Johanna Senfter

* 27 November 1879 in Oppenheim am Rhein, Deutschland
† 11 August 1961 in Oppenheim, Deutschland

Composer, choral and orchestral director, pianist, violinist, pedagogue

"Miss Senfter possesses a quite extraordinary talent for composition and has accordingly, with great diligence, attained surprisingly good results in composition. Of her numerous compositions, a Sonata [...] for violin and pianoforte was performed most successfully at the last public examinations on 23 March 1909.
Professor Dr. Max Reger"

(Christy's testimony of her teacher Max Reger from the year 1909, in: Kottmann, 1999, p. 10)

Profile

Johanna Senfter was a very versatile composer whose works were strongly influenced by the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms and her teacher Max Reger, with whom she enjoyed a friendly relationship following her studies. After Reger's death in 1916 she continued to develop her late romantic compositional style, at times approaching the limits of tonality but without stepping beyond them. The works of her models Bach, Brahms and Reger also stood at the centre of her work as the artistic director of both Oppenheim Music Societies. After the Second World War she withdrew almost completely from public musical life, but continued to compose for the rest of her life.

Cities and countries

Johanna Senfter grew up Oppenheim, Rhineland-Palatinate and spent her school and student years in Frankfurt am Main. In 1908 she went to Leipzig for a year in order to study at the Conservatory there with Max Reger; she then returned to Oppenheim, which was to remain the central location of her life.

Biography

Johanna Senfter was born on 27 November 1879 in Oppenheim am Rhein. She was the youngest of six children of a very well-to-do family. Her uncle, the Oppenheimer pharmacist Carl Koch, attained great wealth and recognition in 1824 through the invention of the industrial production of the antipyretic substance quinine. The name "Millionensafter" is still known to the residents of Oppenheim today.

Johanna's music-loving mother Elise Senfter encouraged the musical talent of her youngest daughter through early instruction at the piano and on the violin.

After suffering a serious case of diphtheria, she was sent to the girls' boarding school "Frielingshaus" in Frankfurt am Main at the age of 13. Starting at the age of 16, in 1895, she began studies at Hoch's Conservatory in Frankfurt parallel to her schooling. She received instruction in the subjects of organ, violin (with Adolf Rebner) and piano (with Carl Friedberg). She received instruction in composition from Iwan Knorr, a friend of Tchaikovsky and Brahms; with Knorr, she occupied herself intensively with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. All things considered, she received a rock-solid education that was firmly anchored in the tradition of the conservative, late-romantic conception of music. She completed her studies in 1903 and returned to the house of her parents. Beginning in 1907 she had private lessons with Max Reger, who recognised her great compositional talent and encouraged her parents to enable their daughter to study further:
"Dear Sir!
Your daughter has now been my pupil for some time and has made such extraordinary progress within this time that it is virtually a duty of necessity to completely finish your daughter's education. I can, therefore, in view of the excellent musical-compositional talent of your daughter, also give the following advice: that [she] should enter my [...] composition class at the Royal Conservatory of Music here, and partake of my teaching one more year beginning on the upcoming 1 October. As I have said: in view of the extraordinary talent of your daughter, it would be a sin not to allow this talent to completely develop to the utmost. [...] 
With highest regards, Your most devoted Professor Max Reger"
(Letter of Max Reger to the father of Johanna Senfter, in: Kottmann, 1999, p. 8ff.)

In October 1908 Johanna Senfter continued her studies in composition at the Royal Conservatory in Leipzig and completed them in 1909. In 1910 she received the Arthur Nikisch Prize, an award for the best composition of the year 1909, for her Sonata in G major, Op. 6 (1909). In her diploma, Max Reger attested to her exceptional progress:
"Miss Senfter possesses a quite extraordinary talent for composition and has accordingly attained, with great diligence, surprisingly good results in composition. Of her numerous compositions, a Sonata [...] for violin and pianoforte was performed most successfully at the last public examinations on 23 March 1909. Professor Dr. Max Reger" (see Kottmann, 1999, p. 10).

After completing her studies, she returned to her family in Oppenheim and worked as a freelance composer. Thanks to her well-situated family, she was able to dedicate herself entirely to composition and did not have to worry about earning a living. She also remained in close contact with her teacher, whom she greatly venerated, after finishing her studies; thus there grew a relationship of friendship between the Reger and Senfter families. Invited by the Senfter family, Reger and his family spent several weeks at their family seat in Oppenheim, the so-called "Sparrhof", enjoying the stimulating musical atmosphere in their hosts' house. The family possessed several celli, violins, a harmonium and two grand pianos. Reger, however, was especially pleased with the Walcker organ of the nearby Katharinenkirche, on which he often improvised. The friendship between the families grew to such an extent that both families even spent a four-week "Sommerfrische" (summer holiday) in Bavaria together.

Reger valued the work of his former pupil highly and tried to assert his influence in order to make the compositions of Johanna Senfter known. With Reger's death in 1916, she thus lost not only an important artistic reference person but also a promoter of her works. She expressed her profound attachment, solidarity and gratitude that she felt towards him in an obituary to the "master" published in 1916:
"Blatant praise was extremely unpleasant for him. [...] I very often had the opportunity to admire his thoroughly modest, selfless nature. [...] And now, it's all about living off the great stimuli and pleasures that Master Reger made available to me. We survivors have suffered a great loss. I shall always remember him faithfully in profound gratitude and reverence, and the beauty and goodness that I received from him will in any case continue to have an effect on me." (see Kottmann, 1999, p. 12)

Not only the deaths of two persons very close to her – her mother also died several months before Reger – but also the turmoil of the First World War and the post-war years contributed to the fact that Johanna Senfter increasingly withdrew from the public. She broke off all contacts with the outside world and lived alone with her sister Sophie, fifteen years older, on the family estate. The inflation and the resultant dissolution of the family fortune finally forced her to come out of isolation and, from then on, to participate in earning a living.

In 1921 she founded a music society with citizens of Oppenheim with which she had numerous works of her own performed during the next seven years. For this undertaking, she sought contact with artists from the region of Mainz, Darmstadt, Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, attempting to win them over for her performances. In 1923 she founded another society, the Bach Association. Under her direction, primarily works of Bach (especially the cantatas) and Reger, as well as her own works, were performed at the Katharinenkirche in Oppenheim and in the music hall of the "Sparrhof". The concerts were a magnet for the art-loving public in this region. The Bach Association existed until 1932 and was finally disbanded because the work of the association was being increasingly influenced by the conformity enforced by the national socialists.

Senfter's work as the director of the societies appears to
have had a positive influence on her compositional work, for she was more productive in the 1920s than ever before. It is possible that she was encouraged by the growing interest in her work and the support by the contacts gained through society work. The promoters of her compositional production included the violist and conductor Michael Balling, who performed numerous works of Johanna Senfter as general director in Darmstadt until his death in 1925, and the composer Hans Fleischer, who had been her pupil for a time and remained her closest confidant for the rest of her life. It was he who also established contact with the Luxemburg general music director Hans Herwig, who awakened the conductor’s interest in the compositions of Johanna Senfter. Herwig then included her works on his programmes and performed a series of her symphonies for the first time. The productive collaboration between the two artists ended with his abrupt death - during the dress rehearsal of Johanna Senfter’s Ninth Symphony.

Despite the growing war hysteria of the national socialists and the difficult living circumstances during the Second World War, Senfter continued to compose and, unlike many other composers both male and female, had the good fortune of having her works performed occasionally.

The entire scope of her bitterness and resignation is expressed in a letter to her friend Hans Fleischer of 4 April 1953:

"Dear Mr. Fleischer, Life has left not a glimmer of appeal for me. I have surely terminated my work, in the most beautiful and fruitful working energy - not out of conviction, but only as a result of the unrelenting, terrible constraints that were imposed on me. How I suffered and still suffer, I can tell no one, and I don't wish to sing any more song of mourning to you. Just one more thing: if I hadn’t been a woman, things would have been easier for me." (Kottmann, 1999, p. 30ff.)

Johanna Senfter died on 11 August 1961 at the age of 81 in Oppenheim following a brief illness.

Appreciation

The compositional production of Johanna Senfter was strongly influenced by Johann Sebastian Bach and Max Reger. As a composition pupil of Reger, she was indebted to the music of her teacher, but she succeeded in emerging from the epigonal circle of her teacher and developing an independent musical language. As the director of two music societies in her native city of Oppenheim, she ensured that the works of her teacher Max Reger became better known in the Rhine region. Moreover,
she made a not inconsiderable contribution to the cultivation of Johann Sebastian Bach by performing the cantatas of that composer.

Her closest confidant of many years’ standing, Hans Fleischer, attempted in 1960 to awaken public interest in the works of his former teacher in the newsletters of the Max Reger Institute. In his article he acknowledged the music of Johanna Senfter as follows:

"The most remarkable thing about Senfter's music is its originality and independence. Her early works were indeed harmonically based on Reger, but not differently than the way Reger was based on Brahms, Brahms on Beethoven or Beethoven on Haydn. The extraordinary melodic power of invention, the structure, the design of her works are her very own; the compression of the thematic material in the development sections of her sonatas and symphonies is of a concentration that commands the highest admiration. The contrapuntal mastery is never an end in itself with her, but is always placed at the service of the intellectual-spiritual content."

Reception

Until the end of the war, but especially during the 1920s and 1930s, her works were performed relatively frequently in the Rhineland-Palatinate region. With the break from the past and the new aesthetic beginning after the Second World War, the works of Johanna Senfter, having originated in the tradition of the German vocal polyphony of Bach, Brahms and Reger, had become obsolete. There was no further thought of performances, so the composer became forgotten. This was not altered by the contribution of her long-standing confidant Hans Fleischer in the newsletters of the Max Reger Institute in 1960. Since the 1990s, however, a growing interest can be perceived in the works of forgotten composers, male and female, who did not belong to the avant-garde. The master's thesis by Christiane Maier of 1993 concerns itself, for the first time, with the composer's production and awakened the interest of Schott Publishers in Mainz, which has been gradually publishing the works of Johanna Senfter ever since. This has led to the fact that a younger, unbiased generation of musicians has been dedicating itself to the works of Johanna Senfter, including the pianist Monica Gutmann and others. A CD with chamber music was issued by the Colosseum label (see discography) in 1999 with the cellist Michael Gareis, the clarinetist Stephan Landgrebe and the pianist Raimar Ulbrich. The master's thesis of Christiane Meier also formed the basis of the one-hour radio programme by Johanna Kottmann, broadcast in 1999 on SWR2. (The original quotations were taken from the script of this programme.)

Rolf Schönstedt's 2002 doctoral dissertation on the twentieth-century art song accompanied by the organ contains a chapter on the corresponding works of Johanna Senfter. With the performance of the Fourth Symphony in B-flat major on 14 October 2011, a further step was taken by the Jena Philharmonic under Othmar Mága to wrest her compositions from oblivion.

Research

When the reception attitude of one-sided focus on avant-garde modernism started to be abandoned in the late 1980s, it became possible, with a certain impartiality, to consider those works that had long stood apart from this focus. The master’s thesis of 1993 by Christiane Maier dealt with the biography and piano works of Johanna Senfter for the first time, and had the positive effect that more attention was paid to the composer’s works again.

Need for Research

There is still no complete indexing of Johanna Senfter's works, further analytic research concerning her works or their reception. Of particular interest is the compositional state of tension between the works of her teacher Max Reger and her own production. In addition, an investigation would have to be made as to the actual extent of the ideological involvement with Nazi ideas that can be observed in the Sixth Symphony.

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Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
- http://d-nb.info/gnd/12954650X
Library of Congress (LCCN):
- http://lccn.loc.gov/n94054767

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Editing status

Editorial staff: Ellen Freyberg
Translation: David Babcock
First edit 22/10/2011
Last edit 03/07/2014

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