

TADEUSZ ZYGFRYD KASSERN

David C F Wright PhD

This composer did not have a happy life. He hated the left wing politics that was imposed upon Poland and such politics have no place in music and the arts, and such politics should be universally condemned by everybody.

Tadeusz Zygfryd Kassern was born on the 19 March 1904 in Lwdw, also known as Lvov, now in the Ukraine. His father, Adolf, was a judge, and his mother, Maria Baumann, came from a family of merchants.

The Kasserns were an affluent family who lived in a tenement in a beautiful part of the city, rich in Polish culture. They were Jewish and, next to the evils of left wing politics, the unacceptable hatred of the Jews was, and is, the other greatest social injustice.

At the age of nine, Kassern became a pupil of Anna Niementowska at the local Institute of Music. During the First World War, he stayed in Vienna. From 1919, he studied at the Conservatory of the Polish Music School in Lwdw. Jerzy Lalewicz was his excellent piano teacher and he learnt theory and composition under the Conservatory's director, Mieczyslaw Soltys.

The great influence on Kassern was Karol Szymanowski whose music is of variable quality but his stage works and orchestral music is often very fine.

In the 1920s, Adolf Kassern became a District Judge and the family had to move to Poznan. The two sons had become Roman Catholics and adopted the names of Stanislaw Maksymilian and Tadeusz Zygfryd respectively. Mrs Kassern died in 1923 and, for the next four or five years, Tadeusz studied law and economics at Poznan University, but continued his piano studies with Wienczyslaw Brzostowski.

Kassern was interested in music criticism but the fascination with Szymanowski lead to his Opus 1, a Piano Sonata in B minor of 1926, which has not survived. Four songs for voice and piano made up his opus 2 but he was searching for an individual style, as all composers should, and this is shown in his Three Piano Preludes Op 3. His original and successful Concerto for voice and orchestra won a second prize in a competition and it had many performances before it was removed because of the composer's political views. He attempted an opera, Daniel, which he did not complete. Many of his works of the 1930s are lost.

The completion of his law studies led to his appointment in the Attorney General's office in Poznan and, from 1927 and for about ten years, he wrote many literary articles about Polish music, perhaps over 550 of them.

His music is mainly neo-classical and he was an admirer of French composers. 1933 saw the appearance of his neo-classical Concerto for flute and orchestra.

There are four piano sonatinas.

The first dates from 1935 and is dedicated to his wife Longina; the second is dated 1944 and is in three movements March, Arietta and Oberek. The third of 1945 is subtitled Carol and has been called



Sonata Breve. Sonatina no 4 is based on themes by Stephen Foster. He also composed Amusement Park Music Book for young pianists in 1936 and the Coney Island Sonatina as another fun piece based on American popular music.

The Piano Sonata no 2 was dedicated to the memory of Szymanowski and is in three movements, sonata allegro, a fughetta and a rhapsody. It is somewhat based on Oravian folk songs and there is some influence of Bartok. There followed an Oravian Suite for male choir and, in 1937, Four Copernican Motets for mixed choir a cappella.

In 1939, Kassern's brother and family moved to Brazil. Tadeusz composed his Concertino for piano and orchestra and moved to Krakow. Some of his works were destroyed in the Second World War. He left Krakow in 1942 having been denounced by the Gestapo. He sketched an opera Koniec Mesjasza. In 1945, he composed his Funeral Trypytch, which consists of three ancient songs dedicated to the memory of Roman Padlewski.

Kassern was employed at the General Consultate of the Republic of Poland in New York where he struggled to find work in the music field. His works were now banned in Poland. In September 1955, he was again denied political asylum in the USA and the anti-Semitism that he had endured in Poland, which was a feature in Chopin's life, and the cruelty of left wing politics deeply troubled him and so he attempted suicide. But his works in America began to take off, largely because it took on a sort of American idiom. His Concertino for oboe and strings and the Sonatina for flute and piano are examples. His opera in four acts, The Anointed, was never staged although the composer thought highly of it.

His next opera, Sun-up, won a prize for the best modernistic opera. In 1956, he had written the opera, Comedy of the Dumb Wife, but believing it would never be performed, he only wrote it in a piano score. At the end of his life, he was working on his opera, Eros.

The British composer, Bernard Stevens, has written that Kassern was a very fine composer of vocal music and that his arrangements of Polish folk songs have very sensitive piano accompaniments.

Kassern died of cancer on 2 May 1957. He was just 53.

(883)

COPYRIGHT David C F Wright PhD 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.