

Alexander Goehr
“Fings ain’t wot they used t’be”

On behalf of the
Archives of the Akademie der Künste
edited by Werner Grünzweig

First Edition 2012

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Printed in Germany

Editorial assistance: Lynn Matheson, Anouk Jeschke, Alexander K. Rothe

Music examples set by Oliver Dahin, Berlin

Scans: Kerstin Brümmer

Typeset in Simoncini Garamond by michon, Hofheim

Print: AK-Druck&Medien GmbH, Schneckenlohe

Cover design: Friedwalt Donner, Alonissos

Cover photo: Misha Donat, London

ISBN 978-3-936000-28-3

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Werner Grünzweig In Dialogue with the Past

The name Goehr has been familiar in music circles in central Europe for decades. Alexander Goehr's father, Walter Goehr (1903-60), a former member of Arnold Schoenberg's master class at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, was known not only for his productions of Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespers* and operas but also for his performances of contemporary music. Compositions by Alexander Goehr, who has been called "Sandy" since childhood days, have been featured at renowned music festivals in Germany since the mid-1950s. In 1956 his *Fantasia*, Op. 4, was performed at the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in a programme also including works by Ernst Krenek, Arnold Schoenberg, Luigi Nono and Bernd Alois Zimmermann. In 1965 the *Pastorals*, Op. 19, were premiered by the Südwestfunk-Orchester conducted by Ernest Bour at the Donaueschinger Musiktage. Only one year later, his first opera *Arden muß sterben / Arden Must Die*, composed to a libretto by Erich Fried, was premiered at the Hamburg Staatsoper. At that time in Germany, new music was promoted as it had never been before, a phenomenon made possible to a large extent by the generous support of numerous radio stations. Young composers from all over the world could now reach an international audience, whether by means of the numerous festivals for new music (Darmstadt and Donaueschingen were but two of many), or through concert series hosted by the broadcasting stations in the German states ('Länder'). These productions were, in turn, often broadcast in (Western) countries around the world.

Initially, Alexander Goehr seemed to fit in perfectly with this newly emerging international avant-garde scene. Born in Berlin in 1932, he grew up in London and studied with Richard Hall at the Royal Manchester College. A French scholarship enabled him to study with Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod at the Paris Conservatoire de Musique in 1955-56. In 1967 Goehr held a scholarship in Tokyo, where he studied the music of the *nō* theatre. From 1967-68 he was composer-in-residence at the New England Conservatory in Boston and at the Berkshire Music Festival in Tanglewood. In 1968-69 he was associate professor at Yale University. In addition to his teaching positions in England (Leeds University, 1971-76; University of Cambridge, 1976-99), he taught at the Beijing Central Conservatory of Music in 1980 and, in the following year, was a visiting professor at both the University of Hong Kong and the University of Wollongong, Australia.

With these many teaching opportunities across the globe, Goehr might have chosen the life of a composer comfortably entrenched within the ivory towers of academia and of institutional funding, but such a course would not have been in keeping with his own personal convictions, especially of taking the audience and musicians into consideration. Goehr noted with dismay how the new-music scene was becoming restricted to festivals or concert series for the initiated few. Although it was accepted and studied in academic circles, avant-garde music had more or less become separated from general musical intentions and became an artistic ghetto—if often a luxurious one—where it remained inaccessible to those who had until then supported traditional music culture; and, Goehr disapproved of the prospect of music becoming increasingly isolated.

During his studies in Paris, Goehr had already experienced what follows from dividing music into separate and distinct compositional camps according to style and aesthetics. His wish to study privately with Max Deutsch, a former Schoenberg student, remained unfulfilled; Deutsch flatly refused to teach a pupil of Messiaen's. Goehr describes these tensions in an interview with Deutschlandradio Kultur:

In Paris I had wanted to study with Max Deutsch, Schoenberg's pupil, as well as being in Messiaen's class at the Conservatoire. But, perhaps in keeping with the tradition of the 'Schoenberg School,' he found such a compromise impossible and showed me the door. Many years later I visited and was generously entertained by Mrs. Schoenberg in Los Angeles; and, when I left, she gave me a facsimile score of *Die Jakobskeiter* and in it she wrote, "Für Sandy Goehr, kein Kompromiß!" That was Schoenberg. I had to smile to myself as I left, because compromise is not a dirty word. There's no such thing as an art without compromise: compromise between a hopefully well-imagined score and the way it is performed; between different traditions and beliefs. Indeed, the world of Schoenberg was also my own—as it were the *Lares et Penates* of our home. But Stravinsky, Messiaen, the world of Darmstadt could not be brushed aside: all these, and as far as I appreciated and understood them, existed to be used. This implies, if not compromise, at least synthesis. As in the political world, less damage is done by understanding the 'other' and bringing diverse things together—that is, less damage than by the pursuit of the kinds of utopias I believed in long ago. I believed in new beginnings; they were a part of my life. Somewhere in me they still exist... or maybe not?

Was Messiaen someone who believed he was opening a new musical world to his students?

Yes and no. Before I got to know him face to face, I saw him through his compositions, writings and ideas as a guide into a new aesthetic of composing. But, in class at the Conservatoire, much of the teaching was shockingly traditional, and—even as it appeared to me then—quite superficial. On the other hand, I was overwhelmed—and still am—by some of the things he said and some of the pieces of that period (for instance, the *Livre d'orgue*), not principally for the way they seem to have been written down, but for their actual sound (especially in Messiaen's own recordings). I had Darmstadt and Schoenberg and Schenker-inspired notions about musical structure. By and large these meant little to Messiaen. As he remarked about Darmstadt activities, "Ils sont tous fous." (They are all crazy.) What I could not know then and can only understand now with some difficulty is that Messiaen was primarily concerned with the phenomenon of sound as it exists, but not in how it might come to be what it is.¹

Goehr must have soon realised that polemics between different schools of compositional style—for example, the failure to recognise such a central figure as Messiaen—must invariably lead to an intolerable lack of communication. Without mutual understanding and without compromise between artistic positions, both art and life in general become devoid of meaning. In England Goehr took a path that would prove to be a continuous challenge. Whereas avant-garde music formed a domain of its own in Germany, musical life in England around 1960 was more unified. Goehr was given opportunities but not provided with a special world. Although he grew up in England with English as his mother tongue and held some of the most coveted positions in academia—such as Professor of Music, Head of Faculty and Chairman of Faculty Board of Music at the University of Cambridge—he always remained somewhat of an outsider. "Had I gone to the U.S., I would have been an American composer today. But one cannot become an Englishman."

Goehr worked in a country that places a great deal of emphasis on upholding cultural traditions and institutions; and, he sees both his daily encounters with local tradition and the corresponding necessity to find compromises as a positive stimulus, as a means of broadening his personal and artistic horizons. To do this, it was necessary for him to become familiar with musical traditions which were not at that time necessarily part of his culture. Thus, even though it meant weathering criticism from advocates of a 'pure' musical avant-garde, he wrote—and continues to write—music that is in dialogue with the past, in turn making it accessible to a wide-

1 *Fortschritt einst und jetzt. Begegnungen mit Alexander Goehr.* Alexander Goehr in a discussion with Christine Anderson and Werner Grünzweig. Six radio broadcasts in January and February 2011, Deutschlandradio Kultur. The discussions were held in German.

er audience. Furthermore, Goehr avoids imposing any sort of confining interpretation on his musical works that would inhibit the performers' own ideas and ability to realise the score. A composer must be willing to accept the tension that exists between his or her own interpretation of a composition and that of the performers and listeners, for these differences are not only inevitable but are inherent in the nature of music and its realisation. Perhaps some of the most inspiring and satisfying moments for Goehr are when musicians are capable of infusing a musical work with new meaning, albeit in such a way that remains sensitive to the composer's own intentions. With his open-mindedness Goehr demonstrates that the refusal to compromise—an attitude which has all too often been glorified in the history of art during the twentieth century—is not always the most valiant and challenging path. On the other hand he does not feel that genuine musical values can be compromised. On the contrary, artistic truthfulness in music, such as that exemplified by Artur Schnabel in *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*,² can be more than the somewhat antiquated *épater le bourgeois*.

*

Alexander Goehr bequeathed his musical estate to the music archives at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin in 2010. The materials of both his father, Walter Goehr, and his uncle, Rudolph Goehr (1906-81)—both of whom were students in Schoenberg's master class for composition at the Akademie—have been a part of the music archive since 2003. In January 2011 the Alexander Goehr Archive was presented to the general public in the form of a concert and discussion within the context of the Ultraschall festival in the Berlin Sophiensæle. In January and February of the same year, six 90-minute radio interviews were broadcast throughout Germany on Deutschlandradio Kultur, interviews in which Goehr discussed his compositions and artistic ideas with Christine Anderson and Werner Grünzweig. Even though there has been an increasing interest in Goehr's music in Germany, the Akademie has decided for the first time to publish a volume of its archive series in English only. One reason for this decision is that the main essay in this book was written by one of the most prominent writers on contemporary music in the English-speaking world, Paul Griffiths.

The archives' book series is intended to inform readers of the most important music collections at the Akademie. The catalogue in the back of each volume includes only music manuscripts. Correspondence, theoretical writings, teaching materials,

2 Artur Schnabel: *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*, ed. Lynn Matheson and Ann Schnabel Mottier (Hofheim, Wolke, 2007).

programme notes, photographs and personal documents are also contained in the Alexander Goehr Archive but are not listed here. In the future it will be possible to research all the archives' materials online at www.adk.de.

The accompanying CD, which contains a recording of the String Quartet No. 3, Op. 37, and the song cycle *Das Gesetz der Quadrille*, Op. 41, was made possible through the generous help and support of Sally Groves of Schott Music, London, as well as from WERGO Records, Mainz.