



Marcel Tyberg

Reborn in Buffalo

Herman Trotter

When it comes to musical archaeology, this story just may be the discovery of the decade.

Until the last few months, the name of once-promising composer Marcel Tyberg (1893-1944) was probably not known to more than 15 or 20 people worldwide, despite the fact that the great Rafael Kubelik had premiered his Symphony No. 2 with the Czech Philharmonic in the 1930s. Born and raised in Vienna, of Polish ancestry, Tyberg (pronounced TEE-berg) spent the last 20 years of his life living in towns along the northern Adriatic near the border of Italy and Yugoslavia. But in late 1944, the Gestapo herded him onto a train, destination unknown. The only news about Tyberg's fate was an unconfirmed rumor that he had hanged himself on the train rather than face the grisly consequences of a concentration camp.

After World War II, the few people who

remembered that Tyberg had written three symphonies, two masses, two piano sonatas, a string sextet, a piano trio and 35 lieder presumed that his entire life's work had perished with him. Any musicologist who questioned that conclusion would certainly have concentrated his search on Vienna and such Adriatic cities as Fiume, Trieste, or smaller towns where he had lived like Abbazia and Gorizia.

That research would have yielded nothing because, for most of the 62 years since Tyberg's death, his entire life's work has been held in safekeeping, in, of all places, Buffalo, New York. It's the treasured property of Dr. Enrico Mihich, a distinguished research scientist who founded and directed the Cancer Drug Center at Buffalo's Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

During those years, with an eye toward stimulating first American performances, Mihich showed the Tyberg scores to certain conductors of the Buffalo Philharmonic, without generating much response. He also con-

tacted the aging Kubelik, who was reportedly excited to learn of the music's existence, but his death in 1996 snuffed out that area of exploration.

But now Mihich has a staunch ally in JoAnn Falletta, the Buffalo Philharmonic's current music director, and the Tyberg Musical Legacy Fund has been established at Buffalo's Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies to promulgate performances of and publicity about Tyberg's long-dormant scores.

The most important result so far has been the American premiere of Tyberg's Piano Sonata No. 1 in B minor (1920) and No. 2 in F-sharp minor (1934) by New York-based Russian pianist Katya Grineva on March 1 in the sanctuary of Buffalo's Temple Beth Zion. The following day in Kleinhans Music Hall, the Philharmonic's home, Grineva made professional recordings of both sonatas for commercial release later this year. Then on June 1, she presented the New York City premiere of the Sonata No. 1 during her recital on the main stage of Carnegie Hall. After repeated listening to a private recording of Grineva's Buffalo performance, I am of the opinion that it was not only an event of historical interest but of substantial musical significance.

There's nothing revolutionary about Tyberg's style. It is richly romantic and extremely expressive, with a tonal and expressive language that might be characterized as part Schumann and part Brahms, nudged just slightly in the direction of 20th Century sonority and brilliance. But what impressed most was the memorability of the thematic material and the engrossing but easily followed way Tyberg develops that material into structurally vivid movements with satisfying, logical, complete musical thoughts.

This is dramatic but not theatrical music built from harmonic blueprints that sweep the listener's emotions along with thrillingly effective key modulations, shifting the plane of the music up or down sometimes with disarming surprise. An even greater surprise was that this spontaneity of expression retained its punch with many repeated hearings. The music dragged me into the inner workings of the creative musical process and wouldn't let me go.

Sonata No. 1 is in three movements (Allegro, Theme and Variations, and Rondo), while No. 2 is in four (Allegro, Adagio, Scherzo, Finale). This may give the architecture of No. 2 a little more complexity, yet both are eminently satisfying except, perhaps, to those who find Tyberg's music anachronistic for his era. It is, admittedly, music that seems unaware of the existence of Debussy, Stravinsky, or even Prokofieff.

My first impression is that Grineva is an ideal interpreter of these sonatas. The tape of

her live performance reveals all the poetry and nuance one could want, but there is also a great reserve of power for the surging allegros.

According to a memoir published in the German newspaper *Starpunkt* (Point of View) in 1948 by a family friend, Marion Schiffler, Tyberg was something like an absent-minded professor, walking through the streets of Abbazia, unkempt and wearing a worn-out loden coat. "He ran past his best friends," Schiffler wrote, "and, unless they physically stopped him, they could not awaken him from his musical dreams." The memoir goes on to imply that his musical imagination was turbulent and all-consuming. This kind of obsessive, churning mental process is quite evident in the music of the two piano sonatas. They are full of passionate, declamatory statements, balanced by slow movements of absorbing poetry and deceptive strength.

If family connections were responsible for Marion Schiffler's quite revelatory memoir, it was another Tyberg friendship, with the Mihich family, that saved his music for posterity.

Tyberg was very close to his mother Wanda, a concert pianist of distinction who was a colleague of Artur Schnabel. Unfortunately, she was also sublimely naive and innocent: when the occupying Nazis declared in 1943 that anyone with a Jew in the last seven generations must register, she dutifully reported that she had a Jewish great-grandfather. Marcel instantly recognized that even though he was only one-sixteenth Jewish, his days were numbered.

He sought out Dr. Milan Mihich in Fiume to whom he surrendered all his musical scores, exhorting him to take any measure necessary to preserve his music. At that time, Tyberg was also teaching harmony to Mihich's son, Enrico. When Mihich died in 1948, the responsibility for preserving Tyberg's scores passed to the young Enrico, then a medical student himself. Enrico's medical career blossomed rather quickly, and in 1957 he was invited to Buffalo, where his research work flourished. But his Tyberg trove languished for another 49 years.

Enter JoAnn Falletta, who spent some time studying Tyberg's Symphony No. 3 and declared, "It's a beautiful work, right out of the late-romantic tradition, but bearing its own individual stamp. If you think of Brahms, Reger, and the more lyrical works of Szymanowski, it should give you an inkling of what Tyberg's orchestral sounds are like. I think audiences will love it."

With the Tyberg piano sonatas launched, Falletta, Mihich, and the Tyberg Musical Legacy Fund expect that increasing publicity and income from the sonata recordings will allow

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them to float a campaign to cover the cost of copying out the parts of the Symphony No. 3 so that it can be performed and recorded.

In the meantime, Falletta is organizing chamber ensembles of Buffalo Philharmonic players, who will perform Tyberg's Piano Trio and String Sextet as early as this autumn.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Lukas Foss's presence in Buffalo made it one of the world's leading centers for new music. Now the city has become the locus for the rediscovery of a potentially important late-romantic composer. Only time will determine the effect Tyberg's music will have internationally, but its gradual re-emergence is generating plenty of excitement in Buffalo.



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