

WALLINGFORD RIEGGER

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Wallingford Constantin Riegger was a very fine composer but barely recognised in his lifetime and then not until the 1950s. Today, his music is almost totally forgotten.

He was born in Albany, Georgia on 29 April 1885 to Wallingford and Constantine Riegger. After his father's timber mill burned down in 1888, the family moved to Indianapolis and then to Louisville before settling in New York in 1900. He learned the violin and the cello as a child and, in 1904, went up to Cornell University but the following year transferred to the Institute of Music and Art, later known as the Juillard School, where one of his teachers was Percy Goetschius (1853-1943) who won international fame as a teacher of musical theory.



Between 1907 and 1910 Riegger was in Munich and Berlin at the Hochschule fur Musick continuing his studies. He made his conducting debut with the Blüthner Symphony Orchestra in 1910.

On his return to America in 1910, he earned his living as a cellist in the St Paul's Symphony Orchestra in Minnesota. In 1911, he married Rose Schramm and was to have three daughters with her. Surprisingly, he returned to Germany from 1913-17 when the Great War was in progress. Here he conducted several opera and symphony concerts. He returned to the USA in 1917 when America entered World War 1.

He was a craftsman. He did not scatter notes on paper as a farmer may throw seed to chickens as some composers scatter notes on paper. If you look at his scores with a professional eye you will see that every note counts.

He was not a show-off. He composed music as he felt it, and not to gain public acclaim and that, to my mind, makes both a great and sincere musician. He found his own style through the study of the many masterpieces of Arnold Schoenberg, and yet he was not a copy cat. He developed his own kind of serialism and his music has a tremendous strength and power yet it is never overwhelming. His music flows and evolves naturally. Yet he would insist that music must never be just cerebral or dry.

Like many composers, he wanted to be original which is the greatest essential for any composer. He wanted to get away from neo-classicism and both the romantic and expressionistic movements in music. Yet he believed in classical form and structure. The idea of loose music did not appeal to him.

Teaching in various locations from 1917 to 1923 was his first calling, but he returned to New York where the throb of the city influenced him to become a composer. He was a friend of composers such as Cowell, Ives, Ruggles and Varèse and formed the Pan-American Association of Composers giving concerts in various parts of the world.

The years 1930 to 1957 were the main years of his composing along with his teaching at various colleges in New York State.

He believed in a certain freedom in music. His masterly 'Study in Sonority' (1927) is for ten violins or any multiple of ten and confronts the difficulties posed by form, harmony, rhythm and texture. The ten instruments have four players with the melody line and four provide the harmony and the remaining two a bass line. The motif is a four note theme and the music has a glowing intensity. Everything is meticulously notated. For example, the four notes all have differing degrees of dynamic range.

Metronome marks are precise. The four note motif is in three guises which predicts his interest in serial music or twelve note music as it is often called.

In the 1930s he supplemented his income by writing scores for choreographers in America and, under many pseudonyms, made innumerable arrangements.

Among his dance scores are Bacchanale (1931), Evocation (1933) Candid (1937), Case History Number... (1937) and Pilgrim's Progress (1941)

Riegger had a great sense of humour. This is seen in his Canons for Woodwind Instruments of 1931. He was always looking at new departures. Dichotomy for chamber orchestra is so named because it has two note rows which conflict in a work of great tension and integrity. New Dance (1932) won some popularity and was rearranged for two pianos due to public demand.

Riegger had great insight and a vivid imagination as shown in his Music for Brass Choir of 1949. There is also a Nonet for brass.

He composed three splendid string quartets (1939, 1948 and 1957), a Piano Quintet (1951), the early Piano Trio (1919) and a Woodwind Quintet (1952). The Opus 1 Piano Trio was once available on a record GC 4117, many years ago.

His interest in literature is shown in his choral works La Belle Dame Sans Merci (1924), From Some Far Shore (1946), The Dying of the Light (1954) and Who Can Revoke? (1948).

He seems to have been reluctant to write a conventional concerto. There are the Variations for piano and orchestra of 1953, the Variations for violin and orchestra of 1959 and the Introduction and Fugue for cello and wind instruments of 1960. His only 'concerto' is that for piano and woodwind quintet of 1953. This is probably due to his dislike of showing off and display and I feel sure that his far left politics influenced him considerably. Music is music, not a feat or a contest such a trapeze artist trying out a new death-defying stunt.

In 1957, he was called to the House for Un-American Activities Committee who were investigating Communism in the musical world.

The following year Leonard Bernstein conducted his Music for Orchestra and, later, was to say, "All who knew Wally, loved him!"

His works were taken up by Stokowski and the great Herman Scherchen. His last two symphonies are very fine.

The facts of his death are bizarre. Some eccentric person was walking dogs that were somewhat out of control and began fighting and their respective leashes became entangled around Riegger's legs and he fell heavily. He suffered a head injury from which he never recovered. He died on 2 April 1961 four weeks short of his 76th birthday.

Among his main works are

Orchestral

- Prelude and Fugue, Op 10 (1930)
- Dichotomy Op 12 (1931)
- Consummation Op 31 (1939)
- Symphony no 1 (1944)

Symphony no 2 (1945)
Symphony no 3 Op 42 (1946-7, revised 1960)
Music for orchestra Op 50 (1958)
Symphony no 4 Op 63 (1956)
Festival Overture Op 68 (1957)
Quintuple Jazz Op 72 (1968)
Sinfonietta Op 73 (1959)
Several works for band and wind ensembles
Elegy for cello and orchestra (1916)
Concerto for piano and wind quintet Op 53 (1953)
Variations for piano and orchestra Op 54 (1953)
Variations for violin and orchestra Op 71

Chamber music

Piano Trio Op 1 (1919)
Study in Sonoroity (1927)
Quartet no 1 Op 30 (1936-39)
Quartet no 2 Op 43 (1948)
Quartet no 3 (1957)
Piano Quintet Op 51

Several piano works

Vocal work

Le Belle dame sans merci (Keats) two sopranos, contralto and instruments, premiered 1924
at the 7th Berkshire Festival of Choral Music

Other works are mentioned in the text.

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