

JAMES SIMON

Dr James Simon, born in Berlin on 29 September 1880, was a composer, pianist and musicologist. At the Musikhochschule, his teachers included Max Bruch (composition) and Conrad Ansgore (piano). In Munich he wrote his PhD dissertation, *Abt Voglers Kompositorische Werke* (1904), followed by *Faust in der Musik* (1906), published in a series of musicological studies edited by Richard Strauss.

From 1907 to 1919, Simon taught in the Klindworth-Scharwenka Conservatory in Berlin.

He was active as a pianist throughout his life, giving solo recitals, playing chamber music and, as a prolific composer of Lieder, probably often accompanied singers in recitals. Shoshana Heyd, his niece, was very close to her uncle, studying piano with him for some years:

I looked up to him with great admiration and love ... and I remember his lectures and piano lessons very well. He was a wonderful teacher... I remember James Simon when I play a Bach fugue. He said to me, 'You know, you must play it as if it has started from olden times. Not as if it starts now but as if it is from eternity to eternity.'

Shoshana, recalling his Berlin recitals and that he especially liked playing Chopin, Brahms and Beethoven, also remembered his lectures on Mozart operas and Bach cantatas. In a similar conversation, Simon's son, Prof. Ulrich Simon, characterised his father as an 'established, liberal and wealthy Jewish family'. According to his son, James lived in a make-believe, Alice in Wonderland world. He was quite conservative in his musical tastes, and although he admired the musical-aesthetic thinking of the famous pianist and composer, Ferruccio Busoni, he kept his distance not only from Schoenberg and his followers, but even from Mahler. Ulrich stressed that his father, though a twice-a-year visitor to the synagogue, was

'very German, really. And ... later on ... for me, he became the great guard of the German classical repertoire, especially Bach and Mozart. That was really his life.'

For his son, James' utter other-worldliness was the key to his existence; he was unable to register what was going on around him. His composition, performance, lecturing and writing were the expanse upon which he created, recreated and extrapolated his art by sharing it with his audiences.

Although James Simon was decidedly conservative as a composer, he wrote much beautiful music and was a consummate musician. His approximately 100 lieder number many very beautiful songs among them. The best of them continue the great tradition of lieder from Beethoven to Hugo Wolf and [Richard Strauss](#). His Sonata op. 9, for cello and piano, owes much to Strauss's influence. His single opera, *Frau im Stein* (Lady in the Stone, 1925), set to music Rolf Lauckner's, of the same name, subtitled as a *Drama für Musik* (1918), performed only once, was published by Universal Edition in Vienna. Many of his larger works, including orchestral compositions, string quartets and a cantata, *Ein Pilgermorgen* (A Pilgrim's Morning, 1929-30) for soprano, tenor, baritone, chorus and orchestra (Rilke), remain in manuscript and have never been performed. At a Jewish Culture Union concert on 17 June 1934 at the Berliner Theater, the Union and its Opera Chorus presented works by Orlando di Lasso, Hans Leo Hassler, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, Israel Brandmann, Moritz Goldstein and James Simon. The latter was the world premiere of Simon's setting of Psalm 137. The work was positively reviewed by Dr Ludwig Mioch in the *Gemeindeblatt* of 7 July 1934: 'This group was preceded by Psalm 137 in a truly sensitive and smart composition by James Simon that was first performed on this occasion.'

The composer was not present on that occasion, however, as he had already left Berlin in 1933, settling in Zürich. During his short visit to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in 1938, he composed a *Lament in Yemenite Style* for cello and piano in memory of his sister. He gave a piano recital in a private home and presented a lecture on music in the Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, speaking in German. Returning to Europe, Simon took up residence in Amsterdam. Although his life there was very difficult, he continued both his composition and performance. Trying hard to have his *Symphonic Dances* programmed by the Concertgebouw Orchestra, they were finally accepted, but not yet scheduled, when the war began and Jewish composers' works were prohibited. The work was never performed. Simon did, however, give radio broadcasts, one of which included Scarlatti, Martini, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Simon joined the well-known violinist [Alma Rosé](#) in a recital on 24 August 1941 at the Amsterdam Ontspanningsgebouw, including Beethoven's Spring Sonata, a group of piano pieces by Mendelssohn, Schubert's great Fantasie, op. 159 and short pieces by Paganini-Přihoda, Dvořák, Anton Rubinstein, Debussy and Pablo de Sarasate.

In late March or early April 1944, Simon was sent to [Westerbork](#), and on April 4 was one of a thousand inmates deported to [Terezín](#). Simon quickly entered into the musical life of the ghetto. He played recitals and gave a number of lectures. While he quite likely wrote other works there, none have survived. On 9 July 1944, however, he set Psalm 126 for Karel Fischer's Durra-Chor, which was performed seven times in Terezín between July and October. Besides listing his lecture topics there, which included his earlier 'Music in the Bible', he closed the circle which he

had opened with the Psalm 137 setting. As did so many of his fellow musicians in the ghetto, James Simon also prepared a souvenir sheet for Karl Herrmann:

'Dedicated to Karl Herrmann. "Do righteous deeds and throw them into the sea." It is according to this Arab proverb you act in your modest readiness to help, for which I wish to thank you. [Notating the opening of the melody, Simon inscribed its text, beginning of Psalm 126.] "When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion..." – Dr James Simon from Berlin, Theresienstadt, 21.9.44.'

On 12 October he boarded the transport to Auschwitz and died in a gas chamber shortly after his arrival.

By David Bloch

Source

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