

Questions about Richard Fuchs

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On May 9, 2008 The New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Kenneth Young, performed the Symphonic Movement in f minor by the German Jewish refugee composer, Richard Fuchs (1887-1947), as part of a “Made in New Zealand” concert in the Wellington Town Hall. Why was this work played for the first time 60 years after the composer’s death? Why was Richard Fuchs totally unknown both in New Zealand, where he lived the last years of his life, and in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he was born and lived for fifty years before finding refuge in New Zealand, and where some of his music was performed in the 1930s?

This Symphonic Movement is a rich, colourful, late romantic work, using a very large orchestra. It starts with a Beethoven like chord and develops into music reminiscent of Mahler. A triumphal opening section resolves into a nostalgic passage, then a turbulent interlude leads into beautiful, haunting wind solos interspersed with organ like full orchestral chords. The opening section returns in a subdued mood and finally it concludes the movement as it began, suggesting the inevitability of fate. On first hearing, one gets the impression that there is too much music, there are too many notes, too many ideas, but this was meant to be the first movement of a vast, four-movement symphony. The last

movement of the symphony was left incomplete. Some of these themes, ideas, would have been developed in the rest of the work. This piece was written in 1943-44, at a time when Richard Fuchs, an architect as well as a composer, was unemployed, and greatly concerned about being able to provide for his family. The Symphonic Movement says a lot about his commitment as a composer. He wrote it in New Zealand in the middle of the war, where he was regarded as an enemy alien, even though he himself was a victim of this same enemy. He was cut off from his cultural roots, and composed this huge orchestral work in a country with no symphony orchestra.

Richard Fuchs arrived in New Zealand in 1939. He was a prominent architect in Karlsruhe, Germany, before the Nazis came to power. When after 1933, he could no longer practice his profession, he devoted his time to his main passion, music and composition. In the wake of the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938, he was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp. He was only released when he received his entry permit to New Zealand. He arrived with his family in New Zealand in 1939 and brought with him his portfolio of major compositions. These included two symphonies, one of which was unfinished, a string quartet, a piano quintet, a work for a wind octet, songs, some with piano accompaniment, others accompanied by a full orchestra. Arguably, he was at the time the most accomplished composer living in New Zealand. In 1939 Douglas Lilburn, the one New Zealand composer of the next generation to attain international recognition, was still a 23 year old student at the Royal School of Music in London.

Fuchs was confident of the merit of his compositions. He had sent his 1933 Symphony in C minor to Felix Weingartner, the leading conductor in

Vienna, and to Wilhelm Furtwangler, the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. Furtwangler was too busy to look at it, asked Fuchs to send it to him again during his break from conducting, but Weingartner was impressed:

*'I have your score and looked through it. I am really astounded that you, not a professional musician, are so skilled technically.' ... 'Your work deserves recognition but this is not the time for it.'*¹

The Symphony was written for a large orchestra that included even a Wagner tuba. And indeed, though Fuchs was not a professional musician, he was a very good pianist who could read the scores of Wagner operas at sight, and already had an impressive number of compositions to his name. By the time he wrote that symphony, his works included a string quartet, a piano quintet and some lieder.

Notable among the compositions he brought with him to New Zealand were works for voice and orchestra. *Hymnus an Gott* (Chasidic Song) for tenor, organ and string orchestra was performed with the Mannheim Community Orchestra (Instrumentalgemeinschaft) at a concert in the main synagogue of Karlsruhe on 28 January 1934, *Frühling*, a setting of 3 poems by Arnold Holz for soprano, organ and orchestra, was included in a programme of the Frankfurt by the Jüdische Kulturbund orchestra, with Emmy Joseph, soprano, as soloist, conducted by Wilhelm Steinberg². Steinberg later became the conductor of the newly established Palestine Philharmonic, assistant to Toscanini, and for many years musical director of the Pittsburg Symphony Orchestra. But Fuchs took special pride in *Vom Jüdischen Schicksal* (The Jewish Fate), four songs, for

¹ Turnbull Library, Manuscripts collection, Fuchs, Richard (Dr) 1887-1947: Papers Inward correspondence MS-Papers-6663-1 & 6663-02 Weingartner's letter dated Basel, 3/1/34

² 4 April 1935

baritone, soprano, choir and orchestra, three of them set to text by the eminent German Jewish poet, Karl Wolfskehl, who coincidentally had also found refuge in New Zealand, and the fourth to a poem by Susskind of Trimberg, the Jewish medieval troubadour. Like Mahler, Richard Fuchs found expression through the combination of voice and orchestra. He entered *Vom Jüdischen Schicksal* in a competition organised by the *Jüdische Kulturbund in Deutschland* (Jewish cultural League in Germany). Jews were not allowed to perform music by German composers. The Nazis believed that Jews exerted a corrupting influence on German culture. Hans Hinkel, the Reich Culture Governor, said that '(Jews) may work unhindered so long as they restrict themselves to the cultivation of Jewish artistic and cultural life.'³ The object of the competition was to motivate Jewish musicians to compose works on Jewish themes. The question of what was Jewish music, or indeed, whether there was such a thing as Jewish music, was widely debated.

The competition had five categories: a short orchestral work, a choral work with orchestra, a choral work for a youth choir, a song cycle and a cycle of songs for a small choir. The competition had an extraordinary response; a panel of 12 judges had 123 submissions to assess.⁴ The standard that they set was so rigorous, that in two out of the five categories there were no prizes awarded, as the submissions were not considered good enough. Of the other three, Richard Fuchs's composition won the first prize in the choral and orchestral section. It was awarded the highest number of marks of any of the entries in all the sections. This was all the more remarkable, as Richard Fuchs was - outside his hometown Karlsruhe – a little known composer, whereas the winners of the

³ The Inextinguishable Symphony, *Martin Goldsmith*, New York 2000. p. 123

⁴ Friedrich Voit, *Jewish Fates: Richard Fuchs and Karl Wolfskehl*

other categories, Werner Seelig-Bass of Berlin, and Hugo Adler of Mannheim were both highly accomplished and well known musicians and choir masters. Winning this prize was a recognition of Fuchs's skills and talent as a composer. Sadly, though the work was rehearsed for a concert, the Nazi authorities refused permission for its performance, so this substantial work has never been heard. Perhaps Wolfskehl's powerful words, enhanced by Fuchs's moving music, were more than the Nazis could accept. Karl Wolfskehl's poems from his collection, *Die Stimme Spricht* (The Voice Speaks) offered exactly the kind of hope that Jewish audiences craved:

'Ever driven forth and scourged with hate
What fearful right have ye to take our tears?
Crouching all day to prey upon our fears?
And watch us scowling by night always terror torn!
To wailing, oath and prayers, ye, ye gave us only scorn:
Nothing we heard but hatred, shrieking cry, -
*And still we do not die*⁵

Karl Wolfskehl's collection *Die Stimme Spricht* (The Voice Speaks) was the response in poetry of a German Jew to the events of 1933⁶. In that year Hitler and the Nazi party took office and almost immediately began to implement a programme to disenfranchise Jews and strip them of their rights as

⁵ Turnbull Library, Manuscripts collection, Fuchs, Richard (Dr) 1887-1947: Papers regarding Vom jüdischen Schicksal 1936-37 MS-Papers-6663-10. A rather free translation by Alan Mulgan, probably based on Richard Fuchs's own literal translation. The original poems are from the collection Karl Wolfskehl *Die Stimme Spricht*.

⁶ Karl Wolfskehl, *Die Stimme Spricht / 1933: A Poem Sequence*, translated by Carol North Valhope and Ernst Morwitz, Schocken Books, New York, 1947, Introduction

citizens of the German nation. With the memory of the Holocaust fading, Fuchs's *Vom Jüdischen Schicksal* deserves a performance as a reminder of the tragedy of German Jewry.

Over the years, Fuchs chose poems to set to music that were significant to him and his times. In 1938 he set T. S. Eliot's *Song for Simeon* to music. It is a work for a bass and orchestra. It contains the words

Grant us thy peace.

I have walked many years in this city,

Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,

Have given and taken honour and ease.

There went never any rejected from my door.

Who shall remember my house, where shall live my

Children's children

When the time of sorrow is come?

They will take to the goat's path, and the fox's home,

Fleeing from the foreign faces and foreign words.⁷

Fuchs, about to relinquish his comfortable if precarious wealthy middle class life in Germany, could well have felt that Eliot wrote the poem for him personally. In exile in New Zealand, in the middle of the war, he set to music two poems by English War Poets, Rupert Brooke's *Dust*, and Wilfrid Gibson's

⁷ T.S Eliot (1936) *Collected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber

Lament. These might have recalled his experiences as a war artist during the First World War on the German side of the Western Front.

Both as an architect and as a composer, Richard Fuchs was steeped in the German romantic tradition. When one of the buildings in Karlsruhe that he had designed, a quaint ornate building, combining the traditional and the modern, was unveiled, the Nazi official described it as a true example of German architecture, little knowing that the architect was a despised Jew, no longer regarded as German. Listening to Fuchs's music you hear echoes of Richard Strauss, Mahler, and even Schoenberg, but Fuchs has his own voice. His music has a rich texture, but avoiding virtuosity, notably in the piano parts, perhaps reflecting Fuchs's own limitations as a pianist. Energetic, almost manic passages are interspersed with sad, melancholic movements and interludes, and the strong melodic lines are often fragmented, suggesting a sense of turbulence and unease. *Heitere Musik (Cheerful Music): Octet for Wind Instruments (1933)* is light hearted serenade music, but the discords in it suggest familiarity with the music of Schoenberg. The two quartets (1932 & 1945), the two piano quintets (1931 & 1941) reflect the world of Mahler and Richard Strauss, yet the deeply sad long slow movement of the 1945 string quartet can only be compared with Shostakovich, and as to the ambitious fugue of the 1941 piano quintet, who else would have attempted to write something like that in the 1940s.

When Fuchs arrived in New Zealand he had hopes of making a living, or at least supplementing his living, as a composer. On their way to New Zealand the Fuchs family stopped off in England early in 1939⁸ and Fuchs had the opportunity to show his music to Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacobs.

⁸ The Fuchs family left Germany on December 26, 1938 and arrived in New Zealand on April 17, 1939. On their way they spent a few weeks in England.

Both wrote recommendations, which they hoped would help Fuchs get recognition as a musician in his new country. With the upcoming 1940 celebrations of the proclamation of British sovereignty and the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi there was an awakening of interest in music, including plans to establish a symphony orchestra, but the outbreak of the war put all such plans on hold. When the National Orchestra was eventually founded in 1946 Fuchs sent his music to its first conductor, Anderson Tyrer, but clearly Tyrer didn't take much trouble reading the music, he didn't even bother to get the name of the composer right in his reply to him.

'Dear Dr Carl (sic) Fuchs,

*I have looked through the enclosed composition and found it very interesting.'*⁹

No suggestion that the pieces may be worth playing by the newly formed orchestra, not a word of encouragement. The prospect of any performance of Fuchs's orchestral works was buried by polite indifference.

Remarkably, Fuchs was not discouraged. He kept composing substantial works. As well as the Symphony in f minor, he wrote songs, some with piano accompaniment, some with orchestra, a piano quintet and a string quartet, and a token of his loyalty to his newly adopted country, *Onward*, a march for the New Zealand Air Force Band. As far as we know, only *Lament*, set to the words of Wilfrid Gibson, and his string quartet were ever performed, the one sung by Mollie Atkinson, a well known mezzo-soprano, the other played by the Ellwood Quartet in a concert in Christchurch.

⁹ Turnbull Library, Manuscripts collection, Fuchs, Richard (Dr) 1887-1947

So why was Richard Fuchs not better known, more appreciated? The 1940s was not a fertile period for the creative arts in New Zealand. Fuchs, architect during the day, played chamber music in his spare time with some of the leading musicians living in Wellington. These included Frederick Page, pianist, pioneer of the performance of the music of the major composers of the twentieth century, and later, founding Professor of Music at Victoria University, Hilde Cohn, a pianist heard regularly in concerts and broadcasts, and her husband, the violinist Gustav, the cellist Marie Vanderwart, the organist Clement Howes, and Kato Kurzweil, the Hungarian pianist and one of the foremost piano teachers in Wellington. Yet, when he urged the newly formed Chamber Music Society to include in its programme his recent String Quartet and his Piano Quintet, which he wrote a couple of years after settling in New Zealand, they turned him down. In the history of the Chamber Music John Thomson recorded that ‘among the musicians ... there was even a composer, a Dr. Richard Fuchs.’ He quoted Ray Gilbert (married to a European refugee and later a member of the Chamber Music Society Committee) “(Richard Fuchs) was a clever fellow, gentle, very much an old-style architect by profession. He played the piano beautifully and was always composing music and songs – his music was romantic, very Straussian. He was always very frustrated because nobody was interested much in his sentimental music.” Not even, alas, the newly formed Wellington Chamber Music Society.”¹⁰

“Sentimental” was certainly not an apt description of the serious large-scale works of Richard Fuchs. He wrote music in the German romantic tradition, a tradition that was discredited by its association with the Nazis. There

¹⁰ John Mansfield Thomson, *Into a New Key*, Wellington 1985, P.23

was also an entrenched suspicion of those heavy German composers, Bruckner and Mahler, whose music was seldom performed in Britain and was not highly regarded¹¹. And there was the colonial disdain for any music that did not bear the stamp of approval of the English musical establishment. Douglas Lilburn, reacting at the time to this dependence on English approval, told young New Zealand composers that ‘When we become more conscious of our own needs and begin to produce an art that will satisfy these we can cut some of the apron-strings that bind us to an older world and begin to love that richer life of an adult nation.’¹² The pity of it was that Richard Fuchs, who as a Jewish composer faced some of the same issues, was not asked to contribute to the discussion of what kind of music should be written in a country striving for its own identity. As a Jew he had to address the similar question of what was Jewish music when his German cultural roots were denied to him. Perhaps Frank Sargeson’s comments on the great German poet, Karl Wolfskehl, whom he got to know in Auckland, applied to some degree to Fuchs and his relation to the New Zealand musical scene. ‘There were times with Karl Wolfskehl when I could feel myself overpowered, weighed down by so much civilization.’ Conversations with Karl Wolfskehl took something from his identity as a New Zealand writer.¹³ Richard Fuchs might also have carried the weight of too much civilization.

Over the years Richard Fuchs was largely forgotten. In the 1960s Rosemary Gordon and Gerald Christeller broadcast some of his songs, but otherwise his large oeuvre languished in the Turnbull Library. Then in 2006,

¹¹ See Ralph Hill,, Editor, *The Symphony*, (1949) Hammondsworth, U.K., Penguin, Chapter 16, Geoffrey Sharp, *Mahler* p.297 ff

¹² Douglas Lilburn, *A search for tradition: A talk given at the first Cambridge Summer School of Music, January 1946*, Alexander Turnbull Library EndowmentTrust, Wellington, 1984

¹³ Sargeson, Frank (1975) *More than Enough*, Wellington, A. H. & A. W. Reed, p. 111

looking for something quite different, I came across his papers and thought that here was something that shed light on the encounter of the European immigrants and New Zealand society, a subject I was interested in as a writer. I read the papers in the collection and looked through the music written out in the meticulous handwriting of a pedantic architect. Fuchs's scores give a glimpse of the personality of the man who wrote them, dedicated, careful, proud of his work, someone deserving of recognition.

I wrote an extended essay about Richard Fuchs.¹⁴ I got in touch with the Karlsruhe Hochschule für Musik, where I assumed that Richard Fuchs studied. Their records were destroyed during the war, but they were interested in Richard Fuchs, a Karlsruhe émigré composer and organised a concert of some of his music. And then one thing followed another. Danny Mulheron, Richard Fuchs's grandson, a filmmaker, decided to take this opportunity to make a documentary film about his grandfather, based on my writing. This was released under the title *The Third Richard*¹⁵. He was also instrumental in arranging concerts of Richard Fuchs's music, first in Government House and later at the Raye Friedman Arts Centre in Auckland. So 60 years after the death of Richard Fuchs his music, that he had never heard performed in his lifetime, was finally brought to life.

Richard Fuchs, a composer, architect, and European intellectual, lived in the wrong place, in the wrong time. He was essentially a late romantic German composer, whose music was dismissed as Jewish music in his homeland. He was too German for New Zealand, his adopted country with its entrenched British tradition, too traditional for those seeking the latest new *avant-garde*

¹⁴ Sedley, Steven, *Richard Fuchs: Composer / Architect*, Crescendo, No 77, August 2007, p.77 ff.

¹⁵ Richard Fuchs Archives http://www.richardfuchs.org.nz/danny_mulheron.php

trends from other parts of the world. He was even too German for the orthodox Jews of Wellington.

Richard Fuchs gave a talk to the British Music Society on Mahler. He wrote in his notes:

Mahler was a Jew (racially, not by religious membership) who deeply felt the spiritual need to be at home somewhere on this planet or in the universe. Mahler's soul longed for a real "home" inside his people and nation, which for him was of course, the German people.¹⁶

Richard Fuchs became a naturalised New Zealander, and he was very proud of that, but culturally he never found his real home here in these islands distant from his German roots.

¹⁶ Richard Fuchs papers in the possession of the family.