

Das Gesetz harmonischer oder dis-harmonischer Entsprechungen

Herausgegeben von Nora Born

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Irma und Stefan Wolpe – Briefwechsel 1933 – 1972

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Foreword

This volume of correspondence was made possible ten years ago when 148 letters from Stefan Wolpe to Irma Wolpe Rademacher and two from Irma to Stefan were deposited in the New York Public Library. Together with the holdings of the Paul Sacher Foundation, the correspondence now numbers 265 items. Nora Born faced daunting challenges while preparing the edition, as Irma seldom dated her letters and Stefan's papers were severely damaged by fire and flood. With infinite patience and extensive interviews with relatives, friends and students of Irma in Israel, Europe and North America, Ms. Born has brought to light a multi-faceted portrait of two great artists whose relationship, although turbulent, was founded on the bedrock of an unwavering devotion to life in and for art. Their achievements separately and in collaboration continue to make a signal contribution to the musical life of our times.

Stefan Wolpe and Irma Schoenberg met through mutual friends around 1927. It was probably on account of their meeting that Wolpe composed »Two Revolutionary Marches« for piano four hands to play for some public event, likely organized by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD):

»And I knew with Stefan right away that he was very poetical. Writing letters – no one could understand them – with most beautiful language. He had a poetic command of German. But he was born with it, with this kind of abundance of images, which actually is his own. I don't know of any German who writes like this ... Then Stefan asked me to play. You see, they were trying to branch out and attract another kind of public.«¹

Although Stefan was married to the painter Ola Okuniewska, he and Irma saw a good deal of each other and began to correspond soon after

1 Irma Wolpe Rademacher, Transcript of interview with Austin Clarkson, 4.4.1976. Sammlung Stefan Wolpe, Paul Sacher Stiftung. § 4, 5, 8, 9. Subsequent citations from this interview will refer to respective paragraphs.

they met. Irma said that although Stefan regarded himself as a soldier in the army of revolutionary artists, he would get together with her to play Bach organ fugues four hands and go to Philharmonic concerts. It seems that from the very beginning of their relationship Irma helped Stefan to realize his musical genius. »It was [as if] he had never given it up, it was inside him.«

Between 1928 and 1933 Stefan worked tirelessly for the resistance and Irma taught for Jaques-Dalcroze academies and launched her career as a concert pianist. For a concert to celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Novembergruppe* in January 1930, Irma accompanied Stefan's »Hölderlin Lieder« and played with him the »Two Revolutionary Marches«. Irma's commitment to Stefan was such that she boldly included three of Stefan's proletarian marches on her Paris debut in 1932. Wolpe was by then second only to Hanns Eisler as the leading German composer for the Communist cause.

Ola returned to Vienna where she gave birth to Katharina and lived with Stefan's friend and collaborator, the Communist author Otto Hahn. From 1931 to 1933 Irma resided in Berlin and attended the shows for which Stefan composed and directed the music: »Die Passion eines Menschen« (1931), the three shows of *Truppe 31* and the Communist Sportrevue, »Alles an den roten Start« (1932), which was given before 4,000 in the *Große Schauspielhaus*.² The Communist Party was defeated in the 1932 elections and Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933. On 27 February, while the Reichstag burned, Wolpe was a few blocks away directing the third show of *Truppe 31*. Five days later the police banned *Truppe 31*. Irma took charge:

»We were staying together in another part of the city. He admitted he was ready to leave Berlin. And I got him a new suit. I didn't want him to look like a [revolutionary]. And I inspected his pockets and burned all the Communist books. And he went to a Czechoslovakia town [Eger/Cheb], where a sister of his

2 Stefan Wolpe: »4 Stücke für die Sportrevue ›Alles an den roten Start‹« (1932), in: »Ensemblestücke für das Kabarett ›Anti‹ (1929) und die Sportrevue ›Alles an den roten Start‹« (1932), edited and introduced by Thomas Phleps, Peermusic, Hamburg 2009, pp. 28–46. Wolpe later referred to this as the »Cantata on Sport«.

was married, and it was the nearest frontier ... The question was to save him immediately, to take him out. He didn't have time to renew his passport or to extend it.« (§ 8)

On March 15 Nazi Storm Troopers and the local police raided the *Friedenau Artists' Colony*, arrested suspected Communists, and burned their books.³

Stefan wrote the first letters of this edition during his first week of exile. Although he and Irma had corresponded during the previous years, she labeled them »Erster Brief«, »Zweiter Brief« and »Dritter Brief«, perhaps to mark the beginning of a new chapter in their lives (*Nos. 1–3*). The three missives reveal Stefan's resilience, his resolve to continue the struggle against fascism, but also his dependence on Irma for financial support and on her ability to play his music and to manage his career. The one letter from Irma in 1933 was written from her mother's home in Bucharest to Vienna, where Stefan was studying with Anton Webern (*No. 6*). The Austrian police questioned Wolpe several times in November and in early December charged him with »Bestimmungslosigkeit« (lacking a reason for residence). He wrote that he was appealing the ruling, but that if the appeal failed, he must leave the country within three days. Irma was preparing for another recital in Bucharest and could not travel until after December 15. According to Stefan she got off the train »dressed in a red leather jacket, like a young revolutionary«.⁴ She took him back with her to Bucharest, where her mother, the Zionist poet Rachel Schoenberg, helped them obtain papers for Palestine. In 1934 Stefan and Irma sailed from the Black Sea port of Constanta to Jaffa, found lodgings in Jerusalem and were married.

The next series of correspondence consists of 38 letters that Irma wrote to Stefan during the spring and summer of 1935, while he was attending Hermann Scherchen's school of conducting in Brussels (*Nos. 7–45*). Irma's almost daily letters reveal the depth and intensity of her love. That only one letter from Stefan survives from that summer (*No. 17*) is a portent of

3 See [http://www.kuenstlerkolonie-berlin-ev.de/Berichte von der Verfolgung der Künstler und Schriftsteller bis zur GroBrazzia am 15. März 1933](http://www.kuenstlerkolonie-berlin-ev.de/Berichte%20von%20der%20Verfolgung%20der%20Kuenstler%20und%20Schriftsteller%20bis%20zur%20GroBrazzia%20am%2015.%20M%C3%A4rz%201933), 9, »Interview mit Steffie Spira«.

4 Hilda Morley, *A Thousand Birds: A Memoir of Stefan Wolpe* (unpublished), Hilda Morley Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, S. 166.

the clouds that were soon to shadow their relationship. His liaisons with other women (*see No. 49*), whether or not platonic, caused Irma endless grief.

The third series covers the years 1940 to 1946, after they have immigrated to the United States and when their relationship swung back and forth between dissension and reconciliation. Despite Irma's distress, she continued to champion Wolpe's music and gave first performances of »March and Variations for Two Pianos«, »Passacaglia«, »Zemach Suite«, »Toccata« and »Con fuoco«. All but »Zemach Suite« were dedicated to her. The piano was Wolpe's instrument, and his compositions for that instrument make extreme demands of the performer. As the principal exponent of Wolpe's music, Irma developed new techniques that contributed both to her extraordinary artistry as a concert pianist and her unique pedagogy as a teacher.

In early 1941 Irma insisted that they live apart (*Nos. 51–55*), after which warm feelings returned during the summer (*Nos. 56–79*). Several of these letters pertain to efforts to bring Katharina, then ten years old, from Switzerland to New York. The papers seem to have been in order and the money for Kathi's travel assured, when the U.S.A. entered the war and the plan failed. Despite Stefan's efforts to rekindle their relationship (*Nos. 87–91*), the letters of 1942 reveal complete estrangement (*Nos. 92–95*) and then reconciliation (*No. 96–101*). In 1943 Irma commenced a relationship with the mathematician Hans Rademacher, a colleague of her brother Iso Schoenberg (*No. 102*). In 1944 Stefan and Irma collaborated once again, performing two numbers from his ballet suite »The Man from Midian« for a celebration in honor of the author Heinrich Mann. That evening Stefan wrote Irma a note of heartfelt thanks (*No. 103*).

The correspondence lapsed until the summer of 1946, when Irma was on holiday. She sent Stefan four loving letters, to which he replied with renewed exuberance. He wrote about Irma's student David Tudor, whose letter to Irma discusses the music he is working on (*Nos. 106, 107*). During the postwar years Irma continued to perform Stefan's music, most notably giving the American premiere of the new edition of the »Passacaglia« to great acclaim. She also worked on Stefan's notorious »Battlepiece« (1943–1947). Musicians returning from the war who became students of Wolpe

organized the *Contemporary Music School* with Wolpe as director. The school's brochure lists Irma as a member of the staff. During this period Stefan and Irma hosted weekly musicales in Irma's apartment at which her students played their repertoire and Stefan's students heard their compositions performed. For several years the Wolpe commune was a vibrant centre of New York's musical life.

The next series comprises twenty letters from Stefan from the summer of 1948, when he visited Europe for the first time after the war (*Nos. 116–135*). They include extensive reports on Katharina, on Swiss society, and on his adored Paris and his discovery of London. In 1948 Stefan commenced a relationship with the poet Hilda Auerbach, who was married to the painter Gene Morley. Stefan moved in with Hilda, and they were married in 1952. Irma obtained a divorce from Stefan in 1949 (*No. 136*).

The fifth series culminates the correspondence with an outpouring of letters from Stefan from 1950 to 1958 (*Nos. 137–263*). In an almost Tristanesque anamnesis, he regrets his part in the failure of their relationship. He recalls his unhappy childhood at home and at school, his traumatic bar mitzvah and his sexual confusion as a teenager. To elicit Irma's sympathy, he provides detailed accounts of his failing health and the desperate finances of *Black Mountain College*. He catalogues his efforts to find a teaching position and asks Hans for his advice in dealing with college directors. He keeps Irma apprised of his creative development, hoping to interest her in his masterwork, »Enactments« for Three Pianos, which he dedicated to her and her two prodigies, David Tudor and Jack Maxin, in the hopes that they will perform it. When Irma expressed her disapproval of such complex music, Stefan was deeply offended, and Hilda wrote to Irma in his defense (*No. 199*). Irma seldom replied, as she evidently had no patience for Stefan's inability to let her go. Of the few letters from Irma during this nine-year period (Stefan mentions them in some of his letters), only one survives (*No. 151*).

The correspondence comes to a close with thirteen letters from Stefan to Irma between 1959 and 1967. Stefan finally accepts that Irma has a different look on life, and understands why they had to go their separate ways. But he still urges her to keep performing his music. While in Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, Stefan writes enthusiastically of visits to

Greece and Israel and adds the ominous news of the onset of Parkinson's disease (*No. 273*). After an experimental treatment of the disease in Vienna in 1967, Stefan convalesced in Katharina's London home. Ola Okuniewska was also living there. With reawakened compassion for Stefan, Ola wrote to Irma offering to come to New York and help look after Stefan (*Nos. 276, 277*). It was implicit that Hilda was proving unequal to the task. And so it transpired that Stefan's last letter to Irma is in Ola's hand (*No. 278*). At the end, despite all their mutual suffering, Stefan's two greatest loves and his child, who had inspired so many works of his art but had presented such relationship difficulties, were drawn together in a circle of compassion.

This volume entwines the lives of two immensely gifted artists – Stefan Wolpe, one of the leading composers and teachers of the 20th century and Irma Wolpe Rademacher, one of the most influential pianists and pedagogues of her time. Stefan composed several of his most important works for Irma, and in order to perform them Irma devised an extraordinary pianism. Bonded by the mission to transform individuals and society through art, they endured marital discord to mentor a new generation of pianists and composers. Their faith in each other's gifts and their shared commitment to the role of the artist in society live on in the impact of Stefan's music and in the legacy of Irma's students.

Austin Clarkson

Danksagung

Meine Arbeit an der vorliegenden Edition begann 2008 in der *Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel*. In der Absicht, eine Biografie Irma Wolpes zu schreiben, durchforschte ich die Korrespondenz zwischen Irma und Stefan in der Sammlung Wolpe. Als 2010 ein weiterer Teil des Wolpe-Briefwechsels der *New York Public Library for the Performing Arts* überlassen wurde, reifte nach und nach die Idee einer Korrespondenz-Veröffentlichung heran.

Mein tiefster Dank gilt der *Stefan Wolpe Society, New York* und der *Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel*, sowie den jeweiligen Vorständen, deren Vertrauen und großzügige finanzielle Unterstützungen die Realisierung des vorliegenden Bandes erst möglich gemacht haben. Mein aufrichtiger Dank gilt ferner der *New York Public Library*, insbesondere Jonathan Hiam, für die Bereitstellung sämtlicher Dokumente zur uneingeschränkten Einsicht, bevor diese der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich gemacht wurden.

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