

Rosy Wertheim (1888– 1949)

Born in Amsterdam, Rosy (Rosalie) Marie Wertheim early on exhibited musical gifts. Her initial inclination was toward a career in social work, but her piano teacher convinced her to pursue her musical ambitions. She took the state exam in piano teaching and got her certificate in 1912, after which she took voice lessons and studied composition with Bernard Zweers and Sem Dresden. During this time she also taught piano and solfege at the Amsterdam Muzieklyceum. Her early interest in social work and concern for the working classes grew into a deep commitment: she conducted the Jewish women's chorus of the Religieuse Socialistisch Verbond in Amsterdam, taught piano to poor children, supported a number of needy families from her own income, and conducted a children's chorus in a low-income neighborhood.

Like many of her Dutch contemporaries in the 1910s and 20s, Wertheim came under the influence of French music, greatly admiring the Impressionist works of Debussy and Ravel, as well as the music of Stravinsky. In 1929 she moved to Paris to study composition with Louis Aubert. Her home became a haven for Dutch artists and composers, and a veritable salon for leading French composers like Milhaud, Honegger, Messiaen, Jolivet, Ibert, and Elsa Barraine. Between 1929 and 1935, her works were frequently included on concert programs in Paris. In 1935 she left Paris for a year in Vienna, studying with Karl Weigl and garnering more performances of her music. From 1936 to 1937 she spent time in the U.S., where her *String Quartet*, *Divertimento for Chamber Orchestra*, and a number of piano pieces were well-received as part of a Composers' Forum concert. During her time in the States she also worked as foreign correspondent for Dutch newspapers, as she had done in Paris and Vienna.

She returned home to Amsterdam only to find a quickly deteriorating situation. At this point sources about her diverge. One source describes her going into hiding because of her

Jewish origins. (Metzelaar) Another source suggests far more activity during the war years, however clandestine. Her obituary describes the incredible source of comfort and support she was to others during the war years. Many who knew her were especially grateful for the covert concerts she gave in the basement of her home, in which she frequently presented works by Jewish composers, whose music had been outlawed. (*Mens en Melodie*)

Among her most successful works were the *Piano Concerto*, written in 1940 and premiered by the well-known and respected conductor of the Residentie Orchestra, Willem van Otterloo; the *Divertimento for Chamber Orchestra* (1934) and the *String Quartet* (1932), both performed in New York; a piano suite; and a *Trio for flute, clarinet, and bassoon*. Her music has been described as cheerful, neo-classical, and at times playful. (Metzelaar)

A number of things stand out in the transcript of the Composers' Forum session in 1937. Audience members frequently brought up their concerns about social consciousness on the part of composers, particularly regarding the difficult to understand "modern" music. In this particular instance, a listener asked, to the amusement of the rest of the audience, "Why don't you give a beginner's class in appreciation of counterpoint and modern music?" Wertheim handled the question with her typical spirit of generosity, replying, in not quite comfortable English, "I would appreciate very highly if I could do that." Her answer was greeted with a round of applause from the audience. The audience also perceived a difference in style between two of her pieces: the string quartet they thought to be more "classical" and the *Suite for the Young* more "modern." The audience was, of course dramatically divided in its reception of the "modern" music. One listener thought the *Suite* "excellently constructed" with "pleasant dissonances," while another "[did] not wish to sound impertinent" but believed that the music sounded "as if it had been either written or played upside down." This listener stated that he

preferred the classics. Other audience members were particularly interested in Wertheim's influences, wanting to know to what contemporary "school" she belonged, and declaring that her *Divertimento* "smack[ed] of Cesar Franck's chromaticism," which Wertheim vehemently denied. Overall, however, her music was received quite warmly.

One of the questions of interest, apart from learning more about her fascinating life history, is related to one of the questions asked during the Forum. What were her influences? and to what school *did* she belong? The answer to that would possibly uncover an explanation for how she came to be residing in New York in the first place. Did she socialize with any of the numerous American composers in Paris during her salon years? Or was it Bernard Wagenaar, a fellow Dutch composer already established in America, who provided the impetus for her American sojourn? Much remains to be discovered about this composer's life and music. Other than Helen Metzelaar's entry in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the only known writings about Wertheim date from the 1940s. Wertheim's own writings as foreign correspondent for Dutch newspapers remain completely unexplored, and the relationship between her music and her social concerns would be an interesting study. We are fortunate to have a photograph of Wertheim, included on the cover of the Composers' Forum concert program.

Selected Bibliography

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