

# ERNST ROTH 1896 — 1971

*Willi Schuh*

In the *curriculum vitae* he compiled a few months before his death—as if sensing that the end was near—Ernst Roth stated that there were three fields of study to which he had devoted himself as a young man, first, in his native city of Prague, and then in Vienna, where he was later to begin his professional career. The three fields were music, law and philosophy.

From his early days, he had closely concerned himself with the situation of the arts within the whole context of culture and, beyond that, of life itself. So his studies of law and philosophy were in no way opposed to his musical studies.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, they intermingled, and became the basis not only of his qualifications as a music publisher, but also of the exemplary manner in which he practised that profession: first, as a man who was deeply musical, secondly, as one whose legal mind made him an international authority in matters of contract and copyright, and last but not least, as one who observed and analysed, with philosophical detachment, the swift changes in the world of music, and in the world generally, during his lifetime. For him, philosophy was not an abstract system; it was a means of achieving a necessary equilibrium. And so, however complex the new developments—for instance, in broadcasting and recording—and however great the claims upon his apparently boundless capacity for dealing with legal and organizational problems, he went his way calmly and steadfastly, preserving a balanced view and never losing that fine sense of humour which was one of his most precious and endearing gifts. Yet his rather delicate constitution was at times severely taxed by the ever-growing demands arising from the responsibilities he so willingly shouldered. Whether in initiating new projects or in continuing old ones, he never spared himself; and that, of course, was bound to affect his health sooner or later.

<sup>1</sup> As a child, Roth had studied piano with Alfredo Pellegrini, teacher at the Prague Conservatoire and husband of Margarethe Siems, the first Marschallin in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. At the University he studied music under Hugo Rietsch. After his military service he continued studying with Rietsch, and had further piano lessons with Karel Hoffmeister at the Prague Conservatoire. In Vienna, where he settled in 1921, he read music at the University with Guido Adler.

Ernst Roth was the complete professional: he made sure that every skill required of a music publisher was at his fingertips. Before entering the profession, he had prepared himself by training as an engraver, printer and paper manufacturer at a large Viennese firm. Then, in 1922, he joined the Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag, and took charge of the editing, printing and distribution of its famous 'Philharmonia' series of study scores. After the amalgamation with Universal Edition in 1927, he became head of its publications department. During the next decade he was responsible for such things as a hundred-part anthology of music, and revised editions of the piano works of Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms. Meanwhile his literary activities continued apace. From 1919—when his novel *Magalhaes* was published in Berlin—until the late 1930's, he published more than a hundred articles on musical and other subjects in newspapers and periodicals in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland. In 1925 he published a treatise entitled *Die Grenzen der Künste* (The Boundaries of the Arts). Characteristically, he there examines the whole territory of the arts, revealing all manner of connections and relationships; first between the various art forms, and then—with that insight which was peculiar to him—between the spiritual and the material preoccupations of the time.

After the German annexation of Austria in 1938, Dr. Roth and his wife—herself a D.Phil (University of Vienna)—moved to London. In September of that year he joined Boosey & Hawkes as assistant to Ralph Hawkes. The two men had met for the first time 15 years before, when Ralph Hawkes, acting on behalf of Hawkes and Son, had come to Vienna and applied for the sole agency of the Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag and Universal Edition. Those ties were strengthened in later years, and it was thanks to the personal initiative of Ralph Hawkes—backed by Leslie Boosey—that Dr. Roth was now brought into the firm, together with other leading executives who had left Universal Edition in 1938. Dr. Roth has recalled that he and his Viennese colleagues brought with them 'not only most valuable contacts all over the world, but also the rights in the works of those composers who could not or would not stay with Nazified Universal Edition.' Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Boosey & Hawkes had already published two new works by Bartók: the Violin Concerto and the Divertimento.

The era of expansion which Boosey & Hawkes had now entered was one in which Dr. Roth played an essential role. One of his earliest projects was the Hawkes series of 'pocket' scores of classical and modern works—the first such series to be published in Great Britain. Besides editing and annotating these scores, he set about modernizing and internationalizing older publications.

Gifted as he was in languages (of which he spoke five fluently) and in business administration, he did much to enlarge and maintain his firm's international relations even during the war years. Meanwhile his training and experience as a practical musician often reaped rewards. For instance, a long conversation he had had with Béla Bartók in the early 1930's had sowed some of the seeds for *Mikrokosmos*, which was published by Boosey & Hawkes in 1940. Bartók had complained that his piano music had been neglected, and Dr. Roth, speaking from his own experience as a pianist, had remarked upon the absence of educational piano music relating to the technical and stylistic problems of modern composition. Bartók had promised to think the matter over—and the six books of *Mikrokosmos* were the result.

Another early contact led to a momentous meeting that is best described in Dr. Roth's own words:

Early in 1942 Dr. Berta Geissmar, Furtwängler's former secretary and guardian angel, now living as a refugee in London, came to see me. Would Boosey & Hawkes be interested in buying the rights in the operas of Richard Strauss, she asked me. Indeed, we were most interested. After long and arduous negotiations a contract was signed on 1 January 1943 transferring the rights to Boosey & Hawkes for the whole world with the exception of Germany, Italy and some minor territories. Richard Strauss in the hands of a British publisher! Boosey & Hawkes were heading towards the very centre of musical life. Luck or merit? The two were inseparably intertwined.

A new Boosey & Hawkes catalogue was prepared by Dr. Roth towards the end of the war and ran to over 300 pages. When it appeared after the war, Boosey & Hawkes was unmistakably a publishing house of major international importance. In the meantime, Britten's *Peter Grimes* had had its triumphant première. Requests for performance-contracts continued to stream in from opera houses throughout the world. Dr. Roth had a key role in all these negotiations and also in such cognate activities as the arrangements for the first continental recital tour (in Switzerland) of Britten and Pears. In an autobiographical fragment dating from that period he noted, with justifiable pride, that during the first six months of 1946, his firm's turnover was approximately seven times that of the whole of 1938, while in the corresponding period of 1945 it was already (despite much-depleted stocks) three times that of the 1938 figure.

Only a man of quite exceptional gifts could have done so much to help consolidate the growth of a major publishing house in such a relatively short time, and in conditions as unfavourable as those that prevailed during and after the Second World War. The qualities that sustained him in this task were many: his decisiveness and his remarkable foresight; his personal charm; his lucidity of mind; and a firmness of will that was often tested in his dealings with composers and institutions. Behind Dr. Roth's quiet modesty there was an unmistakable air of authority. At one's first meeting with him, one already felt that here was a man of wide experience and great integrity. For him, every task that needed to be done was worth doing well, and therefore could not be dismissed as routine or menial. Even after he became Managing Director of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers in 1949, he was more than ready to undertake what a lesser man might have dismissed as donkey-work. How many others in his position would, like him, have made piano arrangements and reductions, compiled opus lists and catalogues, translated over two hundred Lieder texts and modern opera libretti, and written introductions for study scores? Who else would have coped so successfully with the translation and editing of the German version of Kodály's *Choral Method*, or with the German translation of Robert Craft's commentary on the facsimile sketches of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*? He even wrote some couplets for Gottfried von Einem's Nestroy opera *Der Zerrissene*—and they are at once faithful to Nestroy and typical of his own wit.

While still a director, Dr. Roth somehow found the time to write a philosophical study, *Vom Vergänglichem in der Musik* (The Transitoriness of Music), which was published in 1949. Something about the nature of this brief but important work can already be gleaned from the chapter headings; for they define music as 'a creation of sounds . . . which expresses personal feelings . . . that must always be recreated afresh . . . and which is therefore at once transitory and eternal'. Dr. Roth concludes that every musical work is destined to disappear into the shadows while new works are emerging. That conclusion lends

added significance to the fact that Dr. Roth became the ever-helpful friend and adviser of both Richard Strauss and Igor Stravinsky in their later years—two great but completely contrasted figures representing successive generations. His championship of Strauss in the unfavourable and to some extent even hostile atmosphere of post-1945 London was brave and far-sighted. One of his last public actions was to appear on television—against doctor's orders—and resolutely defend the name and reputation of Strauss, who had been the victim of recent calumnies. The chapters he devoted to Strauss and Stravinsky in his memoirs are required reading for all who wish to understand those composers. They bear witness not only to the catholicity of his musical tastes, but also—in view of their contrasted personalities—to the breadth of his human sympathies.

When Dr. Roth retired from his executive posts in 1964, he felt the need to express in writing his views on his profession and, beyond that, on music as it had once been and as it had now become. The result was his book *Musik als Kunst und Ware* (Music as Art and Merchandise), published in 1966. His own free translation was published in London three years later, under the title *The Business of Music—Reflections of a Music Publisher*. In the introduction to that edition he gives the following account of what it means to be a music publisher:

As an intermediary between art and life, between artist and public, he has to consider both the spiritual and the material existences of the art. By viewing them without prejudice he may acquire a qualification which both the pure idealist and the pure materialist lack. This then, is the theme of this book: music between heaven and earth; between inspiration and remuneration.

In these days the heaven of music is clouded by heavy problems, which cast their shadow into every corner of its earthly existence. It is just my profession which has taught me to meet these problems with calm and moderation. I cannot belong to those who unconditionally admire or condemn the past or the present. It is by no means proved that the old times were always good, nor that the new times are necessarily better. I believe in Daniel Defoe's 'Great Law of Subordination', because it is the fundamental law of all order.

*The Business of Music* attracted a great deal of attention, and deservedly so. It is a searching analysis of the changes brought about by the new media and of the consequences for composers, performers, promoters, and audiences in both the classical and the popular field; and its general conclusions are illuminated and set in relief by the personal recollections—not only of Strauss and Stravinsky, but also of Bartók, Kodály, Britten and the representatives of the modern Viennese school. The book's success brought belated public attention to its author. Having always shunned the limelight, he now found himself invited to appear on television and radio and to give lectures. His London publisher immediately asked him for another book. It appeared a few months before his death, and is entitled *A Tale of Three Cities*—meaning the three great cities of the old Danube monarchy: Vienna, Budapest and Prague. The book is shot through with his rich personal experience and is both informative and entertaining.

These two main works had been preceded by his German translation of selections from the 1829 Travel Diaries of Vincent and Mary Novello, which he supplied with an introduction and commentary, and published under the title *Eine Wallfahrt zu Mozart*. It was fitting that he chose to edit this 'Pilgrimage to Mozart'. In *The Business of Music* he expresses his profound admiration for Mozart, and particularly for *The Magic Flute*, which he regards as music's summit: 'inspiration and "the science of composition" enter into an ideal communion, where melody is of the purest beauty and greatness is not yet monumentality'.

Inspiration and science: these were qualities that Ernst Roth was quick to respond to, for they were, in another sense, part of his own life, as publisher, as

musician, and not least as a legal mind who in his capacity as vice-president of the Music Section of the International Publishers' Association was responsible for numerous important contributions to decisions on contract and copyright. For instance, it was he, together with Dr. Straschnov of the EBU, who evolved the entire system of contracts between publishers and European broadcasting stations—as a result of which, composers' interests are protected, whatever the changes in the medium.

To the end of his days, Ernst Roth remained in the closest touch with Boosey & Hawkes, being Chairman of the publishing company and Deputy Chairman of the holding company. But the last year of his life was over-shadowed by illness and by the death of his mother, whom he and his courageous wife had lovingly nursed. Even so, he refused to free himself from work and professional responsibilities.

Dr. Roth will long be remembered in the world of music, where his professional example and his thinking are likely to remain influential. In a more personal sense, his memory will live on in the firm to which he gave so much, and above all in the hearts and minds of those upon whom he bestowed his friendship. They came to understand, admire, and love him for the rare human being he was.

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# Tempo

A quarterly review of modern music edited by David Drew

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30 West 57th Street, New York 10019**United Kingdom**Boosey & Hawkes Ltd.  
295 Regent Street,  
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Annual subscription 80p (post free)

Price 20p (postage 3p)

Printed in England by The Regent Press (Boole) Ltd. Liverpool for Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.,  
295 Regent Street, London W1A 1BR New York address: 30 West 57th Street, New York 10019.