

# Preface to *Gesprochene Musik*, 1. "O-a" and 2. "Ta-tam"

Christopher Caines

Think of the great composers of German and Austrian music in the last century, and certain names spring to mind: Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill. Among those names should be Ernst Toch. That for many musicians and music lovers this is not yet so is due not to the character of Toch's music but to the curtailment of his meteoric early career by the Nazi regime, which drove the composer into exile in 1933. In the United States, where Toch eventually settled, his major achievements in orchestral, chamber, and operatic music remain less familiar than those of his American and European peers.

Toch has long been best known for *The Geographical Fugue*, which is such a repertory staple that today it seems hardly a choral singer in the United States passes through high school and college without performing the piece at least once. The work is equally popular among avocational choruses of all kinds, and professional choirs of course also sing it. Given the *Fugue's* renown, it is strange that the oddly stoic little note Toch (1950, 12) appended to the published score has apparently excited little curiosity over the years:

*"This piece is the last movement of a suite GESPROCHENE MUSIK (Spoken Music), which, from different angles, tries to produce musical effects from speech. The suite was performed and recorded at the Berlin Festival of Contemporary music [sic] in 1930. The record got lost or was destroyed, likewise the music, except the manuscript."* Ernst Toch

You might think conductors would have been tumbling over one another trying to get hold of the other movements of this suite: the existence of the manuscript for more music related to the *Fugue* has been no secret for decades. The full story is stranger still. Toch's note would lead the reader to imagine a live public performance and a commercially released live or studio recording. Yet there was no such show, nor any such album. It may come as a shock to its fans that, far from being designed as the reliable choral showpiece it has since become, the *Fugue* was not originally intended for performance by live singers at all.

As Toch indicates, the *Fugue* premiered with its original German text as *Der Fuge aus der Geographie* during the Neue Musik Berlin festival in July 1930 as part of a three-movement suite, whose first two movements

are published here for the first time. As Mark Katz (2001, 176; 2004, 99–113) recounts, the suite was one of the works debuted on the program of *Grammophonmusik* (gramophone music) as *Originalwerke für Schallplatten* (original works for record albums) shared by Toch and Hindemith, both then rising young stars of German new music, during which the composers used phonographs in various ways to play prerecorded sounds onstage. This explains why there was only ever one “record” of *Spoken Music*, not records.

Toch’s suite in performance was not played back at the speed at which it had been recorded—78 RPM—but much faster: that was the whole point. The score was conceived for the purpose of providing material for a pioneering experiment in the mechanical manipulation of sound: specifically, an investigation into the acoustical properties of speech as raw material for music that focused on how vocal sounds change when speeded up—to such an extent that, as Toch perhaps to his surprise discovered, they may be distorted beyond recognition. As the composer explained in the program notes he wrote for the concert, he sought to explore

the spoken word, and let a four-part mixed chamber choir speak specifically determined rhythms, vowels, consonants, syllables, and words, which by involving the mechanical possibilities of the recording (increasing the tempo, and the resulting pitch level) created a type of instrumental music, which leads the listener to forget that it originated from speaking. (Toch 1930, 221–22)<sup>1</sup>

It must have been a weird sight: Berlin’s hippest aficionados of avant-garde composition (as I picture them) assembled before a phonograph onstage out of whose great horn-shaped speaker piped the sounds of, well, Alvin and the Chipmunks on amphetamines chanting “Ratibor! Und der Fluss Mississippi und die Stadt Honolulu . . .” If we cannot help but conceive the results as sounding comical, or quaint, or banal to our ears today, we must try to imagine the shock of hearing human speech recorded and speeded up when that phenomenon had hardly ever been publicly heard before, and perhaps never in a musical context. By an odd turn of fate, the audience in 1930 did include at least one person fully capable of realizing the concert’s implications regarding the role that technology would play in music in decades to come: none other than the eighteen-year-old John Cage.

The *Fugue* owes its American career to Cage’s advocacy, while the oblivion to which Toch consigned the first two movements of *Gesprochene Musik* is perhaps due in part to Cage’s apparent lack of interest in them. The fledgling American composer sought out Toch at his first American

home in Pacific Palisades, California, in 1935, and obtained his permission to have the *Fugue*'s score published in Henry Cowell's seminal magazine *New Music* in that same year, with the by now iconic English-language text that Cage and/or Cowell probably created or commissioned ("Trinidad! And the big Mississippi and the town Honolulu . . ."). Although Cowell published the score as part of a selection of music composed for gramophone, Cage promoted the work with zest, considering the *Fugue* a seminal work of genius, while Toch in later years tended to dismiss it as a youthful *jeu d'esprit*. Perhaps in some sense they were both right. Seriousness and whimsicality need not be strangers.

With *Gesprochene Musik*, Toch singlehandedly invented the genre of music for speaking choir, which the composer's grandson, the writer Lawrence Weschler (1996, 2003), has described only half-jokingly as "Weimar rap." As Toch of course well knew, the use of spoken instead of or in addition to sung text has deep roots in German music, especially music for the theater. Toch, who throughout his life considered himself "but a link in the chain" of composers, was always conscious of balancing progressiveness, even prescience, in his work with an unshakeable reverence for tradition. To innovate by digging in soil tilled deeply by his predecessors was ever his method.



"The record got lost or was destroyed, likewise the music, except the manuscript," which was among the papers that Toch and his wife, Lilly, succeeded in taking with them when they fled Germany with their little daughter (Weschler 2015). So far as the staff at the Ernst Toch Society in Santa Monica is able to ascertain, the suite's first two movements had never been heard since that single 1930 concert until 2006, when they were sung to accompany a ballet I choreographed for my ensemble, Christopher Caines Dance, set to Toch's complete works for speaking choir—which, in addition to *Spoken Music*, includes only one other work, the *Valse*, Toch's bemused parody of cocktail party chatter, composed in 1960 (published by Belwin Mills in 1962 but now unfortunately out of print). The dance was one section of a program-length work entitled *Worklight* (Castelnuovo-Tedesco 2006).

In order to make our performances possible, I prepared an edition of "O-a" and "Ta-tam" from a photocopy of the composer's holograph graciously provided to me by the Toch Society from the composer's archive at UCLA. The manuscript scores are written in ink on hand-penciled rhythm staves. They are complete drafts but by no means fair

copies prepared for an engraver. Although both pieces are in one sense simple (since there is no pitch notation) and brief (each lasts only a minute or two in performance), deciphering the manuscripts posed several challenges.

In editing the music, I have been guided by the principle of making the fewest possible changes necessary to render the pieces performable. (Some details of the music that conductors and singers may want to consider in preparation for rehearsal are discussed in the notes to the scores.) I have written out the manuscripts' repeats, eliminating the use of repeat signs in the interest of ease of reading; corrected a few missing and miscalculated rests and erroneous or confusing beams and ties; and added a few obviously missing dynamic markings (such editorial additions are printed in parentheses). I have spelled out abbreviations in Toch's German expression markings and annotations and added English translations of them.

The greatest difficulty in editing this music is posed by the text. While the *Fugue's* text comprises phrases incorporating the names of cities and other geographical features from around the world, "O-a" and "Ta-tam" set expressive nonsense syllables of the composer's own devising. In effect, "O-a" concentrates on experimenting with vowel sounds, "Ta-tam" with consonants, and the *Fugue* puts both together, playing with the rhythmical possibilities of words as if discovering them anew—almost as if words themselves had only just been invented.<sup>2</sup>

I have added hyphens to connect Toch's syllables into "words" that match the notes' rhythmic groupings; without these hyphens, the text would be all but impossible to read at anything close to the rapid tempo Toch indicates (a tempo impossible for live singers that is explained by the use of the phonograph in 1930). I have also supplied three syllables missing in the text underlay, and I have made diacritics in a few repeated phrases congruent where Toch appears to have been somewhat careless with them.

Determining Toch's intentions regarding these diacritics, which crucially affect the pronunciation of his invented language, poses a particular problem. The composer's addition of breves and macrons (˘ and ˉ; short and long marks, respectively) to indicate the precise German vowel sounds he intends makes it clear that vowel quantity is important in the performance of this music. However, Toch's use of the marks is often inconsistent and occasionally even contradictory. He tends to include the diacritics when introducing a new phrase for the first time but does not bother with them after that, seeming to take for granted that his copyist or engraver would understand his intentions,

or more likely intending to supervise the copying or engraving himself. Moreover, in Toch's rather hasty handwriting, it is sometimes hard to tell the two marks apart. I have followed Toch's predominant rendering of each phrase in question, which leaves certain choices—the vowels Toch writes without diacritics—to the performers' discretion. Had Toch, whose published scores testify to his meticulous scrutiny, seen these pieces into publication, he would without question have resolved every ambiguity himself. I can only hope to have managed largely to fulfill his intentions.

Toch's insistence on precision of enunciation in this music is revealed in the text's refined details. Certain phrases, for example, are introduced only to be slightly varied right away: In "Ta-tam," the soprano answers the bass's "be-te ka-te-**be tön**" with "be-te ka-te-**be ta**," which she soon changes to "be-te ka-te-**pe ta**." Later, "gi-ta pe-to-**go tū**" is developed into "gi-ta pe-to-**gū tū**," in order to connect via "tū-gi-ta" to "ta-gi-ta." Such subtleties enhance the illusion that the singers are speaking a real language while at the same time reinforcing specific textural effects.

Carmel Raz's (2014) illuminating dissection of Toch's phonemic palette in "O-a" and "Ta-tam" underscores the intensity of Toch's preoccupation with *sound* in composing this music, and with the expressive fusion of vocal timbre and rhythm. Raz's formal analysis of the pieces as miniaturized versions of, respectively, a classical scherzo and a traditional march is also persuasive. In this regard, it may be worthwhile to recall the etymological meaning of *scherzo* (a jest), and to note that the vowel-dominant phonemic palette of "O-a" suggest strings and woodwinds, while the consonant-dominant array in "Ta-tam" suggests a marching band's percussion and brass.

Whatever interpretive choices are made, the key is to understand that, nonsense though it may be, this is in essence a German-language score, and all the syllables should be pronounced as they sound *in richtigem Hochdeutsch* (in correct High German). That said, I think that when the music is performed by singers whose first language is not German, and preceding the English version of the "Fugue," any inevitable local coloring of the sounds will not be out of keeping in a score that concludes with a celebratory ode to the joys of global geography.

I wish to note three other mysteries that only Toch himself could resolve with absolute certainty. First, in "O-a" there are lightly penciled question marks (in a hand other than Toch's, I think) over the downbeats of measures 28 and 32; I feel sure that these marks simply note the lack of text underlay for some of the voices in these two places, which I

have supplied. (Unless Toch himself had a *What was I thinking?* moment, the question marks suggest that someone other than Toch was involved in preparing a fair copy or engraved setting of the score in 1930.)

Second, “Ta–tam” has, in thick, soft colored pencils, letter S’s in small circles and squares and circled letter C’s at several points. I conjecture that, though he nowhere says so, Toch must have experimented at some point with assigning the vocal figures of the piece alternately to soloists in each choral section and to full chorus (designated S and C for *Solo* and *Chor*). I have included these markings, since the musical result of performing “Ta–tam” in this way would certainly be of interest; adopting a similar approach to “O–a” would also yield valid musical results. Toch’s indication in “Ta–tam” to the effect that the piece could *also* be performed by vocal quartet (even though he used a small chorus in 1930 and even though the score’s passage with *divisi* bass would in fact require a *quintet*) suggests I think that conductors should feel free to experiment with the forces at their disposal (and also suggests that Toch must have considered a possible life for the music in live performance after the phonograph concert).

Finally, in “O–a” there are also square marks, in the same or a similar soft–penciled hand, divided in four like windowpanes, in all four voices over the “klapp” on the downbeat of measures 33 and 35; identical windowpane marks also appear over the downbeats of measures 3 and 4 in the tenor in “Ta–tam.” Since I cannot guess what these puzzling marks might mean (and since standard music notation software does not offer such a symbol), I have not included them in the printed scores.



Despite his distinguished career as a professor of composition and composer for film, a Pulitzer Prize (in 1956, for his Symphony no. 3) and a Grammy in 1960, and an extraordinarily rich output of major scores in his last years, Toch never regained in the United States the great reputation nor, more importantly, the feeling of belonging, of social embeddedness in musical society, that had anchored him in Germany in his early career. It is heartbreaking to read that in his later years Toch sometimes referred to himself ruefully as “the world’s most forgotten composer” (Weschler 1977, xv). With a steady flow of new recordings and increasingly lively interest among musicians, especially in Germany, Toch’s music is gradually coming to enjoy the appreciation that it has long deserved. I do not doubt that one day his symphonies and string quartets in particular will be acknowledged among the masterworks of the twentieth century.

Compared to them, the two pieces offered here are admittedly of much smaller scale, yet they are no less momentous for that. First, “O–a” and “Ta–tam” are challenging and fun to perform—worth singing and hearing in their own right. They cast light on a much-loved staple of the choral repertoire: heard as Toch originally intended it as the climax of *Gesprochene Musik*, the *Fugue* feels and *sounds* different from how it does in isolation. The suite deserves to take its rightful place in the history of the radically experimental tradition in modernist music.

In its original cultural context, a particular moment in the growth of the Weimar avant-garde, the suite was specifically an experiment in the areas of speech as music, the mechanical manipulation of recorded sound, and playback as performance—fields then closely allied to the earliest forays in electronic music and the exploration of radio as an artistic medium. From the vantage point of nearly a century later, *Gesprochene Musik* is revealed as anticipating or converging with many later developments: a whole wing of vocal music devoted to playing with language beyond words, whose most salient American exponent has long been Meredith Monk (scores by Cage and Stockhausen also come to mind); popular forms that emphasize rhythmic speech over singing, such as word jazz, Jamaican dancehall, and rap/hip-hop; sampling, looping, morphing, and other technological manipulations of music that are particularly applied to the recorded voice; as well as a distinctive strain of modernist humor (think P. D. Q. Bach). Even within only the field of acoustic choral music, these two tiny pieces point toward musical territory that remains uncharted.



I thank Lawrence Weschler, who has done so much to advance the cause of his grandfather’s music, and Dina Ormenyi, at the Ernst Toch Society, for all their support and assistance. I thank conductor Kristina Boerger, who brought Toch’s music to life *con brio* in the 2006 performances for my company. I also thank the singers in those performances: Jeanmarie Lally and Laura Christian (sopranos), Silvie Jensen and Alison Taylor Cheeseman (altos), Christopher Ryan and Michael Lockley (tenors), Joshua Parillo and Staffan Liljas (basses); and the dancers: Ivanova Aguilar, Katrina Cydylo, Lauren Engleman, Jamy Hsu, Edgar Peterson, Gisela Quinteros, Michelle Vargo, Indre Vengris, and Christopher Woodrell. Many thanks to pianist-conductor Christopher Bruckman, without whose sharp eye and ear and expertise in the computer typesetting of music this edition would not have been possible. I must also thank Kristina and Chris for many insights that helped me to decipher the music and for encouraging me to strive for the strictest possible fidelity to the composer’s manuscript, elusive though

## Current Musicology

---

Toch's intentions sometimes seemed to be. Finally, I thank Carmel Raz for introducing me to recent scholarship, including her own, that illuminates this score, and for her assistance in the final proofreading and correction of this edition.

If making available the complete score of *Gesprochene Musik* plays a small part in redressing the unjust neglect that so much of Toch's music has had to endure for so long, it would gladden my heart.

### Notes

1. Quotation translated by Carmel Raz (2014).
2. For the purposes of my dance, I inserted the *Valse* between "O-a" and "Ta-tam," ending with the "Fugue." I would commend this sequence to vocal ensembles interested in performing Toch's complete music for speaking choir as a set in concert. The problem is that if the *Valse* precedes *Gesprochene Musik*, it seems to preempt the suite's developmental structure—the "discovery" of words—while the *Fugue* upstages the *Valse* if the later-composed work is performed immediately following the suite. Programming some other piece between the suite and the *Valse* or allowing for applause or even an intermission between them might also be a good solution.

### References

- Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Diana. 2006. "Toch's *Spoken Music* Rediscovered." *Vocal Area Network* June 3. Accessed March 20, 2016. [www.van.org/articles/CainesBoergerInterview20060603.htm](http://www.van.org/articles/CainesBoergerInterview20060603.htm).
- Katz, Mark. 2001. "Hindemith, Toch, and *Grammophonmusik*." *Journal of Musicological Research* 20 (2): 161–80.
- . 2004. *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Raz, Carmel. 2014. "The Lost Movements of Ernst Toch's *Gesprochene Musik*." *Current Musicology* 97: 37–60.
- Toch, Ernst. 1930. "Über meine Kantate 'Das Wasser' und meine Grammophonmusik." *Melos* 9 (5–6): 221–22.
- . 1950. Composer's note appended to *[The] Geographical Fugue*. Melville, NY: Belwin Mills.
- Weschler, Lawrence. 1977. Introduction to *The Shaping Forces in Music: An Inquiry into the Nature of Harmony, Melody, Counterpoint and Form*, by Ernst Toch, iii–xv New York: Dover.
- . 1996. "My Grandfather's Last Tale." *The Atlantic Monthly* 96. Accessed March 20, 2016. [www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96dec/toch/weschler.html](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96dec/toch/weschler.html).
- . 2003. "Popocatepetl: A Noodling Reminiscence." *The Threepenny Review* 92. Accessed March 20, 2016. [www.threepennyreview.com/samples/weschler\\_w03.html](http://www.threepennyreview.com/samples/weschler_w03.html).
- . 2015. "Ernst Toch—My Grandfather the Forgotten Composer Who Fleed the Nazis." *The Guardian*, June 18. Accessed March 20, 2016. [www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/18/ernst-toch--weimar-germany-forgotten-composer-lawrence-weschler](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/18/ernst-toch--weimar-germany-forgotten-composer-lawrence-weschler).



