

Syracuse University

SURFACE

The Courier

Libraries

Spring 1985

Recollections from a Life in Music

Louis Krasner
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/libassoc>



Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krasner, Louis. "Recollections from a Life in Music." *The Courier* 20.1 (1985): 9-18.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Courier* by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
C O U R I E R



VOLUME XX, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1985

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY ASSOCIATES
COURIER

VOLUME XX

NUMBER ONE

SPRING 1985

- Foresight and Courage: A Tribute to Louis Krasner
by Howard Boatwright, Professor of Music,
Syracuse University 3
- Recollections from a Life in Music
by Louis Krasner, Professor Emeritus of Music,
Syracuse University; and Instructor of Violin,
New England Conservatory of Music 9
- Unusual Beethoven Items from the Krasner Collection
by Donald Seibert, Music Bibliographer,
Syracuse University Libraries 19
- Álvaro-Agustín de Liaño and His Books in
Leopold von Ranke's Library
by Gail P. Huetting, Librarian, University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign 31
- Lady Chatterley's Lover*: The Grove Press Publication of the
Unexpurgated Text
by Raymond T. Caffrey, New York University 49
- Benson Lossing: His Life and Work, 1830-1860
by Diane M. Casey, Syracuse University 81
- News of the Syracuse University Libraries
and the Library Associates 97

Recollections from a Life in Music

BY LOUIS KRASNER

On October 28, 1984, Mr. Krasner came back to his old home, Syracuse University, in order to speak to the Library Associates at their annual meeting. After a warm introduction by Professor Frank Macomber of the Department of Fine Arts, Mr. Krasner gave his address on the subject of American composers whom he had known and worked with. The following is an abstract of his talk, in which particular emphasis has been given to Roger Sessions.

I have always been deeply interested in the affairs of the Syracuse University Library Associates and I feel honored by your invitation to speak at this luncheon. Only on an occasion such as this do I realize how long it has been and how very many are the years for which I have to account. I have reflected hard during recent days and I have attempted to bring some order to the thoughts that have accumulated during many decades and now crowd my mind. The passage of time seems only to add to the questions that possess us, or at least to change them as they stir the memory.

Do we truly get smart in later life? I am not sure. But whatever it is that matures our advanced years, I recognize that a thoughtful, deeper insight is not the usual characteristic of youth—which is an overloaded time when we must strive, when we must push, persevere, and hasten on towards the realization of our ambitions. Do we, as we grow older, become reflective, and a little more tolerant? Perhaps, but sometimes, also a little less tolerant. Not only do human values change—and always with increased acceleration—but, also our own individual outlooks undergo constant revision.

Rudolph Kolisch, the highly esteemed violinist and leader of the internationally known Kolisch Quartet of Vienna, which premiered the important new works of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern in the 1920s and 1930s, was teaching in Boston in his retirement when I



Louis Krasner at violinist Paul White's summer camp in Newport, Maine, 1922.

arrived there a few years ago. As old friends, we found much to talk about, and in our long discussions Kolisch boldly philosophized that he had arrived at the conclusion that the great music of the masters should not be performed at all, but should only be read and studied from the score. This, mind you, was Kolisch's contention after a lifetime of highly successful concertizing in the United States and in Europe. It sounded like an outrageous idea. But it came from an authoritative musician who was already over eighty years old.

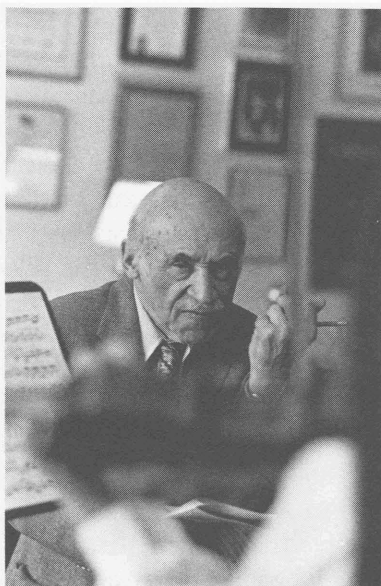
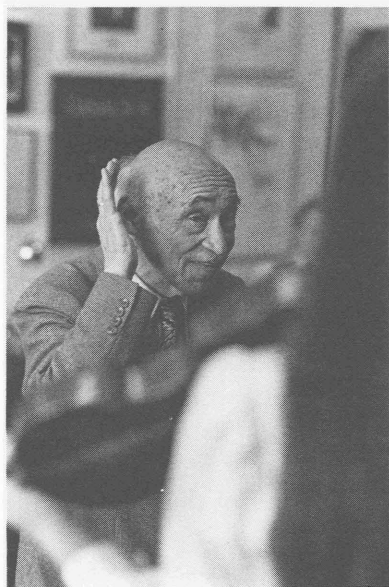
So, as I continue to work and fret with talented and accomplished student musicians, I arrive at a deeper understanding of Kolisch's point of view. Let me explain. A great work of art, as, for example, a late Beethoven quartet adagio, is—in its vision, in its universality, in its

infinite measure of contemplation—so overwhelming and all-consuming in its power that it appears impossible and beyond human ability to recreate and bring it to total and perfect realization, to achieve the oneness with it that existed in the mind of the creator at the moment of its inspired conception. Thus, it may be that, indeed, Kolisch's view does merit serious consideration. To my students, however, I present Kolisch's viewpoint in order to argue and perhaps even to support my conviction that *struggle* and *striving* are themselves actual, vital, and productive forces that are inherent in a true work of art. In interpretive performance also, the performer's self-identification with the essence of the artwork, the striving, the persistent striving, and the total and complete dedication—these breathe life into the art experience and its uplifting sense of perfection. Émile Zola expressed it in words that are inspirational for the performer. "Art", said Zola, "is a corner of the Universe, seen through a temperament."

I have become an octogenarian—the word rings forbiddingly in my ear. But there are compensations too, for it is apparent that the status brings with it some distinction and, I hope as well, the privilege of indulging in reflection with one's friends. And now, I shall turn to the subject of my many decades as an American musician.

I have a hazy memory of longing folk-songs that my mother sang beautifully in my infancy. But my first discovery of outside music occurred when, at the age of four, I heard the awesome ceremonial chants of orthodox Russian priests during a funeral procession on a dusty country road in a tiny village of the Ukraine. Then came my family's emigration to the United States. About two or three years later, I began to spend hours lingering outside glass store fronts on the sidewalks of Providence, Rhode Island, listening to the latest sentimental ballads and ragtime music that was played, sung, and sold by talented and very persuasive singers and pianists.

I remember at about that time being entranced as I stood by a small group of instrumentalists and singers at a lively, folksy Jewish wedding in a neighbor's apartment. Soon, and despite a very scratchy voice, I coaxed my way to membership in a small synagogue choir. It was when I heard (and I can still relive the moment) the heart-rending, expressive beauty of a Psalm sung by my elder, twelve-year-old brother Jacob at the High Holiday services in a synagogue that I



Louis Krasner in his master class at Crouse College, Syracuse University, in October 1984 (Photos: Steve Sartori).

recognized the necessity of music for my life. My violin study began at this time, relatively late, at the age of nine. Four or five years later, by a stroke of good fortune and the generous, long-lasting sponsorship of a wonderful lady, I was taken to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory of Music.

In due course, I discovered the music of Charles Ives, Leo Ornstein, and George Antheil, who was then known as the “bad boy of music”. When I met Roy Harris, Henry Cowell, Walter Piston, and others, I never failed to urge each of them to write music for the violin. Roy Harris obliged me with a piece called Prelude, which was impassioned, impulsive, and characteristically expansive. Harris enjoyed considerable attention and prominence for a time as the typically American composer, whose music depicted our great, western-frontier landscape. Henry Cowell’s response to my urgings was the Suite for Violin and Piano, which, despite his close friendship with Charles Ives, was more suggestive of Far Eastern thought. Cowell’s music is contemplative, colorful, somewhat repetitious, and even introspectively shy.

My closer association with two of America’s most significant composers, Roger Sessions and Aaron Copland, came later. The music of each master is as unlike the other’s as could be expected from two so dissimilar natures and personalities. Nevertheless, they always enjoyed a warm, affectionate admiration for each other, and in the 1930s they organized jointly a Society for the Promotion of American Music. Copland’s music is loved for its open harmonies and jazzy American rhythms. Sessions’ expressivity is heavier-laden with darker harmonies and complex rhythms. And, it is not readily accessible. Copland’s music is closer to France than to Sessions, while Sessions relates to Central European influence more than to Copland or other Americans. You may be interested to know that Roger Sessions had ties to Syracuse through his sister Hannah, who was the wife of Paul Shipman Andrews, former dean of the Syracuse University College of Law.

Roger Sessions’ Violin Concerto is one of the most important concertos of our time. When I played it in 1947 with Dimitri Mitropoulos and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, the composer wrote out extensive notes, which, I think, shed light on the mood of the times and lend insight also into the work process of a composer and the creative energies that propel his being. Sessions wrote:

My Violin Concerto was begun in Rome in 1931 and finished in San Francisco in 1935. I did not work on it continuously between these dates. At that time I was composing little, allowing my conceptions to take place slowly, and reflecting, and observing much; besides that, I was making and undergoing great changes, in a purely external sense. About the time the Concerto was begun, I left Italy, where I had lived for six years, and went to live in Germany for two years. The first movement was composed in the summer of 1931 in Eastern Holstein, on the shores of the Baltic Sea; the second was completed, and the third, in essentials, and the fourth were sketched, in Berlin, in the following months. I did not, however, bring it to completion till the summer of 1935, when, after having witnessed the Hitler revolution and having shortly thereafter returned to the United States, I visited California for the first time as a guest teacher at the University in Berkeley. The Concerto is associated in my mind with all of these events and with others of a more personal nature; but I have no reason to consider the music as connected with them in any more direct sense than that of having been composed with great intensity in a period of intense living and rapid change, both inward and outward. But for me the work is a very important one; not only do I feel that I have put a very large part of myself into it, but I still feel that it is the first of my works in which is clearly embodied what has come to be most characteristic of all my later music.

An internationally known violinist had asked me for the score even before its completion; he later announced his intention of performing it. The date was set for early December 1936, with one of the major Eastern orchestras, and had been extensively publicized both by the violinist and otherwise. Three weeks before the performance, however, the violinist asked for a postponement and requested me to change the work in certain respects—in particular, he asked me to compose a new Finale. Since I had written the Concerto as I wished it, and since I had also been in constant consultation with a first-class violinist during the composition of the violin part, this was clearly out of the question. I finally, however, felt obliged to release the violinist from his agreement

to play the work, and did so on my own initiative. No doubt, it was this episode which has led to rumors that the violin part is “unplayable”; but it should be made clear that it was on my initiative, and not that of the violinist in question, that he was released from what he considered an obligation, and that I have no reason to believe that he is responsible for any rumors regarding the ‘unplayability’ of the work. The episode was, in my opinion, unavoidable, though there is no doubt that it constituted a serious setback—even though a temporary one—for the work itself. This is by no means the first time, moreover, that a new work has been declared unplayable, especially in the case of stringed instruments with their highly specialized technique.

I might tell you here of my own meeting with Mr. Sessions at the time the Concerto’s performance was suddenly cancelled. I had travelled from New York City to Boston to hear the work. It was soon after the successful launching of the Alban Berg concerto and I was eager to hear and possibly add another new concerto to my repertoire. My disappointment was therefore keen when, upon arrival at Symphony Hall, I read the “cancelled” strip which had been pasted over the large display poster outside the hall. I took the next train back to New York City and, to my great delight, I met Roger Sessions on the train. He recounted the entire sad story of the Concerto and its unhappy cancellation. He then asked me whether, in view of my having had some performing experience with so-called problematic, ‘unplayable’ violin music, I would take time to examine his work and report to him as to the validity of the criticisms that had caused cancellation of this, for him, very important performance.

I received Sessions’ manuscript shortly afterward and, following some study, I determined that there were indeed a few passages which I wished to recommend for change. However, before submitting my findings to the composer, I grew a little hesitant and turned to my friend Richard Burgin, the deeply admired concertmaster of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at that time, with the request that he also examine the score and let me have his judgment. After some time, Richard Burgin informed me that he, too, had found various passages which did not seem suitable to him and which he recommended should be altered. It then developed in our further discussions that the pas-

sages objected to by the original performer were different ones from those I had marked for elimination. Furthermore, the places that Mr. Burgin designated for change were different still from the parts that both the original soloist and I had criticized and wished altered or rewritten.

When I explained these discrepant findings to Roger Sessions, he was, of course, amused and we all agreed enthusiastically that the Concerto should certainly stand exactly as it was originally written. It has since been played by several artists and I do not think that I could now even locate the various, so-called 'unplayable' sections of the piece.

It is a matter of record that both the Brahms and Tchaikowsky violin concertos were, at first, rejected as unviolinistic. The concerto of Alban Berg, although warmly received by the general public in all its early performances, was often described by critics and musicians as cacophonous and written against the violin. The Berg is now admired everywhere, as one of the standard-repertoire violin concertos. The Arnold Schoenberg violin concerto is in my judgment a truly great and monumental work, which makes utmost demands on performer and listener alike. As yet, only a small number of violinists play it and its acceptance by the public has been slow and labored. Schoenberg always said: "I can wait."

The innovative new music of the 1930s and 1940s frequently excited audiences to much furor, opposition, demonstration, and rancor; whereas the contemporary music of more recent years is, I think, somewhat milder and more audience-conscious. Nevertheless, it should be noted that public acceptance has, in general, not been heightened measurably by this fact.

Now, I shall return very briefly to my earlier American years.

The violin concerto by the high-ranking Italian composer, Alfredo Casella, had its first performance in 1929 in Boston when I played it from manuscript under the baton of the composer.

During that period I played and also recorded for Columbia Records a new Sonata for Violin and Piano by the American composer Walter Piston, who was at the piano for the performance and recording. By the way, Walter Piston was also the pianist when, as students, we played together in a trio which provided background music in a Boston downtown hotel lobby. Piston was of Italian parentage and his music bears some similarity in attitude to that of Casella.

Nevertheless, nothing in either composer's work can be identified as Italian or American, although both correspond in flow and style.

The Sonata for Violin and Piano by the gifted composer and pianist Easley Blackwood is an individualistic and effective work of considerable momentum. We played it at the University of Chicago, where the composer is based, and later in Syracuse, which has faithfully supported many first performances.

I must, at this point, take a moment to express my appreciation and gratitude to Syracuse University and the Syracuse community for the encouragement both have always given all local music organizations in their efforts to bring famous and also lesser-known composers to this area. This city and University may well be proud of the distinguished composers that have lived and taught here. Those that I have known and performed—Joseph McGrath, Ernst Bacon, Howard Boatwright, Earl George, and Franklin Morris—have always been of inspirational help to me, as well as stimulating for all artistic activity.

Syracuse has in its interest and support kept abreast very honorably with contemporary music. Not only the Syracuse Symphony, sustained in its infancy by the efforts of Chancellor William P. Tolley, but also the University Orchestra concerts, and the Art Festival events, together with the outstanding concerts sponsored by the Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music—these have all helped to bring Syracuse much national recognition as one of our country's respected cultural centers. The long list of composers who visited, played, lectured, and conducted at Crouse College reflects nobly on the Syracuse public. I am proud that Dimitri Mitropoulos and Aaron Copland have been recipients of honorary degrees from Syracuse University.

There is little time left for me on this occasion to talk at any length about my important years in Europe. I lived in Paris during the now famous 1920s and made my debut in Vienna in 1929. During the years that followed I lived and studied in Berlin in the pre-pogrom period and later in Vienna. That increasingly turbulent period was of enormous significance for me. My colleagues and friends were often deeply involved intellectually and emotionally in the political and social upheavals, and I myself witnessed strife and actual military battles fought between the Social-Democratic regime of Vienna and the Federal Fascist government of Austria. My concertizing in Europe continued, as did also the frenzied enterprise of the creative artists

and their loyal followers and supporters in Central Europe. Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern were the music heroes. My good fortune in having had the opportunity to live and function during those years in Vienna—"the proving ground for World destruction" in the words of Karl Kraus—was great beyond calculation. The arrival of Hitler in Vienna, of course, hastened my return to the United States.

Overall, I feel that my early American training, institutional and other, and the sense of courage and venture which it imbued in me, served me to great advantage as a young man associating with and finding acceptance among well-established, mature musicians, artists, and successful performers in Europe. Reviewing the advantages and the continued opportunities opened to me by the patronage of my generous private benefactor in the days before government and foundation grants, a friend dubbed me "one of the last examples of a kind of period piece of early Americana". It is interesting, perhaps even elucidating, to think of myself in terms of a Benjamin Franklin stove or a Duncan Phyfe chair.

I will leave you now. Thank you for your attention—and much more.