

KAROL RATHAUS

David C F Wright DMus

There is a lot of rubbish and misinformation given about composers.

Great composers are ignored and poor composers are elevated to greatness.

People have the right to enjoy the music of their choice but because we like a composer does not make them great and because we do not like a composer does not make him a poor composer. We must not judge composers from our personal prospective.

However, putting aside our likes and dislikes, there are composers whose works are poor for various reasons such as lack of memorable content, poor grammar, lacking in skill and technique, inadequate orchestration, lacking in originality, displaying no understanding the instrument or instruments.

The Communist regime in Russia condemned certain works and certain composers forcing them to write in a nationalist and cheerful style. This also happened in other Communist states. Music has to be progressive to arrive at originality. And yet there are shallow people who condemn music if it does not have a tune or shows skills beyond the listener's ability.

Karol Rathaus's music has been called degenerate meaning it is music that has declined from a former or original state, having become inferior or undesirable, depraved or corrupt and lacking in quality.

To add to the rubbishing of Rathaus a debate arose around 1942 which questioned his nationality. Was he Polish, German or Jewish?

He answered this by declaring his concern for the Jews although their problems did not affect him personally as his intention was to stay in the USA. He could not envisage a solution to the Jewish question in post war-Europe but hoped that anti-Semitism would decline.

Rathaus did not practise his Jewish faith. He was not concerned with religion but with the political problems that faced the Jews.

The creation of the nation of Israel in 1948 did not end the problems for the Jews.

He was born Karl Leonhard Bruno Rathaus on 16 September 1895 in the Polish town of Tarnopol in Galicia then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, now in the Ukraine. He began composing at the age of 7 and composing for the orchestra at the age of 14. He studied at the Vienna Academy of Music from 1913 and later at the Berlin Musikhochschule from 1920. The years between saw Rathaus in the Austrian army.

His piano music enjoyed a measure of success.

[PDF of Sonata 1](#)

[PDF of Sechs kleine Klavierstücke](#)

He was bedevilled most of his life as to his nationality which irritated him. His mother's native tongue



was Polish but Karol did not consider himself to be Polish. In 1923, the authorities declared that his nationality was German-Austrian which pleased him.

After the war he followed his teacher Franz Schreker to Berlin along with other students. Ernst Krenek was a fellow student. No work and no income forced Rathaus to return to Vienna an environment he did not like, but here in the Austrian capital he was recognised for his piano music. His Symphony no 1 was first performed in Darmstadt under Joseph Rosenstock in 1924 and the impressive Symphony no 2 was premiered in Frankfurt in 1926 under the great Hermann Scherchen. This work gave rise to the claims that it was degenerate music. It was his ballet *The Last Pierrot*, given in the Berlin Staatsoper, was a great success. The story of Pierrot looking for Columbine was updated with scenes in a modern factory and dance halls.

Following this success famous conductors took up his work such as Furtwangler, Horenstein, Klemperer, Kleiber and Scherchen. This also encouraged an interest in his chamber music.

However, his opera *Strange Soil*, first performed in the Berlin Staatsoper in 1930, was a failure and hindered his reputation.

He composed music for Max Reinhardt's production from 1928 onwards and his film music enjoyed much success such as *The Murderer Dmitri Karamazoff* of 1930. He worked with many well-known directors of the day such as Ozepe, Granowski and Braham. He was uncertain about the success of this genre and feared he might only be remembered as a composer of utilitarian music. The rise of Nazism caused him to emigrate to France where he found work as a film composer and was hardly able to receive performances of his serious music.

After two years in France, he and his wife, Gerta, and son moved to London in 1934 where they stayed for four years but he could not find work. Here he composed his *String Quartet no 3* and the *Violin Sonata no 2*. When he left London, he left papers and compositions behind which were destroyed in the blitz. He visited Hollywood but found no opportunities there. His attempts in Broadway met with little success. His two shows *Another Sun* and *Herodes and Mariamne* failed. His powers diminished and his *Piano Concerto* and his *Symphony no 3* took an inordinate time to compose. He eked out a living by writing educational music.

The newly founded Queens College, just outside New York, offered Rathaus the post of a teacher which he accepted although he had not considered teaching before. He felt that he had to be free to compose but, by now, he was disillusioned with the neglect of his important music and he yearned for an active contact with the public and their response to his music. However, his role as a teacher did bring him pleasure. But he did succumb to writing music for advertisements as he needed the money. His friends helped out but were perplexed that he no longer took any interest in his early works. Horenstein recommended that Rathaus's *Vision Dramatique* be submitted to a publisher but Rathaus said he had put it aside and implied that only music by Hindemith was being published.

Rathaus's son, Bernt, said that the Nazis had destroyed his father who was bitter by what had happened to him. Even today in this country there are many worthy composers who are neglected and we are saturated with the music of some composers who do not reach any high quality.

He made a performing edition of Mussorgsky's splendid opera *Boris Gounod*.

Being a severe critic of the Nazis did not help Rathaus and he was depressed by the political events in post-war Germany. German music was headed up by Hindemith, who was not admired by Rathaus, although Hindemith was a very fine composer and versatile musician. Nonetheless Rathaus's concern for Germany was both sincere and patriotic.

Rathaus died at Flushing, New York on 21 November 1954. He was 59. He had been suffering from ill health due to over work and fatigue. His widow set up the Karol Rathaus Memorial Association.

His music is certainly not degenerate and the slow movements in his symphonies are highly impressive. I venture to say that are among the finest slow movements ever written and his orchestration is first class. The Piano Concerto gradually reveals its many secrets. Sadly, I have not heard any of his five string quartets.

As an example of his superlative orchestration, his Prelude for large orchestra is a winner. You will not find finer orchestration anywhere.

A great composer still awaiting to be recognised.

(1196)

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright DMus 2013 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.