

middle/ground

By *Martin Brody*

Almost by chance, I met Stefan Wolpe shortly before he died. I was finishing college but only beginning to try my hand at composing. I'd seen no scores of Wolpe's music and had heard only a few of his pieces—the catalogue of his recorded music was pretty thin at the time. But what I had heard had produced an immediate spark of recognition. There was a sense of portent in the music. It foretold solutions to not-yet-identified problems.

My connection to Wolpe was Alfred Leslie (a bona fide New York School painter who had, fortuitously, decamped from the City for a brief residency and the prospect of a large, rent-free studio at Amherst College—to him, an absurdly rural location). Alfred was a conspicuous presence at Amherst. Planning a monumental painting of the car crash that killed Frank O'Hara, he had contrived to hoist a jeep through the second floor window of his studio, right in the center of campus. (This, it turned out, wouldn't be easy—for the better part of two days, the jeep dangled incongruously, an imposing, surrealist sitework, just outside the studio window.) However, few students were interested in Leslie's work itself or his journey from abstract expressionism to neo-realism. To me his avant-garde credentials were intriguing, and we began to meet up regularly to drink beer in the student center. Like Wolpe, Alfred had been part of the 8th Street scene, and, like Wolpe, he lived in the artists' co-op building, Westbeth. When I mentioned my inchoate fascination with Wolpe's music, he suggested that I head for Westbeth immediately. Against my protests that I was a rank beginner, unprepared for an exchange with a composer of Wolpe's stature, Alfred insisted: Wolpe was already ravaged by the effects of Parkinson's disease and confined to his apartment on the Lower West Side. It would be now or never.

Several days later, I took the bus to New York. As I'd been warned, Wolpe's physical impairment was severe. Breathing, let alone speaking, was difficult—he could only squeak out a few words at a time, making an effort that clearly required enormous stamina and focus. But the fierce intellect and mordant humor were intact, and he marshaled his words to startling effect. "Tell me," he demanded, immediately (and unforgettably) after I showed him the brief pieces I'd written during a year of erratic, indecisive work: "Do you think you're responsible if you've been misled?" The request was exhilarating—cryptic and perhaps even somewhat miscellaneous, but utterly incisive and illuminating. I had to wonder how many

times he'd used the line before. Still, the question, like his music, portended other, as yet incipient questions and answers. I took the occasion to declare my independence: "I'm responsible for myself now"; but I had no idea from or to what. Wolpe died several months later.

In relating this story, I don't mean to cast myself as symbolic son to Wolpe's father figure. The Wolpe atelier was already overstuffed with artistic progeny, and I had (and would continue to have) my own mentors. Besides, Wolpe wasn't the father figure type. Telling tales about a musical patriarchy or an ascendant artistic lineage probably would have seemed like a pedestrian enterprise to him—perhaps worse, a crypto-fascist exercise. Even terminally ill, Wolpe remained more of a dada than a father figure. However, I do want to suggest the haphazard but propitious quality of my encounter with Wolpe and his question. It hardly felt like a passing of a torch or lighting of a path. But it was, explicitly, an incitement to change direction, to move—to take the proverbial leap of faith. The immediate sensation was of *transport*, a movement across a divide, provoked not only by a question, but also by an enigmatic aesthetic experience and a compelling personal encounter. But shortly after taking the plunge, I realized that I had landed in a poorly marked territory. Mapping the space has turned out to be a big part of the ensuing artistic enterprise. This task has been difficult enough that I've come to feel that the imagery of "mapping," "leaps," and "faith" itself is suspect (overblown, underdetermined), even if it captured the vertiginous feeling of weightless movement I experienced with Wolpe. "Place," itself, has turned out to be an uncertain figure. Had I leaped from "neo-classicism" to "avant-gardism"? From a hobby to a profession? From scales to sets? Was it a shift in ideology, aesthetic, identity? However pertinent, these terms, too, seem elusive, insufficient.

What I'm laboring to describe was probably not that unusual an experience for composers who came of age in the '70s. I imagine that other middle-aged, mid-career composers could describe a comparable initiation rite or "horizon experience," an indispensable but at first only dimly comprehensible meeting with unfamiliar music or a charismatic composer. But such experiences might have complicated repercussions. My deepening involvement with Wolpe's music focused my perception of the precarious position his compositional practice occupied within the larger field of cultural production and reception. Initially, this awareness wasn't all that abstract; it emerged from very basic questions: Why was there no consensus about Wolpe's importance? Why didn't more people want to write, play, and listen to music like Wolpe's?

The concrete questions, however, led to more abstract and generalized answers—and then on to even more general but inescapable questions. Looking back, I would now say that Babbitt's discussion of "contextuality"

provided the most useful model of the situation.¹ But Babbitt's term and his description of a shift in compositional procedures—away from the communal and toward more self-referential aspects of music—only complicated matters. “Contextuality” named a generalized condition and a precarious situation, a high-stakes game with serious risks (unintelligibility, incoherence, solipsism)—not a clearly defined place or a stable practice.

For Wolpe, whose compositional maturation occurred so shortly after the emancipation of the dissonance, taking on the risks of contextuality might seem inevitable and even heroic. The music of his that I first encountered engaged the problematic of self-referentiality head-on, postulating an expressively powerful, internally coherent, and comprehensively elaborated musical “universe.” In its specificity and its interrelatedness with other forms of cultural production, it did indeed portend a sense of place.

There was, of course, a proliferation of such places during the postwar period (think of *Le marteau sans maître*, *Williams Mix*, *Zeitmasse*, the Carter Double Concerto, Coleman's *Shape of Jazz to Come*, the Barraqué Sonata . . .). But which of these could a fledgling composer inhabit in 1971? At the time of my initiation to Wolpe, the structuralist part of the enterprise had, of course, come into its own in academe, but the utopianism and the broader cultural and ideological frameworks were largely obscured. And by then, the cultural milieu had begun to shift in ways that Wolpe could not have anticipated and would not live to see. By the early '70s, to be drawn into a new “musical world” by the force of an aesthetic or personal encounter might have felt like a leap, but not exactly from one place to another. You didn't have to leave the old place behind; the conversion experience wasn't necessarily absolute. Engaging with the risks and opportunities of contextuality decidedly did not seem inevitable or heroic. By then (*already* then, apparently the heyday of the New Left), the lynchpins of what we now summarily call postmodernism had fallen into place. We had already begun to grapple with our unstable, hybrid identity categories, our post-analytic epistemologies and post-historical politics, our global culture and global capitalism—even if the analytical vocabulary for analyzing such things was still rudimentary. Already, metaphors of physical topography didn't work very well to describe the mutating, virtual spaces in which we lived our mercurial musical lives and declared our engagement with, or allegiances to, different kinds of music or modes of musical experience.

From my youthful point of view, there was a palpable tension between a (neomodernist) impulse to stake a claim to what still seemed a vital ideology and musical idiom, and an incipient (postmodern) awareness that the ideology was disintegrating and that the idiom could (even more, *should*) not be privileged. The compositional practice and *modus vivendi* inscribed

in Wolpe's music, his writing, and his still-robust presence at a time of grave illness could be comprehensively admired but not entirely recuperated—certainly not generalized into a common practice.

Still, you have to start somewhere—and, more to the point, get somewhere. However difficult it may be to escape the feeling (and imagery) of being multiply located and of having no fixed position, it seems crucial to try—to stake a claim to a position. And music, which at least begins and ends but can move from beginning to ending in so many different ways, seems an especially appropriate medium for exploring paradoxes of cultural location and dislocation. And so, I'll return briefly to my encounter with Wolpe's music, to say a bit more about how the issues of responsibility and direction that he raised have come back to haunt me. It was difficult to chart the area that Wolpe had led me to, but, in exploring it, I eventually reached what seemed to be a border—and an opening into a different place.

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The initial effect of Wolpe's stunning question has been re-sparked for me countless times in experiencing the unsettling events of his music. The music's constantly morphing spatial configurations and rude gestures (set off by compulsively measured, ametrical, microseconds of silence, so often shorter than an intake of breath, more like the breathless onset of a thought) provided an ever-varied, entirely pleasurable, aestheticized electric jolt. The music not only incited a jump into something new and not yet very intelligible, it even seemed to be about jumping—leaping from one stark gesture to another, with no mediating transitions. The effect was (is) magically fresh in each reiteration; and the notes themselves were (are) full of hints about how my own music might go. The first pieces that I wrote that seemed to have any clear intention took off from compositional ideas in Wolpe's *Form* (for piano), *Chamber Piece No. 1*, and his strangely magisterial essay entitled "Thinking Twice." In these, I found ideas about spatially projecting unordered pitch-class sets, linking intervals with musical behavior, modes of expanding and contracting the pitch-class field, and so on. More generally, though, Wolpe's gestures seemed to be saying: *No uncritical thinking*. This was a provocation: I had set out composing (like many others, I suppose) as a knee-jerk neoclassicist, guided (misled?) by intuitions of taste and sensibility. It took a while for me to feel the force of an aesthetic problem, to understand musical expression in terms of compositional method—more generally, to sense that charting new ways to interconnect musical details, design, "language," and ethos could be transporting (or, conversely, to experience the feeling of crashing and burning when these things were out of sync). I sensed only

gradually, for example, that there might be an incongruity between the distinctively nontonal sounds to which I was drawn and the tonal voice-leading techniques and phrase shapes to which I was habituated. (*Tell me, do you think you're responsible if you've been misled?*) Wolpe's disjunct gestures, expanding and contracting in time and space, broke through the cautious contrapuntal configurations of my fledgling efforts, dislodging already complacent, if immature, compositional habits.

And so, the critical corollary: *No halfway solutions*. I may have read that Schoenberg was dead, but for me there was little experiential charge to (or critical perspective on) Boulez's severe polemic until I experienced the electricity of Wolpe. The music affirmed its own self-referential principals, rejecting any and all attempts to jerry-rig a bridge to tonality. It distanced itself as much from "idea" as from "style." (In this respect, too, it constituted a "place" with no access roads. You had to take a leap to get to it.) You would find here no effort to recuperate tonal norms through twelve-tone properties, nor any ad hoc forms of neoclassicism. Wolpe found any number of ways to describe positively the method that emerged from these negations, but his most succinct phrase was "lost gradualness." His constantly shape-changing pitch-class collections generated no structural bass lines, no set hierarchies or fixed-order properties, no balanced phrasing, no harmonic rhythm, no recovery of classical forms, no pretty consonances resonating through the foreground flurry of activity—in short, *no middleground* mediating between a hyperactive musical surface and an often sluggish, inert, or erratically changing pitch-structural background.

Of course, Wolpe's was not the only music that influenced me, but it provided the most efficacious models during the years that I was beginning to find myself, compositionally speaking. Over time, however, the integration of detail, design, language, and ethos that I had modeled on Wolpe began to unravel. I hadn't become disenchanted with his music, but I struggled, especially with what I had come to think of as the signature aspect of his musical universe: the elided middleground. I experimented with unsystematic voice-leading techniques, chord voicings, and doublings that I had previously cast off in favor of Wolpe's systemic discontinuities. There was no new revelation or conversion experience to precipitate the change—no decision to make an aesthetic overhaul. Rather, I felt a strong, unauthorized urge to reassert a mediating level between the active, mercurial musical surfaces of my music and its static background structures. The impulse to regain gradualness was baffling but ineluctable.

Eventually, though, I did come to some terms with the compulsion; again, Wolpe provided a clue. I had already realized that the music of his that I loved most and that had moved me the furthest from where I started

was rooted in radical cultural politics—i.e., his experiences with the Berlin dada movement, the Novembergruppe, and the Bauhaus, as well as his brutal, political exile. However, while the flames of avant-garde aspiration may have been rekindled in the '60s, they had gone cold again by the end of the Reagan-Thatcher and Bush (*père*) era. By then, Wolpe's evocation of an alternative world and the utopianism it foreshadowed seemed remote.

I became aware of this while writing a chamber opera based on Mikhail Bulgakov's *Heart of a Dog*, a wild novella satirizing the Russian Revolution and its failed project of radical social and subjective transformation. The story provided me with characters that embodied radically different subject positions—Bolshevik revolutionaries, *ancien régime* reactionaries, and an antihero narrator, a dog turned human and back again by a Frankensteinian scientist. Only midway through writing it did I realize that I had been drawn to Bulgakov's story at least in part to examine my own compositional situation. Adapting Bulgakov provided a way to "sound out" the question of cognitive and social transformation through music, in parallel play with the novella's satire of scientific socialism. In the opera, the story of a failed experiment in individual and collective transformation was linked to the gradual liquidation of compositional materials and procedures that for years I had called my own—now identified with operatic characters who perpetrated and suffered the experiment.

Giving away (to my characters) what I had thought of as my own seemed appropriate, theatrically and symbolically, but it left me in a difficult place—briefly, it left me nowhere, compositionally speaking. (I hadn't anticipated the opera's outcome, so I wasn't prepared to find an alternative.) Fortunately, though, some of my other characters gave me their music, as if in exchange. That is, I could let go of one mode of musical production by embodying it in my characters; but I could also experiment and identify with other compositional modes through a complementary process, one of allowing a character to suggest the musical idiom. But, just as the story provided no winners, no triumphant outcome, the opera privileged none of the characters' music. Its more conventionally continuous music was as ironic and unsettled as the parodied avant-garde discontinuities of its revolutionaries.

The outcome of *Heart of a Dog* (opera and novella) was bleak. Since writing it, I've been searching for less ironically charged attitudes toward musical continuity—and also an alternative to operatic impersonation or pastiche. In a very broad sense, my project has slowly moved from one of asserting a fixed contextualist aesthetic to one of projecting a satiric struggle between distinct musical idioms to one of musically enacting the process of searching for a stable artistic "place." The formal and narrative

dimensions of the music seem to follow. However, I continue to feel that any integration that ensues should incorporate an awareness of its own provisionality. I now see the problem in terms of steering a path between the stark contingencies of Wolpe's "high" contextuality and the hasty triumphalism of some of the recent attempts to reclaim musical universals, tonal or otherwise.

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I suppose that there's no need to emphasize the provisionality and open-endedness of these comments themselves. To say that I've left out just about everything is simply to acknowledge how multifaceted and unyielding the compositional process is. But however tentative or incomplete the answers may be, it still seems urgent to pose the questions and define the project. In this regard, it now seems to me crucial to knock through the barrier between discussions of compositional "technique," "craft," or "expression" and of constructed (musical) identities and unstable cultural formations. However fragile the connections that emerge, Wolpe's own insistent question and his oracular music still seem pertinent. It still seems meaningful to ask ourselves if we're being responsible, if we've been misled.

Note

1. Babbitt discusses "contextuality" most explicitly in the last of his Madison lectures, but the theme runs through much of his writing. See the final chapter in Babbitt 1987.

Reference

Babbitt, Milton. 1987. *Words About Music*. Edited by Stephen Dembski and Joseph Straus. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.