

Ernst KRENEK

PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

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ERNST KRENEK AT THE PIANO: AN INTRODUCTION

by Peter Tregear

Ernst Krenek was born on 23 August 1900 in Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and grew up in a house that overlooked the original gravesites of Beethoven and Schubert. His parents hailed from Čáslav, in what was then Bohemia, but had moved to the city when his father, an officer in the commissary corps of the Imperial Austro-Hungarian Army, had received a posting there. Vienna, the self-styled 'City of Music', considered itself to be the well-spring of a musical tradition synonymous with the core values of western classical music, and so it was no matter that neither of Krenek's parents was a practising musician of any stature: Ernst was exposed to music – and lots of it – from a very young age. Later in life he recalled with wonder the fact that 'walking along the paths that Beethoven had walked, or shopping in the house in which Mozart had written "Don Giovanni", or going to a movie across the street from where Schubert was born, belonged to the routine experiences of my childhood'.¹

As befitting an officer's son, Krenek received formal musical instruction from a young age, in particular piano lessons and instruction in music theory. The existence of a well-stocked music hire library in the city enabled him to become, by his mid-teens, acquainted with the entire standard Classical and Romantic piano literature of the day. His formal schooling coincidentally introduced Krenek to the literature of classical antiquity and helped ensure that his appreciation of this music would be closely associated in his own mind with his appreciation of western history and classical culture more generally.

Experiments with composition also started at a young age and in 1916, after having presented his piano teacher with a draft score of a piano concerto and a suite for piano solo, Krenek was encouraged to sit the entrance examination for the Imperial and Royal Academy for Music and the Performing Arts. He was offered a place and for the next two years he would attend secondary school in the morning and classes in the Academy in the evening. But the influence of his composition teacher, Franz Schreker (1878–1934), and the broader impact of the onset of the First World War, would start to unsettle Krenek's to-date apparently comfortable assimilation into a Viennese cultural mainstream.

¹ Krenek, memoirs, published in German as *Im Atem der Zeit: Erinnerungen an die Moderne*, trans. Friedrich Saathen and Sabine Schulte, Braumüller Literaturverlag, Vienna, 1998. This and subsequent quotations are taken from the English original, which is in preparation from Toccata Press.

Although he was drilled in traditional compositional disciplines such as counterpoint, the underlying aesthetic principles Schreker conveyed were 'delineated by the landmarks set up by Debussy, Max Reger, Richard Strauss, and perhaps Scriabin',² which, like Schreker's own music, seemed to speak more of, and to, a mood of *fin-de-siècle* literary and social decadence, than to 'classical' Viennese values.

Initially the war had little effect upon his daily life, but by 1916 Vienna started to be hit by the rationing of basic goods and by the increasing presence of the wounded. Krenek was called up for military duty only in 1918 and was thus lucky to avoid front-line service. Nevertheless, his brief experience of army life was enough to convey a lasting impression of a 'gigantic, wasteful and gruesome bureaucratic enterprise of unheard-of dimensions and futility'.³ In such a mood, his simultaneous discovery of Karl Kraus' satirical journal *Die Fackel* had a profound impact. In it, Kraus had prominently and courageously opposed Vienna's uncritical endorsement of the war. But his diagnosis extended far beyond the uncovering of a pervasive recklessness with the truth and other journalistic excesses. He decried the degrading of basic literary standards more generally, insisting that creative artists should reassert a fidelity to principles of form and content applicable to their chosen medium.

For Arnold Schoenberg, Kraus' views were crucial in encouraging him to explore ways of organising musical material that would eventually lead to his 'discovery' of the so-called twelve-tone technique. Since Krenek was of a younger generation, the appropriate creative response was less clear, especially when the dismal course of the war precipitated the total collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and political, economic, cultural and humanitarian crises followed in its wake. The first of his eventual seven piano sonatas dates from this time and certainly betrays an affinity with a Schreker-influenced neo-Romantic musical style, but it also demonstrates an emerging 'neo-Classical' concern with articulating more abstract musical structures. This conscious exploration of the boundaries between subjective freedom and objective authority was to become a defining characteristic of his music. More immediately, it also reflected something of the character of post-War Vienna.

Such challenges temporarily dissipated when, in 1920, Schreker was invited to become the director of the Staatliche akademische Hochschule für Musik in Berlin and bring his composition class with him. Krenek followed him there, but he was to find Berlin refreshingly free of the introspective insecurities of his home town, and that in turn encouraged him decisively to break with his teacher and adopt a more aggressively modern style. Nevertheless, signs of Schreker's influence, especially his

² Krenek, 'Circling My Horizon', in *Horizons Circled: Reflections on My Music*, with contributions by Will Ogdon and John Stewart, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974, p. 20.

³ Krenek, memoirs.

willingness to absorb the absurd, the ironic, and the disruptive in his music, were to remain with Krenek for the rest of his life.

In Berlin Krenek made the acquaintance of many of the leading composers in Berlin, including Artur Schnabel, Eduard Erdmann, Ferruccio Busoni and Kurt Weill. Of these, the most important in terms of Krenek's subsequent compositional development was to be Erdmann, who was an impressive concert pianist as well as a composer. Krenek later recalled that it was through Erdmann that he

learned for the first time to look at music from purely musical vantage points and to discuss and analyze it in a truly professional matter-of-fact manner instead of watching it from the outside and evaluating it in the vague terms of pleasantness of sound, as was Schreker's habit. I dare say that practically the whole of my musical philosophy is due to my intercourse with Erdmann, at least the groundwork for it was laid in those three winters in Berlin, when I used to see him about once or twice every week. The most important thing he did to me and for me was introducing me to Franz Schubert, of whom I so far had thought as a genial fellow who had written lots of somewhat old-fashioned songs, to which I greatly preferred the expressively more ostentatious and idiomatically more spicy works of Hugo Wolf, and plenty of other music that I did not estimate very highly because it seemed not much sophisticated, too folksy and rather banal. When Erdmann started praising Schubert beyond everything and I made some remark as to his 'corny' treatment of the text in regard to strong emotional expression, I was amazed at Erdmann's answering that he would not agree with that in the first place, but above all had not considered the text in the least, but wanted the songs to be looked at as pure music, in which the voice part could just as well be played on a clarinet or some other instrument. It had never occurred to my mind that one could contemplate a song from this angle, trained as I was to judge music with words according to Schreker's operatic standards, and I was wondering what possibly could be left of good old Schubert's musical inspiration, if one discarded the expressive interpretation of the poetry, which I thought was modest enough. Today I must admit that my ignorance of musical values was truly miraculous, considering that I had occupied myself with music for fourteen years. I will be forever grateful to Erdmann that he with untiring enthusiasm worked with me through the complete volumes of Schubert's songs in the fine Breitkopf and Härtel original edition. This enthusiasm I have fortunately inherited, and nothing better can happen to me than playing Schubert's songs for somebody who is susceptible to the incredible wealth of stunning deeds in the art of composition as laid down in those precious volumes. I thoroughly agree with Erdmann that for teaching the basic principles of composition one would hardly need more than the 600 songs of Franz Schubert. It was only then that I really understood and learned how to build and balance phrases, how to distribute points of emphasis and how to coordinate harmony and meter, what expansion and contraction meant, how all the details

of a musical formation were interdependent and what musical logic was. And all that was done not in pedantically systematizing technical devices, but presented with exuberant enjoyment and keenest delight. Ever since I have remained faithful to Schubert, turning to him whenever I need enlightenment, encouragement or plain joy and happiness.⁴

Many of Krenek's compositions for the piano at this time owe their existence to Erdmann, including Krenek's completion of the two unfinished movements to **Schubert's Piano Sonata in C major, D840** [13]–[16]. Schubert had apparently abandoned the work in April 1825 after completing the first two movements in full, the trio section of the third movement, and the first 272 bars of the finale. Krenek did not think himself too presumptuous in taking on this task

for in both [unfinished] movements the thematic material was completely established, so that I did not pretend that Schubert was still composing by proxy as it were, but I had only to use my knowledge of, and feeling for, Schubert's style and technique in order to supply what he might have done himself. I think I did a fairly creditable job, although the last movement might have grown much longer at Schubert's hands than it did at mine.⁵

This increasing understanding of, and appreciation for, Schubert's careful control of musical material helped encourage Krenek towards a similar creative path to that taken by Schoenberg and, by the early 1930s, explore twelve-tone composition. Like Schoenberg, his decision was influenced by a growing sense of creative isolation, even as he enjoyed the fame and financial security that came with the success of his opera *Jonny spielt auf* (1926). This growing sense of being constitutionally 'out of step' with the world around him was to be compounded by the Wall Street Crash in 1929, the effects of which were to reverberate across financial institutions, industrial centres and the parliaments of Europe. For the fledgling Austrian Republic (to which Krenek had by this time returned), as for the Weimar Republic in Germany, political life seemed to move inexorably from parliament to the street.

Deeply occupied by the question of how a composer might adequately respond to these profoundly unsettling circumstances, Krenek considered giving up composing altogether. A lengthy correspondence about such concerns with the critic and social philosopher Theodor Adorno at this time helped him towards a renewed sense of artistic agency. 'Music has become so different', he realised, 'precisely because society has become so different. And it is impossible to go back.'⁶ He could now appreciate more

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 15 November 1932.

completely what he saw as the steadfast adherence to objective values evident in the music of the disciples of Schoenberg, especially Anton Webern and Alban Berg, the latter of whom became a close friend.

The rise to power of the Nazi Party in Germany only reinforced Krenek's belief in the necessity, if not righteousness, of his decision. And the subsequent annexation of Austria into the Third Reich in 1938 demanded an even more dramatic response from Krenek – exile to America. There, especially after the onset of World War Two, his underlying sense of creative exile became only more profound, although the composition of the **Prelude, WoO87** (1944) [12], was a reminder that even in the darkest of days, positive links to Europe still were possible. This little gem of a work was composed for Werner Reinhart (1884–1951), a wealthy Swiss businessman and patron of music who had variously accommodated and financially supported Krenek (and his then wife Anna Mahler) in the mid-1920s. Alongside his friend the conductor Hermann Scherchen, Reinhart had played a leading role in shaping the musical life of Switzerland for three decades from the 1920s, ensuring a strong emphasis on contemporary music. In its lyrical application of twelve-tone technique it reveals Krenek's indebtedness to the keyboard music of Schoenberg and Berg in particular.

It would take many decades after the end of the World War Two before Vienna would properly acknowledge the creative achievements of such composers. Not least for that reason Krenek remained in the United States, eventually settling in Palm Springs, California. In an interview with *The Los Angeles Times* in 1950, he refuted any notion that living in America necessarily changed the compositional outlook of an émigré composer, although he did admit that

musical life in America is conducted in a manner which apports to the more refined, complex, and exciting artistic achievements [...] a smaller degree of significance and respect than they more frequently enjoy in the over-all picture of European public opinion.⁷

More poignantly, his American biographer John Stewart observed that after World War Two, whether Krenek was in Los Angeles, San Diego, or Vienna, he considered himself still a 'a visitor, even a tourist'. And in 1975 Krenek admitted 'that he was not acknowledged as an American composer, but neither was he, despite all the honors, acknowledged as an Austrian one'. As he later told some friends, tearfully, 'I don't know where I belong'.⁸

Krenek could at least connect with developments in the post-War European musical avant-garde, especially that centred around the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, and he

⁷ 'The Sounding Board', *The Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 1950.

⁸ John L. Stewart, *Ernst Krenek: The Man and his Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, pp. 303, 343 and 373.

started to explore strict serial organisation of musical material in a manner similar to that being applied by composers like Pierre Boulez. But his piano music was never to become as obsessively concerned with the total control of musical material, or the desire to remove all references to tonal conventions, that characterised Boulez's works for the instrument at this time.

Krenek's **Piano Sonata No. 4, Op. 114** (1948), composed between April and June 1948 in Los Angeles, was described by Stewart as

one of the most inward-looking, most manifestly 'about itself' of Krenek's works. Yet for all its brooding and self-preoccupation, it is witty, urbane, courteous, even ceremonious – an extraordinary rich, provoking, and beautiful work.⁹

The first of its four movements a *Sostenuto* [1], consists of an exposition followed by three successive sections of development, a formal structure Krenek developed after the manner of Beethoven's late sonatas, but which has particular expressive force by virtue of the increasing tempo for each section. A slow movement in an more traditional 'song' form follows [2], using pitch combinations that allude to minor triads to accompany an expressive melodic line. The scherzo-like rondo [3] is the most overtly virtuosic of the movements, making full use of the extreme ranges of the instrument, as well as alluding to 'jazzy' syncopations. It is the last movement [4] – a slow minuet (perhaps recalling the 'tempo di minuetto' of Beethoven's 'Diabelli' Variations) followed by five variations (the last of which including a quotation of the opening theme of the first movement) – that ensures that the work retain an overall sense of pathos. Writing in *The New York Times* on 17 January 1982, the music-critic Bernard Hollard described it as a work 'without thickness, excitable while never ranting, and expressing a real sadness devoid of self-pity. Mr. Krenek's music, in other words, felt deeply without ever abandoning its aristocratic reserve'.

The brilliant, quirky and urbane *George Washington Variations, Op. 120* (1950) [5]–[11] was the result of a commission from Morris Molin, a wealthy Los Angeles businessman, for his daughter. The main theme, 'Washington's Grand March' [5], first appeared in published form in 1796 under the title 'New President's March', and quickly became a ballroom favourite in New England in the early nineteenth century. Krenek had discovered it, and the tune known as 'Martial Cotillion' which appears (albeit in a 'ghostly' form) at the very end [11], in a manuscript book dating from around 1800 owned by the Euterpean Society of Hartford, Connecticut. Across the middle five movements [6]–[10], the march is gradually deconstructed and reconstructed through close thematic interrogation and the incorporation of elements of polytonal and twelve-tone-derived harmony, jazz-inspired rhythms and tonal reminiscences. The

⁹ Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

overall result is something of a catalogue of the virtues that makes Krenek as much a compelling composer for the piano as he is for the stage. Across its seven movements can be found music that is variously tonal, atonal, expressionist, surreal, classical, ironic, sincere, profound and grotesque, drawing on sounds both American and European in origin. In so doing, is it not music that also speaks to an experience of modern life now shared by more and more of us?

Peter Tregear is Professor and Head of The School of Music at the Australian National University. He has conducted several UK premieres of Weimar-era works, including Max Brand's opera Maschinist Hopkins at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 2001, and Krenek's Schwergewicht in Cambridge in 2004. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the Ernst Krenek Institut in Krems and a committee member of the International Centre for Suppressed Music, London. He is the author of Ernst Krenek and the Politics of Musical Style (Scarecrow Press, Lanham (Maryland), 2013).

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Jonathan Woolf, *MusicWeb International*

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The Ukrainian-born **Stanislav Khristenko** has been performing on four continents since his first solo recital, given at the age of eleven. His performances have been praised in such international media as *Gramophone* in the UK, *The Washington Post* in the USA, *Le Soir* in Belgium and *El Pais* in Spain. He has appeared as a soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra of Belgium, the Cleveland Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony, Hong Kong Chamber Orchestra, Berliner Musikfreunde Orchestra, Takamatsu Symphony Orchestra, Arkansas Symphony, Northwest Florida Symphony and Moscow Conservatory Orchestra, among others. His performance highlights include solo recitals in Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, Schubertsaal in Vienna, Phillips Collection in Washington; and performances with orchestra in the Grosse Saal of the Berlin Philharmonie, Severance Hall in Cleveland, the Large Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire and Hong Kong City Hall.

Stanislav Khristenko has won top prizes at some of the most prestigious international piano competitions. In 2013 alone he won First Prize at the 2013 Cleveland International Piano Competition, First Prize at the 2013 Maria Canals International Music Competition, and was named Fourth Laureate at the 2013 Queen Elisabeth Competition.





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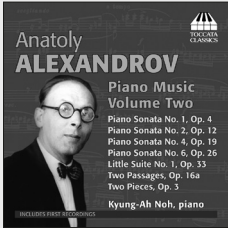
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