

Cultural Death

Music under Tyranny

Kabasta • Hoehn • Fried



ARBITER

Cultural Death: Music under Tyranny

Oswald Kabasta • Alfred Hoehn • Oskar Fried

1. **Beethoven:** Leonore Overture, no. 2 **13'10"**
Oswald Kabasta conducting the Munich Philharmonic
rec. c. 1942-44. unissued 2RA 5690/3 previously unpublished
2. **Brahms:** Piano Concerto no. 2, Op. 86: I. *Allegro non troppo* **15'39"**
Alfred Hoehn, piano; Reinhold Merten conducting the Leipzig Radio Orchestra
rec. 1940.4.5. licensed from RBB Media previously unpublished
- Berlioz:** Symphony fantastique **50'10"**
3. I. Rêveries – Passions. *14'26"*
4. II. Un bal. Valse. *6'55'*
5. III. Scène aux champs. Adagio. *13'21"*
6. IV. Marche au supplice. Allegretto non troppo *5'06"*
7. V. Songe d'une nuit de sabbat. Larghetto – Allegro *10'17"*
Oskar Fried conducting the USSR State Symphony Orchestra
rec. 1937/38 on film soundtrack in Moscow
total time: 79'07"

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production & audio restoration: Allan Evans photos: Kabasta (p.8); Hoehn (p. 12);] other cover and text photos are of Fried.

Lost artifacts by three musicians have resurfaced out of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union, each of whom arrived at a horrid end. The Nazis had implemented a program of bringing forcible-coordination to all their ideas and goals, known as *gleichschaltung*, an electrical term that involves the "switching" of elements to be compatible within a circuit, or power system: this concept is an apt description of Nazification. It fueled Kabasta's success whereas Hoehn and Fried were unadaptable outsiders whose artistic and personal integrity remain with us, living on in the deep spirituality evident in their recorded performances.

The Nazis' broad rise on the cultural front began in 1920 when they relaunched the failed *Völkischer Beobachter* newspaper. A respectable pseudo-intellectual facade lured the German public into accepting an ideology that viewed the past through a pathologically distorted lens, while imposing their National Socialist revisionism onto a millennial chain of disparate historic events and personages. Their articles progressively manipulated every well-known protagonist, past or present, German or otherwise. The paper's pompous and elevated language instilled in its credulous readers the perception that the illustrious icons of their common past had actually sacrificed their individuality for a greater common good. Of course their readers were expected to adopt these same values. The Nazi method of parsing history, science, art, and religious investigation before a historic funhouse mirror was to prove their claim of having uncovered hidden patterns in their subjects' unconscious chronology, finally setting aright, so they believed, an enormous historical misperception. In their hands, Rembrandt's deeply expressive art was put forth as "visionary fanaticism," the painter warped from being a creator of contemplative self-portraits into an artist who harbored no patience for any "stagnation of the soul." One by one, Shakespeare, Bach, Mozart, Schiller, Goethe, Byron, Beethoven, culminating in Wagner, were recast as purveyors of revisionist correctness and early prophets of the Nazi political philosophy. This variety of propagandistic noise replaced a disappearing free press, a crucial step in their relentless and all-encompassing manipulation of society.

In this new environment, the Austrian conductor Oswald Kabasta was perfectly suited to abet Nazi cultural projects while thriving on the smug satisfaction he gained from their approval. Kabasta's name denotes ancestors who originated in German-speaking Prague after that language forcibly supplanted the native Czech tongue and culture, relegating Czech-speaking citizens to a minority status. This writer experienced a fleeting account of an evolving Kabasta when meeting Hermann Broch de Rothermann at the home of his relative, the writer Gregor von Rezzori, in 1985. "Pitz", as he was known, asked if I had ever heard of his first Viennese piano teacher - Kabasta: "He was a monster!" (In 2013, Pitz's widow Sachiko Broch de Rothermann stated that Kabasta would beat the boy.) Their contact took place in 1921 when his father, the writer Hermann Broch, engaged Kabasta to teach his eleven-year-old son while at the same time securing a teaching position for Kabasta at the *Traiskirchen School*, where he led the orchestra.

In 1926, on Karl Muck's recommendation, Kabasta became conductor of the *Graz State Opera Orchestra*. A review from November of that year points out that "Herr Kabasta is a man of the phrase. He doesn't seem to stretch the tempos but neither does he exaggerate them. Streams of revolutionary blood roll in his veins. The music that he makes resounds in his heart and therefore sounds good to the ear."

Four years later he secured the *RAVAG* (Austrian Radio) orchestra and in 1933 he added the *Vienna Symphony* to his duties. Kabasta was a foil to the conservative conventions of the *Vienna Philharmonic*, as he championed new and daring works at every possibility. His *Wiener Symphoniker* toured Europe in 1936 to much acclaim. A London stopover included a live BBC broadcast on 19 January, playing Strauss's *Die Schweigsame Frau*, Schubert's Symphony no. 3, Enescu's *First Romanian Rhapsody*, Beethoven's *Leonore Overture 2*, and Stravinsky's *Petrushka Suite*, the latter a work recently banned in Germany. Following Kabasta's return engagement in London that autumn, Benjamin Britten noted in his diary for 28 October 1936:

"After Schmidt's we go to Vienna Symphony Concert at Q[ueens].H[all] under Kabasta.

This is a really great orchestra, & it is a miracle to hear real orchestral playing. Perfect ensemble & intonation in the Leonore 2 & Haffner Mozart Symph. A most thrilling virtuoso show of Til Eulenspiegel - a wonderful show. Bruckner's 7th does not convert me."

A 1936 Prague review describes how "the voicing and the sound of the orchestra are equally excellent, with a bit more bite in the strings than in our local orchestras. The woodwinds also seem to have a different tone color over all, extremely bright and sonorous."

During a visit to Munich in the 1935/36 season, Kabasta took part in an evening of contemporary music which so impressed the Munich Philharmonic's directors that he was considered to be a worthy replacement for their old-fashioned Sigmund von Hausegger, an earlier Brucknerian who did not follow Kabasta's forward-looking custom of keeping up with and mastering new music, a direction the management sought to develop, with the object of making the Munich orchestra a rival to the Berliners.

The orchestra also attained a greater role in Germany by representing the city where the Nazi party originated. In *Music in the Third Reich: National Socialist Aesthetic Theory as Government Policy*, Donald Wesley Ellis writes: "Reviews of [von Hausegger's] concerts were uniformly favorable if reserved. He seemed even to inspire respect in the music editors of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, who said of him that he kept Munich from being a hot-bed of international atonality."

Kabasta's candidacy initially posed a problem due to his lack of concern for Nazi cultural priorities by his seeking to include composers such as Stravinsky, who was proscribed by the regime. Nonetheless, his appointment was confirmed. During Kabasta's first season with the orchestra in 1938 he gained the backing of a certain functionary who allowed him to smuggle into his programs the French composers Debussy and Ravel, the decadent Scriabin, and even Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste*. The latter work amazed Willi Graf (1918-1943), a member of the anti-Nazi *White Rose* resistance group who was tortured and executed for not informing on his colleagues, noting in his diary that amidst standard offerings such as Beethoven's *Eighth Symphony* and the second *Leonore Overture* came a composer not yet

officially banned but hardly tolerated. Bartók's final appearance in Germany came early in 1933 when Frankfurt Radio's conductor Hans Rosbaud featured the composer as soloist in his *Second Piano Concerto*. Rosbaud was denounced for "spreading the Jewish spirit." Graf pointed out that as someone who generally avoided risks, Kabasta's inclusion of the Bartók later kept many listeners awake as they wondered about his defiance. In light of such actions, another functionary, one Herr Mayerhofer, reported to the Munich Philharmonic's board on Kabasta's proposals for their upcoming season:

"At the end of March 1939 Kabasta presented the customary list of works which he wished to perform in the winter season of that year. The suggestion included Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*, Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, Bartók's *Music for String, Percussion and Celeste*, Ravel's *Bolero* and Debussy's *Three Nocturnes*, the traditional artillery of Beethoven, Bruckner, Brahms, Haydn and Mozart. This will, I am sure, put Munich in the center of the international limelight. He could certainly have gotten some advice from the foreign office. Prokofiev, who traces his lineage to Stravinsky, is himself international and Western and of no concern at all for German culture. We could certainly do without Ravel, that stylish composer of countless radio broadcast works. In short we must ask ourselves a basic question: Would it not be well advised to present a group of no less popular recent German works in the stead of this foreign offering? At least before we include recent foreign composers, we ought to get the opinion of the Foreign Office concerning the presentation of the right foreign composers in order to advance the purposes of German foreign policy and to maintain good relations with the Reich authorities."

As Kabasta became indispensable due to a dearth of visiting musicians and the availability of a restricted pool of lesser locals, his intransigence is recounted in another briefing:

"In connection with my recent judgment of the Philharmonic season, let me add this not unimportant post-script. Gottfried Ruedinger has had his compositions published by the firm of Anton Böhm in Augsburg. When Böhm recently contacted Kabasta for his judgment of Ruedinger's works, Kabasta refused even to look at the work in question. As far as I can see,

Kabasta has busied himself with the old war horses and foreign musicians that are contrary to the precepts of National Socialist musikpolitik. It is of utmost concern to the board of the Philharmonic Society that incidents like the above will circulate in the Reich and give the Munich Philharmonic a bad reputation."

Kabasta, on learning of his criticism, formally responded:

"I don't understand why the Society presented my suggestions for the 1939/40 season to [Mayerhofer] in the first place. I can only assume that this criticism was extended in his capacity as music librarian. In my first year as conductor of the Munich Philharmonic I have proved that I'm trustworthy and loyal to both the Cultural Office and to Mayor Fiehler. But I insist that I will not allow any meddling in artistic matters nor will I accept anyone's tutelage."

An indignant Mayerhofer stated that Kabasta was apparently unaware of the membership of the board and the powers vested in Mayerhofer's position, and left it to Oberbürgermeister Fiehler to decide "whose position is correct in the era of National Socialism" in so far as Kabasta "thinks himself that he is some sort of sovereign in his post."

After the Tonhalle, Munich's main concert hall, fell victim to Allied bombs in 1944 Kabasta held on, but one year later was hospitalized with a heart condition. While convalescing, he learned that he had been stripped of his duties as a conductor after being categorized as a "borderline" case by the victorious Allies, initially as someone who was not a bona fide party member but one who had been an applicant. It was deemed inappropriate for Kabasta to retain a position under American control as he had under the Nazis; return could only come about if an "extensive investigation" would clear him.

According to David Monod in *Settling Scores*: "The city [of Munich] continued to pay Kabasta's salary and to negotiate with the Americans for his reinstatement. But this became a virtual impossibility when Kabasta admitted to having applied to join the Nazi Party as a precondition for getting his job, even though he added that he had never been issued a membership number and had always been 'inwardly' anti-Nazi (the conductor neglected to tell the Americans that six years before [1939] he had also applied for membership in the Austrian



Nazi Party.) And so despite his appeals, in October 1945 the conductor's name appeared on the Intelligence Section's blacklist, and [Edward] Kilenyi [a Hungarian-American pianist serving in the military] ordered the city to discontinue his pay. An impulsive musician with a bad heart and an unsteady temperament, Kabasta's dismissal left him devastated:

"From his hospital room he issued mournful appeals to Americans and the city for rehabilitation; but [the officials] remained firm."

Holed up in a hotel room for several months in Kufstein (Austria), Kabasta sat down and penned a vainglorious farewell note to his former orchestra:

"As it is known, my career is finished; I, who in all my life never engaged in politics, have now fallen under the wheel of politics. I thank Destiny for having led me to Munich, where I was able to live for years in marvelous artistic work. I thank the people of Munich for their ability to excite themselves and for their loyalty. I thank with my heart the orchestra for its artistic contribution and collaboration. Oh how uplifting were those experiences with them! I wish, I beg of you, that you watch over the Philharmonic, for whom I wish the most happy future, crowned with success. The next time they will play (my!) Bruckner Eighth, that they would think of me and my wife in silence."

Two days later, the fifty-year-old Kabasta and his wife ingested lethal doses of veronal, a barbiturate, the very same method used by German Jews when wishing to quickly die before possible capture by the Nazis. His wife survived for some months and when the day of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary arrived, she succeeded in taking her life.

Kabasta the musician had an irrepressible urge to perform contemporary masterpieces, taking great risks to smuggle them in. Alban Berg had been annoyed when he learned that Kabasta was to premier his *Lulu Suite*, as he, Erich Kleiber, and Ernst Krenek regarded him with contempt for both musical and personal reasons.

Kabasta's performance of Beethoven's *Leonore Overture no. 2*, a work frequently appearing on his programs, displays a high-strung level of musicality. Our discovery of surviving test discs made in wartime Munich c. 1942-44, provides riveting and fascinating listening. A critic who heard Kabasta conduct the work in London noted: "A fine performance of Beethoven's

Leonora II overture, clear-cut in every detail, yet filled with the warm romance of the drama, began the concert. No doubt the pundits are right in saying that Beethoven refined away the dross from this overture to make the perfect version of it in Leonora III, but what a lot of lovely dross he had to sacrifice! The playing made us glad to have it restored.”

Alfred Hoehn's concert reviews often refer to him as a poetic musician. Schumann's *Piano Concerto* led by Hans Weisbach featured “brilliant piano technique, always supported by a very attractive, warm singing melody in the foreground that is in harmony with this passionate soulful music. The same impression was confirmed in his solo piano recital.” A Beethoven *4th Concerto* in Dortmund was “outstanding, as was a recital that showed him to be a craftsman of the finest stature in memory.” Hoehn's Amsterdam recital (24 XI 1921) came at a time when Bach was primarily offered in transcriptions: he played the *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, along with Couperin, Scarlatti, Beethoven's last sonata, Chopin, Liszt, Debussy, and Reger:

“Hoehn himself is so subtle; the conviction and understanding he demonstrated in Debussy were greater than I had ever experienced.” Debussy's *Homage à Rameau* evinces genius in a “special precise clarity and elegance of conception, so pure and richly multi-colored, so intimate and reverently played as I have yet to hear from a German pianist.”

Hoehn's Liszt indicated “a great virtuoso who reached the highest of spiritual realms, particularly in the *Mephisto Waltz* and *Feux Follets*. Such pieces, in my opinion, had something of a demonic mastery; the bravado sounded firm with a rare magic, through its variety of rhythms and tones, all masterfully calibrated. His varied tempos have a boundless energy, increased by the freedom of life it sows.”

Debussy resounds in a preface that Hoehn contributed to a pupil's book, published in the Germany of 1938, one that slights the regime's agenda through its focus on a French musical practice that fails to acknowledge the Nazis' aesthetic or aims:

Preface

In May 1907 I heard for the first time the magical sounds of the opera *Pelleas et Mélisande*. Deeply impressed by a then newly appearing creative form of a somewhat revolutionary style which seemed to break with tradition, I tried bit by bit to fathom the nature of what

its music-historical precedents could be. Already in Mussorgsky we experience directly great moments of impressionistic manifestations of sound, as, for example, in *Boris Godunov* (Coronation Scene, Forest Clearing at Kromy, Clock Scene with Glockenspiel). Here we quickly discover the roots of such a compositional manner [Debussy's]: the rendering on stage of musically illustrative [programmatic] passages.

Even French impressionism by no means discredits the primary origin of pictorial expression, which certainly illustrates the “titles” of each work such that we can be led experientially through the domain of “impressionism.” It is clear that in these musical expressions, the intellect, in a spiritually rich form, brings one closer to the composer's intended effect. Naturally, to the creator, interpreter and listener, this indicates a withdrawal from the true center of the musical soul...

It is a credit to my former student Herr Dr. H.-G. Schulz that, in a completely unorthodox manner, he has reported the problem of impressionism in a clearer light. Ignorance of the style is far greater than one might admit; even a Busoni is under the mistaken impression that the A minor Prelude [No. 20] of Book 2 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* bears “impressionistic” traits; Bach's linear art and figurative style reveals such an interpretation anachronistic.

Accordingly, the study of the present book, in which I grapple especially with the impressionistic keyboard style, is meant not only as a welcome stimulus for knowledgeable [and] interested music circles, but also for pianists and keyboard teachers.

Alfred Hoehn. *Preface*, in **Dr. Heinz-Günther Schulz.** *Musikalischer Impressionismus und Impressionistischer Klavierstil*. Konrad Tritsch Verlag, Würzburg, 1938.

Translated by Dr. Kenneth Cooper, 2013.

When Hoehn appeared in London, a critic writes: “He commands a full tone, never pressed to the point of hardness, and singularly beautiful in sustained and lyrical passages. Herr Hoehn's principal works in this programme were Brahms's early piano sonata in F minor and



Schumann's *Carnaval*, both of which, particularly the scherzo and finale of the former, amply displayed the brilliance of his execution."

A rare musical nugget is embedded in an otherwise pro-forma account that inadvertently reveals a critic's displeasure when confronted by a bygone Brahmsian practice that survived in Hoehn's playing: "The very wayward rubato used in Brahms's slow movement suggested that the moonlight romance of Sternau's verse attracted him more than the shapeliness of Brahms's melody."

Hans Rosbaud, one of Hoehn's star piano pupils who became an eminent conductor, partnered his teacher on several occasions. A 1930 Stuttgart program finds Hoehn as his soloist in the Brahms *Second Concerto*, and several years later, they gave Rachmaninoff's *Second Concerto* in Frankfurt. Hoehn also appeared with Abendroth, Furtwängler, and Dohnanyi.

Felix-Eberhard von Cube's letter to the music theorist Heinrich Schenker on 2 June 1934 after his Hamburg lecture on Schenkerian analysis mentions Hoehn's interest in an approach out of favor with the regime:

"I have also enclosed for you the review of a lecture that I gave recently, with the courage of despair. It seemed to me the only possible way of giving voice to the truth, without meeting an a priori objection. The success exceeded my expectation, and even the review—lightly drawing inspiration from me—shows that there are still people who are prepared to bear intellectual responsibility. Strangely enough, the lecture received an echo from, of all places, Frankfurt! From there a Professor Alfred Hoehn (do you know him?) wrote to me, saying that he wanted to learn more about these things. I shall send him a few related notices and a 'self-drawn' *Ursatz*."

Hoehn suffered a paralytic stroke while on stage in Leipzig, 1940 during the 2nd movement of Brahms's *Piano Concerto no.2*: our published excerpt came months earlier, an allusion to the last music-making of his life. He died in 1945 from a heart attack, possibly after witnessing his piano hurled down a stairway by an American soldier billeted in his home.

Try as one can to follow a wandering conductor who boasted of lacking ties with any one orchestra, **Oskar Fried's** activities and life pose a thorny puzzle. His shadowy footsteps land one into a labyrinth of countries, stumbling across gaps of lost years. Aside from sporadic interviews, we lack access to his inner world, as much was concealed by both temperament and by choice, unlike his many colleagues who did their all to leave behind their legacies. A casual note in Count Harry Kessler's diary on 14 December 1905 describes the chatting when Kessler and Fried dropped by to visit their close friend, the decadent Hamburg writer Richard Dehmel and his wife:

“About [Richard] Strauss and Fried. Where Strauss intends to be sensitive he regularly becomes banal. His strength is in the witty, in the subtle. Mrs. Dehmel said that Fried was superior to him because he naturally commanded a hot passion. Dehmel contradicted quickly; even though perhaps the race agrees with you that Frau Dehmel feels drawn to peace, he, Dehmel, joined in with the totally opposite reaction, I daresay, the dissimilarity of the race from his wife. Furthermore, one must admit, Thank God, for the cool art arising in the world is due to Strauss. We had played on the nerves much too much.”

Fried's uncanny knack for turning up at crucial moments presents a succession of close-ups at historic balances in transition and their consequences. One year after Fried's debut as a conductor in 1905, he toured Russia, visiting Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa. Fried introduced Petersburg audiences to the Mahler *Second Symphony*. On 10 November 1906 he conducted the private orchestra of Count Cheremetyev along with members of the Opera chorus and the alto Otilie Metzger-Froitheim. Fried had not seen St. Petersburg since his youthful vagabondage as an itinerant horn player. Along with the Mahler premiere came *Verklärte Nacht* – Fried's own cantata. In private, Rimsky-Korsakov and his camp rated Mahler's symphony as “very bad,” one that “contained absolutely nothing of genius, far worse than Richard Strauss.” Fried recorded a revelatory *Scheherazade* with the *Berlin Philharmonic* in 1928.

One Petersburg critic appraised Fried's performance as being *perfect* whereas another spelled out a large number of the symphony's serious faults: “In the first place, the lack of style, and despite the originality of the design and procedures, the lack of musical personality. The

remarkable technical procedures become an end in themselves. The orchestration is really exceptional, but, at the same time, its monstrous musical content, this sonorous column of pure delirium, this alternation of exaltation and absurd platitude, the absence of artistic logic, consistency, and perhaps even sincerity, all this pretentiousness, this affectation, useless emphasis and crushing power of the sonority, without a defined musical physiognomy, all this simply exhausts and overwhelms without offering one single genuinely artistic moment. Of course, this symphony is, in every sense of the word, an exceptional work, but ... is everything exceptional good?”

Fried is termed “an artist full of temperament, [guilty of] mannerisms and agitation.” A 1907 performance of excerpts from Rimsky Korsakov's *Christmas Eve*, sung by Nezhdanova, was held with the composer in attendance. Fried returned in 1909 for a triumphant performance of Scriabin's *Symphony no. 3* that coincided with the composer's long-awaited return to Russia after several years abroad. In a successive Berlin reading, the painter Max Beckmann described “a dreadfully boring piece by Scriabin, *Le Poème divin*,” followed by “a beautiful aria by Mozart sung by a magnificent soprano, and the evening ended with the Meistersinger overture played at the worst possible tempo. I had to sit aside Frau Kolbe. She was very strongly perfumed.”

Soon after giving the first German performance of Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* with the world premiere of Delius' *Dance of Life* with the Berlin Philharmonic, Fried left for Paris to attend the *Ballets Russes* in December of 1912 for Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. He joined Kessler, who later dined out with Nijinsky, Diaghilev, and Hofmannsthal.

Some months later, Fried returned to Paris just after conducting two evenings at *La Scala* in Milan that included Berlioz's *Symphony fantastique*, a work he kept close at hand, one with which he identified with throughout his life, along with works by Weber, Liszt, and Busoni. On the night of Wednesday, 28 May 1913, Fried and Harry Kessler met at Larue's to eat and chat with Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Stravinsky, Ravel, Werth, Misia Edwards (later Sert), André Gide, Bakst, and others, where, Kessler noted, “the common opinion was that tomorrow evening, the premiere would be a scandal.”

Count Harry Kessler's diary entry on the Rite of Spring's debut:

“A completely new choreography and music. Nijinsky’s dancing style as different from Fokine’s as Gauguin’s from _____. A thoroughly new vision, something never before seen, enthralling, persuasive, is suddenly there, a new kind of wildness, both un-art and art at the same time. All forms laid waste and new ones emerging suddenly from the chaos. The public, the most elegant house I have ever seen in Paris – aristocracy, diplomats, the demimonde, was from the beginning restless, laughing, whistling, making jokes. Here and there some stood up. Stravinsky, who sat with his wife behind us, raced outside like one possessed after scarcely five minutes. Suddenly a stentorian voice cried out from the gallery, ‘Okay, whores of the Sixteenth (the Sixteenth Arrondissement, that of the elegant world), are you going to shut up soon!’ The reply came from a loge: ‘Voilà those who are ripe to be annexed.’ At the same moment D’Annunzio and Debussy in [Gabriel] Astruc’s both got into a quarrel with a neighboring loge, screaming into their faces, ‘What a bunch of imbeciles!’ Now the commotion became general. Astruc was heard crying ‘Wait for the end, you can whistle afterward!’ and as a reply from the orchestra: ‘How long?’ whereupon Diaghilev replied, ‘In five minutes.’ Pautrier behind me shouted, ‘Play a tango for them’; Marie Murat had a loud argument with her brother Gide, Ghéon, the entire Nouvelle Revue Française stood like a phalanx at the entrance to the loges, bottling up with shouts, the orchestra and loges of the Polignacs, Rohans, Murtas, etc. And above this crazy din there continued the storm of salvos of laughter and scornful clapping while the music raged and on the stage the dancers, without flinching, danced fervently in a prehistoric fashion. At the end of the performance, the monde and demimonde went at it until a frenetic applause triumphed so that Stravinsky and Nijinsky had to come on stage and take repeated bows.

“We went to Larue’s and had a late supper, the usual crowd, and in addition, Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Bakst, Cocteau, and I took a taxi and did a wild tour through the city at night, looking almost dead under the moonlight, Bakst waving his handkerchief on a walking stick like a flag, Nijinsky in tails and a top hat, silently and happily smiling to himself. The dawn was breaking as the wild, merry party set me down at my Tour d’Argent.”



Fried, an ardent Bolshevik, spent part of World War I in Switzerland where he may have met Lenin in Zurich. Kessler was engaged as a diplomat by the Germans and he briefed Fried to carry out political missions under the guise of cultural activities. Kessler notes the mingling of his conductor-friend with the writer Fritz Unruh and René Schickele, an Alsatian poet who would document the conflict between France and Germany in 1918, at a lunch in Bern on January 6 of that year:

“Schickle said that it was time that a great offensive be undertaken in all countries against the military. What he chiefly accuses them of is their misuse of spiritual values – that is, artists, writers, luminaries – for their ends and thereby devaluing them, by throwing dust in their eyes, somehow bribing them, and directing them into false paths. He, Schickele, does not want to be misused in this fashion because he believes that he could offer something more worthwhile precisely because he has a firm confidence in Germany’s future leading role intellectually speaking.”

Lenin invited Fried to be the first visiting artist to appear in the new Soviet Union. Upon Fried’s arrival on a Berlin-Moscow express in 1922 he was met at the train station by the leader himself.

Fried’s only documented trip to the United States in February 1928 coincided with Ravel’s. Both Fried and Ravel were engaged to conduct the *New York Symphony*. At Eva Gauthier’s they gathered to celebrate Ravel’s birthday; an eager George Gershwin had also been invited. A curious reporter with the *Christian Science Monitor* got more than he expected from Fried, as his story is among the most informal glimpses we find in the media, displaying Fried’s offhand spontaneity and barbed wit, while he casually larded his patter with insightful observations.

The Brass Tacks of Conducting.

Oscar Fried is confessedly temperamental, being susceptible to all sorts of things of the actual now, even to the temperature. From the passing instant, he tackles instances, and from the immediate moment catches momentum.

“This is fine weather,” *he remarked to me the day after his arrival here, and he had more ways of expressing the idea— attitude, gesture, laughter, sparkle of eye and ring of voice— than I could count.*

“Beautiful,” I admitted, “the best time of the year in this part of the world.”

“Brilliant sun,” he added: “invigorating air.”

“Glorious,” I conceded; “but I’m not interested in the weather. I want you to talk to me about conducting.”

“But I’m not interested in conducting.”

“As you like. Down it goes.”

“When I sailed into New York harbor yesterday morning, the scene, as I looked toward town from the deck of the ship was a perfect Fata Morgana. The city, hidden in mist, was a fairy picture. After a time, the contours of the shore and the outlines of the buildings began to emerge in fantastic forms. It was like a drawing by Doré. I never would have believed that what I saw was reality there, and I would not have been surprised if it had all disappeared from before my eyes. And now let me tell you what happened. The moment I stepped upon the pier, the illusion was gone.”

Romance and Fact

“What,” interrupted I, “are you talking about, if not music? Go right on, please!”

“Yes; romance and fact; and lately I illustrated the contrast by presenting the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven and the *Sacre du Printemps* of Stravinsky on the same program. In Paris, they shook their heads. The *Ninth Symphony* has an epic quality; it has idealism and it has passion. The *Sacre*, on the contrary, makes no epic discourse and it conveys no epic disclosure and it conveys no notion of idealism or of passion. And still, the two works, though opposite in what they express, are together in what they accomplish. The *Ninth Symphony* is a preparation for all the music that has followed until today, and the *Sacre* is a preparation for what will come until we cannot tell when. Beethoven opens the door for Wagner and Strauss; Stravinsky for the next composers. I should like an opportunity to make this Beethoven-Stravinsky illustration before an American audience, and I may yet have it.”

“What will you offer, when you direct the New York Symphony?”

“An all-romantic program. I have just arranged it in consultation with Walter Damrosch [the symphony’s conductor]. A great chance Mr. Damrosch gives visiting conductors; an orchestra

perfectly trained, audiences alert and hospitable.”

An All-Romantic Program

“And your all-romantic program comprises what?”

“Weber's Euryanthe overture, nature seen ecstatically; Brahms's Symphony No.1 – nature comprehended by effort; Stravinsky's *Firebird* – nature in eccentric, exaggerated, distorted view: and Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* – nature serenely contemplated. All the different manifestations of romanticism. Weber, born to it; Brahms, fighting to subdue it; Stravinsky, picturing Russian life and thought by means of it; Ravel, refining it and getting at its essence.”

“You have almost made a definition of romanticism.”

“Then let me stop. I don't like to define the romantic; nor could I if I tried. For romanticism is universal. It is sun, air, light. It is felt, not explained; and the same is true of the classic, if we were to go into that subject.”

“All right, thanks, for what the composers say, from Beethoven to Stravinsky. Would you mind giving me a word or two on their means of saying it? To think of the matter from the quantitative standpoint does the expanded orchestra belong, in your opinion, to the past, and will a reduced scheme of instruments be the rule hereafter?”

“The orchestra in recent years has been developing backward; that is growing smaller. But that was for economic reasons chiefly. Nevertheless, I think the necessity has proved beneficial. We have seen than an amateur at composing may write with some success for a big aggregation of sonorities, and that only a great composer can write with effect for a little group.”

The Technique of Conducting

“Thanks again, Mr. Fried; but now the brass tacks of your profession. Does conducting progress? Has it a technique that improves?”

“If you look at conducting on the average, the answer to that would be Yes. Look at it, however, in its higher aspects, and the question hardly arises at all. Every conductor of extraordinary gifts forms his own technique. So you ought not, really, to call this man's conducting good and that man's better; rather, you should make distinction between good and not good.

You would never think, in that case, of describing the conducting of a Mahler as better or worse than that of a Nikisch; you would only remark that the conducting of the one type was different from that of the other. Nor would you speak of the Mahler school or the Nikisch school of conducting.”

“Can conducting me taught?”

“It both can and should be. I have long hoped to take part in the establishment of conducting as a craft.”

“Masters and apprentices?”

“By class methods; 20 or 30 students, the teacher and an orchestra to work with. Show them directly how to do things. Under present conditions, those who want to learn seldom have a chance to do so except by hearing and observing from a distance.”

–Winthrop P. Tryon. 10 March 1928

Fried spoke to the New York Times about Stravinsky's recent *Oedipus Rex* as the most significant and important composition of recent years: “It opens up tremendous new possibilities in opera, for in it, Stravinsky has utilized modern technique and orchestration to revivify the old opera forms. He has breathed a new spirit into an old body, creating something that is refreshingly different without being eccentric. I feel it cannot help but influence future operatic composition.” Fried then insisted on the importance of Berg's new *Wozzeck*.

“The new conductor has for many years appeared exclusively in Europe as a guest, a position which he points out, prevents any given public of ‘tiring of him.’” The Times covered Fried's debut:

Oscar Fried Has Ovation.

When a German conductor of long reputation in his native land comes to America and opens a program with the Brahms *C minor symphony* the common supposition is that he will prove a tried and true interpreter of the classics. Last night, at the concert given by the New York Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, Oscar Fried, guest conductor for a pair of concerts of that body, proved to be nearly everything which is the reverse of the characteristics just mentioned. By the testimony of a single concert he had all the qualities of the virtuoso or,

it might be better to say, prima donna conductor, who has showmanship of a personal kind, experience and authority over the players, the passion for effects at any cost to more substantial musical qualities, and the unquestionable ability to make an orchestra “sound.”

It is due Mr. Fried to say that he made the *New York Symphony* sound as no one of a half dozen predecessors has done this season, For all that, and in spite of the remarkable demonstration of the audience at the end of the Brahms Symphony – an ovation that lasted for minutes and brought conductor and orchestra to their feet – the interpretation of that familiar work was as a whole mannered and superficial.

The first movement, from the interpretive standpoint, was the strongest. When Mr. Fried treated details in ways of his own they had logic and, above all, saliency. In the slow movement he fell short, not only of its mood, but its musical breath, its sustained lyricism, and its inherent classic balance. The movement became episodic and lost in significance. The third movement was not better. The finale, with the wondrous introduction and the victorious conclusion, told, and roused the audience to one of the greatest ovations that has been witnessed this season. Not to detract from the conductor's accomplishment, it is a movement that tells anyway, even when played less precipitately and at a pace more just to its form and content than the prevailing tempi of the conductor.

Perhaps the cloven hoof of tendencies not wholly classic and sacrosanct might have been suspected in advance from the fact that Mr. Fried followed Brahms's epic symphony with a suite from Stravinsky's *Oiseau de feu* and another orchestral suite from Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*, which seems to have become the popular orchestral show piece of the season. Some may have predicted, also, that the restlessness of much of the Brahms interpretation would find its outlet in the modern spirit and scoring of a Stravinsky. But Stravinsky, on the whole, was worse than Brahms. There is poetry and romantic feeling, as well as color, in the Russian score. It was distorted in tempi and its phrases and “jazzed up” to make a virtuoso's holiday. Most of the music rushed by at a pace so breathless that it was all but unintelligible, and, as in the Brahms symphony, the lyrical passages were mainly conspicuous for the unlyrical and unpoetic manner in which they were played.

If this reading was not intentionally impertinent to the composer, it was one which failed in comprehension of his mood, to say nothing of nice adjustment of details. The sunrise music of Ravel's suite, which is all color, and so instrumentated as to yield the richest returns to the conductor of picturesque inclinations, was considerably better, and fascinating to the ear.

The impression of this concert was of a conductor whose musical conception is of a highly debatable nature, who can, however, gain brilliant and striking effects, at short notice, with a band as competent as the New York Symphony.”

– Olin Downes. 17 March 1928

Not one to stay put even in good times, Fried's hurried escape from Berlin came immediately after the Nazis assumed power in 1933. Where would this itinerant soul land? To throw people off his trail, he announced that the Tbilisi Opera in Georgia had engaged him to conduct there; most references offer this unverified tale as fact.

An eyewitness account of Fried's plight comes from Verdina Shlomsky (1905-1990), Israel's first woman composer, in Shlosha Profolim (Three Profiles):

What shall I do? I'll go to the Chagalls', the house that's the nest of the émigrés. Near the Bois de Boulogne there is Chagall's beautiful villa with an enormous garden. Birds are singing, and Mrs. Chagall, may she rest in peace, is covering a table in the garden with a lot of flowers while Chagall walks there in the garden, feeding his beloved cats. Upstairs in the atelier are canvasses waiting to be painted. [to Mrs. Chagall:]: “It's very pleasant here and my thoughts are uneasy, about what will be, what started before I came there. I hope you're not waiting for someone, some important guests and that I'm not in your way.”

Often when his wife and I sit with him, Chagall talks about his life: “We're not waiting for anybody! Don't worry! Only for Oskar Fried.” The garden door opens again and slowly, the conductor Oskar Fried approaches. “Are you here?” he whispers into my ear. “It's good that you're here! Your presence is very reassuring to me because I feel that you are someone I can rely on.” All of us were thinking in those times about a plan: We have to arrange to get an invitation to Palestine for Oskar Fried. The question is “How?”

Paying attention to details, Chagall brought over the meal that he served in a diligent, precise

fashion and Oskar Fried systematically wolfed down his portion. I looked at him all the time, only at him, as if by some electrical current I sensed in him, like a telepathy, his feelings of worry and anxiety.

Oskar Fried! The great Maestro, the very famous man, the name who's known in all the music world yesterday and the day before, when they would hold special receptions for him in the most elegant salons and arrange his concerts at the Salle Pleyel, to which many of the Parisian elite came and it was impossible to even approach him, to even talk to him, he was like a Duke in his court. One time when I came to meet him at the house of the Princess de Polignac, where he was staying, I had to wait a number of hours, because . . . the house barber was laboring all that time to give him a head massage. And now, here he is, frightened and fidgeting, full of anxieties, and in complete confidence he tells me about his ongoing problems, and I felt the horror of homelessness in his heart and the fear of poverty in his eyes.

As the sun set into the horizon's pink hue, stars began to appear in a secretive way over the dusk, growing into a darkness that covered the garden. In confidence, Oskar Fried suggested that we should walk through the Champs Élysées. Paris was shining, bestowing something special on all her people walking along her streets, the feeling of a desire to float in this special atmosphere. "Paris Soir! Paris Soir!" shouted the paperboys, but there was no desire to stop this great feeling in walking there by looking into the future through the newspapers while Paris dresses herself for the evening. So Oskar Fried and I slowly walked along the Boulevards and we continued to speak and our conversation went on endlessly and we talked, almost whispering, especially he, as if trying to be careful not to disturb the noise of the Champs Élysées and the boulevards. He told me it's now a bargain market – dirt cheap: today you can buy for half price in an end-of-season sale. That's the way we are. That's what we've become. It's a great season in History that's coming, most probably, to an end. And do you know what's my wish now? I would like to go to the land of Israel, to get up and go, but right away. I'll agree in advance to the most minimal conditions. I want to form an orchestra and settle down there and I'll find a way in Palestine, I'm sure I will find a way and I will also conduct the orchestra. . . ." and with a sudden movement, he took out his wallet and quickly pulled out a few banknotes

and in an irritated voice, demanded of me: "Please break them into small coins but all the coins should be new, shiny, not soiled in any way. Do me a favor: I am collecting new coins."

Oskar Fried loved to visit my studio at which there were always friends present. They all came from the music world but never talked about music. This was a thing that got on his nerves: he didn't like it when people talked about music. What they did was they ate and this gave him real pleasure. One day he said: "I will not move from here. I will stay here only [until I'm able to move to] Palestine." Then he sat down and decided to write a letter to my brother [the prominent poet Avraham Shlonsky] in Palestine and among other things he wrote: "*Ich war immer ein Jude, ohne darauf Wort zu wegen.*" ("I was always a Jew, without giving it any importance.")

The cramped atmosphere in Paris pushed, even drove people and made them run away. Where to? It was difficult to focus. The view in Paris was soothing, making it easier to bear unpleasant thoughts and I was walking along the Boulevards and the little streets until I got tired and arrived at the feet of the Eiffel Tower and suddenly, what do I see under the tower but a Parisian policeman with a palette, busily painting, and when he saw that I was uneasy he covered the picture, but was very nice in his tone and he started a pleasant conversation. "Where are you from?" and when I told him and he said "Ah, the Jews. The Jews have to stop being Jews and mix, to stop existing (apart from others) It will put an end to their horrible suffering. It's something terrible that's going on, it's unbelievable, everything that's happening, and the Rule of the Money. I don't want to talk about Money: salauds! [Bastards!]" "Money [argent]?" I asked him with a smile. "Money ['argent' implies both money and silver] is a part of Nature. Argent is inside the earth." And from one thing to another, suddenly the man said "I wish that all people would understand that the health of the world is metaphysics, that religion is the daughter of Fear, and due to that, we have to educate ourselves to change fear into courage and the hope that people have in religion will have to be transformed into the security of being sure. Perhaps only then will the bright light of Justice shine through the darkness in which the esprit sank." With a great deal of conviction, he took off his painting from the easel and showed it to me, saying: "Look how beautiful this is."

Along wide boulevards with buildings on the sides and in good spirit, my heart slowly came to my working place. [She wonders about this Greek philosopher standing there, reviewing his life, then continues:] How lucky it was for me that I could think about the possibility of coming home, to Palestine, to the heat [khamsin], to be useful there. Others didn't have it. And then I remembered Oskar Fried, I don't know why he appeared suddenly. We are in Tel Aviv, 1934 and there is a symphony concert at the Ohel Shem [God's Tent] Theater and who is among the personnel? In the days before Huberman and Toscanini, a few people who knew how to play, a few mediocrities, and a few amateurs playing a Beethoven symphony and all the defects, not a small number of them, were accepted and forgiven. And suddenly, a very mistuned chord shook me and I turned back to the left and a few chairs away, I see Oskar Fried sitting among the public. Oskar Fried! And he says: "Didn't I tell you that I was going to conduct an orchestra in Palestine and here is the orchestra that I will conduct!" And I remember that it looked like a mirage to me when shortly afterwards the Beethoven Fifth was played in the same place by the same group of people with him conducting. Who could have predicted that such a thing is possible?

I was soon meeting him very frequently. His presence alone elevated a high spirit in the music world but Tel Aviv didn't reciprocate, but he visited Jerusalem and was enchanted, he would caress all kinds of donkeys, camels, and he always said "Don't you dare desecrate the ancient! Don't bring over Europe's leprosy. Leave it the way it is now. Don't add anything! Stop reading papers – there's nothing left there [Europe], nothing except headlines, lies, destruction!"

After that he went to Moscow. Why didn't we keep him, Oskar Fried, so that he will sit here among us? Not a long time passed and he died there, may his memory be blessed. So, whenever I am walking in an Autumn garden and step on the last season's wet leaves, I am sending my old fishing boat to the great sea of the past that will live forever in our selves in the continuing future.

Al Hamishmar, 1945. Translated by Oded Regev.

Chagall wrote Tel Aviv's mayor Dizengoff about "the first rate German musical artists that have been hurled into France and could find an application for their talents in Palestine." On learning that Dizengoff was close to the Philharmonic society, he mentions it is "headed by a young conductor. We don't know him, perhaps he is a talented man, but surely, even for his youth, is not as experienced as Oscar Fried. The latter wants to go to Palestine anyway. We are trying hard to convince him [to do so.] Though he is 60 years old, he is in full possession of his strength, which he is eager to give to Palestine." Fried stayed for a month of concerts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem with a local orchestra, one soon to be expanded by Huberman's creation of the *Palestine Symphony*. In Russia, some seventy five concerts were reported and by the 24-year-old Kurt Sanderling arrived in Moscow from Berlin (1936) he met Fried, whom he termed *kaput*. Fried's new Russian wife was a descendant of Glinka. He became irate about the interest in Mahler that snubbed him. Concerts became fewer due to Fried's declining health: he died in 1941 during the week when the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was abrogated and Stalin began murdering all nearby Germans. One report claims that he passed away in a hospital during a bombing, his last words were curses hurled at the overhead German warplanes. Fried's passing remains unsubstantiated as the deathbed defiance betrays the style of a Soviet cover-up. Fried acquired Russian citizenship in 1939 yet his finale and place of burial still remain obscure.

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