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Otto Klemperer - Behind every great conductor

By Norman Lebrecht / July 30, 2003

I wonder whether any young woman today would do what Lotte did, and give up her life for the sake of her father and his art. Lotte was the only daughter of Otto Klemperer, the conductor who, more than any other, made Berlin a byword for musical modernism in the 1920s and London a benchmark for orchestral excellence in the 1960s.

He could not have achieved these transformations unaided. Klemperer suffered from a severe form of cyclothymic illness which, in manic phases, provoked arrest and disgrace, and in depressive mood, brought him close to self-destruction. Without a responsible relative in constant attendance, Klemperer could not have fulfilled his invaluable musical duties. Even now, 30 years after his death, every British orchestra contains players whose standards were set by Klemperer, and whose eyes glisten at the mention of his name.

The first to look after him was his long-suffering wife, Johanna - long-suffering because when Klemperer was on a high he was beset by satyriasis, recklessly pursuing every woman within arm's reach. Gustav Mahler's daughter, Anna, once found herself chased by him around a dining table. Knowing that he had been close to both her parents, she breathlessly sought to preserve dignity and friendship. "Dr Klemperer," she gasped, "in Bach's B-minor mass, rehearsal figure 48, is that top note F or F-sharp?" Klemperer stopped as if stunned and delivered a magisterial analysis of the work. Music was the only interest that could override his furious compulsions.

Johanna saw him through the glory years at Berlin's Kroll Opera, where he presented popular classics in radical reconstructions, along with new operas by Weill and Janaek, to an audience comprised of factory and office workers. What Klemperer did at the Kroll remains a utopian model for 21st century opera houses. It was, inevitably, anathema to the Nazis.

The family left Germany a month after Hitler seized power. Lotte was nine and a comfort to her father in the bewilderment of exile. "Dr Klemperer," said an orchestral administrator in Los Angeles, "you and I have become such good friends that from now on I'm gonna call you 'Otto'." "You may call," growled Klemperer, "but I will not come."

In 1939 he underwent surgery for a brain tumour and emerged with one side of his face paralysed, his tongue atrophied and his behaviour even more erratic. Johanna refused to commit him to a mental institution, but Klemperer walked out on her, saying he needed a year's freedom. He went careering around the country with the wife of the Utah Symphony music director, Maurice Abravanel, leaving a trail of unpaid bills. Reported missing on the front page of the New York Times, he was arrested and displayed in the next day's papers behind bars. Released on bail, he faced a mob of reporters, with Lotte acting as mediator and interpreter. She was 17 and had already been thrust into her life's mission.

Most American orchestras, scandalised by Klemperer's conduct, crossed him off their books. After a concert in Los Angeles, he went walkabout and was found beaten up in a gutter. A 1947 tour of Europe was peppered with madcap incidents, winding up in Budapest where Klemperer took charge of the State Opera and Lotte flirted with communism until they were nudged out.

Back in America, he was blacklisted for serving on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain and refused a passport extension. In November 1954, he was holed up, flat broke, in a fleapit New York hotel when a young agent, chancing his luck, asked him to conduct a concert in Portland, Oregon. Klemperer balked at travelling 3,000 miles for a single gig, but Lotte and the agent fell "half in love" and she persuaded her father to take the date. It marked a turning point in post-war musical destiny.

In Portland, Klemperer ripped an epochal Beethoven Seventh out of the unbelieving fingers of provincial musicians, most of whom had never played it before. The agent, Ronald Wilford, made his name overnight and went on to become the mightiest commercial force in musical America. Klemperer was given a passport and flew to London, where the producer Walter Legge wanted him to conduct the Philharmonia, EMI's recording band.

In a city awash with orchestras-that played just about as well as required and seldom better, Klemperer fired the Philharmonia with an unEnglish excess of aspiration and self-belief. He conceived each work as a structural integrity, revealing its contours from the opening bars and giving musicians and listeners alike an extraordinary confidence in their comprehension of the work. Every concert seemed to have been programmed as an act of human necessity. At the end of his inaugural Beethoven cycle, the jubilation was so exuberant that the London County Council commissioned a bust of Klemperer from Jacob Epstein for the Royal Festival Hall, where it stands to this day.

He continued to court disaster, suffering near-fatal burns when his pipe caught fire in bed and he tried to extinguish it with a whisky flask. In the public eye he was brutally forthright, never more so than on John Freeman's Face To Face television programme. With London musicians he was alternately rough-tongued and paternal, handing out cigarettes to the ones who pleased him. When Legge disbanded the Philharmonia in 1964, Klemperer gave his allegiance to the players, investing them with his own rugged independence and securing the orchestra's survival.

None of this could have come about without Lotte's devotion. Her tongue could be as rough as his when dealing with the fixers of the record industry, but she had the charm and wit to ease most vicissitudes, never presuming to control his life. One morning, bringing the old man his breakfast tray, she found him in bed with a young woman. "This is my daughter, Lotte," grunted Klemperer by way of introduction, "and you - what did you say your name was?"

To feminists, Lotte's must appear a wasted life, a voluntary form of child sacrifice that postmodern times have made redundant. She died this month, aged 79, at her home outside Zurich, unknown beyond the backstage of concert halls and with few tributes to mark her passing.

Intellectual, attractive and formidably capable, Lotte could have made a very different life for herself. When I asked once whether she had ever considered it, she politely ignored my impertinence.

She had made a calculated career choice to be her father's helper, a role that was no less valid in her eyes than the heady ascent of women politicians, artists and CEOs. In 1954, Lotte wrote that her parents' plight had "made me resentful, furious and ... ambitious". By facilitating her father's fulfilment, her achievement will resonate for ever on record and in our concert life. The Philharmonia will soon announce a musical tribute in memory of Lotte Klemperer.
