

NIKOLAI LOPATNIKOFF

David C F Wright DMus

Nikolai Lopatnikoff was born on 16 March 1903 in Reval (now Tallin) the capital of Estonia.

He studied piano and theory at St Petersburg Conservatory but his family fled to Finland during the Russian revolution. Then Nikolai went to Heidelberg in Germany and studied at university and travelled to Mannheim to study composition with Ernest Toch.

But, as music did not guarantee either an income or a career, Lopatnikoff studied engineering at Karlsruhe Technical College (1921-1927) earning a degree in civil engineering but his heart was set on music. He married Elenora Laschinsky in 1926 and they lived in Berlin from 1928 to 1933.

The rise of Nazism in 1933 caused him to travel to Paris, Finland, London and Estonia as a travelling concert pianist. He and his wife lived in London from 1933 to 1936 before emigrating to the USA.

At one time he was regarded as an avant garde composer, an expression people use often incorrectly. This was primarily when he was known and admired in central Europe. He participated in festivals at Donaueschingen and Baden-Baden. He knew Prokofiev, Hindemith, Stravinsky and Copland. Prokofiev encouraged him with his successful Piano Concerto no 1 which the composer withdrew not wishing to another composer of a flashy Russian piano concerto. Sibelius helped Lopatnikoff to acquire a permit to live in Helsinki. Copland arranged Lopatnikoff to meet Koussevitsky who commissioned a work from him.

Lopatnikoff was a friendly man having friendships in the USA with Vernon Duke, David Diamond and Walter Piston. His works were performed by major orchestras under Ansermet, Bernstein, Dorati, Munch, Reiner, Ormandy and others. He won prizes for his String Quartet no 2, his Symphony no 1 and received commission from famous artists.

His avant garde style disappeared when in America as the Americans were not keen on 'modern' music.

He was an accomplished pianist.

He was head of composition at the Hartt College of Music in White Plains, New York.

He became a USA citizen on 6 June 1944 (D day). His wife died in 1946 and he took up a post at the Carnegie Institute of Technology and was an active participant in the cultural life of Pittsburgh for the rest of his life. He married Sara Henderson Hay, the American poet, in 1951.

He composed four symphonies, three string quartets, Danton an opera in three acts, two piano concertos, a concerto for two pianos, a violin concerto, a concerto for orchestra, sinfonietta, two sonatas for piano, two violin sonata, cello sonata, a piano trio and much more. His music is tonal and perhaps Romantic in style and sometimes his piano writing has a welcome bite. His music is worth getting to know.

He died in Pittsburgh on 7 October 1976.

(463)