academic serialism as the “only” acceptable form of modern music for much of the last half of the twentieth century is bound up with the loss of composers who sought other paths. Schulhoff and others, for whom there was no gulf at all between their work and their audience, were forgotten or ignored. It is not only that Schulhoff himself was gone. The political disappointments, and especially the role of Stalinism, were used to argue that any attempt to compose for a mass audience, to educate a mass audience, was hopeless and would lead only to disaster. “Serious” music was only for the elite, and the masses needed and deserved only what was dished out to them by the world of capitalist commerce.

There is a kind of parallel, although obviously only a very rough one, between the worlds of avant-garde music and politics. Just as it is conventional wisdom to proclaim today that “socialism is dead,” it is fashionable in some circles to say that classical music is dead—that it has given way, on the one hand, to “modern” music that is heard by almost no one outside of those who compose it, and on the other, to increasingly “dumbed-down” music for the larger audience.

Music is without a doubt the most abstract of art forms, and the imposition of political or programmatic content on a musical composition is antithetical to the integrity with which the creative artist must proceed. But that does not mean that the composer should cut himself or herself off from the world. Schulhoff’s creative trajectory is a complicated one. In the end, his struggle was cut short prematurely. There is much to be learned from the effort to develop a musical language that reflects the real world, with an emotional content that engages the listener

The classical music tradition hasn’t simply died or disappeared. Conlon and other musicians are insisting on the need to recover the actual history of cultural ferment and struggle of the twentieth century, and to learn from this history. The same can and must be said of politics, of course. We should consider, in this context, just why the issue of the near-forgotten musical avant-garde arises today. It is unquestionably connected to a growing awareness, even if indirectly and only dimly perceived at first, that the unresolved political issues of the twentieth century are once again being posed in the twenty-first.

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