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## Rudolph Kolich at 82: a link to Old Vienna

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### Comments

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*Kolisch: "Schoenberg's music is not supposed to be pleasant"*

**A** YOUNG man's old man, Rudolf Kolisch was eighty-two last month. "I'm not a piece of history," he protested to a birthday interviewer a few years ago. "I'm an active musician."

Active is fair enough. The visitor to Kolisch's suburban Boston home, where he lives comfortably surrounded by chessboards, well-worn pipes, and well-thumbed scores, a brace of colossal Great Danes and a large poodle named Pierrot, can be excused for regarding his retirement as an expression merely of social convention. Trim, bright-eyed, and erect, Kolisch maintains the physique of a man years younger, and a schedule that would not embarrass a man years younger still. Judging and teaching, he still travels nationally and internationally. Only recently he added a seminar on the Beethoven quartets to his ensemble class at the New England conservatory. Students asked for it, he explains, as though it needed an explanation. The month of August is reserved each year for the international Schoenberg seminar near Vienna.

Kolisch's denial of his historical

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## Rudolph Kolisch at 82: a link to Old Vienna

niche is less convincing. A surviving link to the Vienna of Sachertorte, Strauss waltzes, and Freud, he recalls local premieres of *Rosenkavalier* and Mahler's Eighth as personal experiences. Alban Berg was among his father's acquaintances. An aspiring avant-garde composer visiting an associate professor of medicine? Vienna was like that, Kolisch says simply. In any case, Berg was a hypochondriac and his father was interested in music. In the mid-1920s, Kolisch's teacher and friend Arnold Schoenberg courted and married Kolisch's

sister Gertrud while he was a guest in the family home.

Even an early childhood accident that cost him a digit of his left middle finger contributed to Kolisch's historical significance. A pupil of Sevcik and a player of real distinction, Kolisch grew up with the violin in his right hand, the bow in his left, the world's best—and, so far as he knows, only—professional left-handed violinist. His accident also effectively eliminated the possibility of orchestral playing as a career. Both physical and temperamental disposition led

him instead into one of the century's most distinguished chamber-music careers. By the mid-twenties Kolisch, himself still in his twenties, was an associate of the pioneers, a close friend and confidant not only of the composers of the Second Viennese school but of Bartók and Ravel.

Till its demise in New York as an early casualty of World War II, the Kolisch Quartet (née New Vienna, then Vienna) was among the great ensembles of the era. Its vast and comprehensive repertory extended from the beginnings of the literature to the latest contemporary work, all of it played from memory. Kolisch recalls one stretch of seventeen concerts without a repetition in the program. To hear Kolisch tell it, the quartet's success seems to have been an inexplicable surprise to all but critics, concert managers, and audiences. On its American debut at the Library of Congress in 1935, Olin Downes celebrated its "uncannily finished, flexible and brilliant ensemble" and the "warmth and vividness" of its playing. The debut program consisted of two pieces, Berg's *Lyric Suite*, itself premiered by the quartet in 1927, and Beethoven's Opus 130, performed with the Great Fugue as its last movement. Seen retrospectively, the program epitomizes Kolisch's career in the service of what he calls "the Viennese *espressivo*." Like his choice of Berg and Beethoven, his whole professional life has been an affirmation of the continuity, integrity, and universality of the Viennese musical tradition.

As a happy warrior in the musical campaigns of six decades, Kolisch has lived to see the contested ground of his early years become an accepted, even familiar part of the musical landscape. His premieres include the Third, Fifth and Sixth quartets of Bartók, and the Third and Fourth quartets of Schoenberg, in addition to the *Lyric Suite*. In 1930 he was the first to play the Ravel Violin Sonata at a time when Ravel was still considered an eccentricity, Schoenberg the outer limit of music, and Webern an absolute freak.

While associated with the New School for Social Research and its "University in Exile" in the early 1940s, Kolisch also conducted first American performances of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du soldat*, Bar-

tók's *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, and Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony.

But his services extend retroactively to Beethoven. Discovery of Beethoven's original, and hitherto neglected, metronome tempos and their systematic relationship to one another was among his particular moments of truth. "I remember with pleasure an occasion in Paris" [Kolisch recalled in an article in the *Musical Quarterly* in 1943], "when after a performance of Opus 95, which I had attempted to play according to Beethoven's metronomic markings, a professor of the Conservatoire, a true keeper of the Holy Grail of Tradition, could hardly wait for the last note to die away before crying out '*Tout ça trop vite*.'" The taking of sides led to a fistfight."

With rather less pleasure, and some lingering self-consciousness, he also remembers lecturing on the subject at the New School to an audience that included Otto Klemperer. The reason for slow Beethoven, Kolisch believes, is essentially that the composer's contemporaries found his music too hard, and that Joachim, the pope of Viennese musical practices, mistakenly assumed that the slow tempos that had come down from them were intentional. With Joachim's endorsement, slow Beethoven then became Tradition. Perhaps for reasons of tact, Kolisch no longer remembers whether his lectures led to indignant shouts from the floor in New York.

Like the skirmish in Paris and the struggle for survival in wartime New York, Kolisch's memories of life in music's front lines combine the funny, the wry, and the bitter. Tennis with Chaplin in Hollywood is one of the bright spots. So is what Kolisch, the doctor's son, believes to have been the world's first appendectomy under local anesthesia, which he followed with great interest in a mirror.

Even the German annexation of Austria in 1938 turns out, in his recollection, to have its sunny side. Effectively expatriated, and in any case long resident in Paris, Kolisch traveled on with his Austrian passport, enjoying at each border crossing the bittersweet demonstration that he remained a citizen of a country that had disappeared. A contrite and grateful postwar Republic conferred

its highest civil decoration on him thirty-five years later.

Among the darker memories is his experience with Bartók in New York. Kolisch remembers almost insuperable problems arranging a first, let alone a second, performance of Bartók's now-classic Sixth Quartet in 1941. The composer, reduced to impoverished desperation, was meanwhile saving money by lining his own notepaper in a rented room in Brooklyn. Kolisch was also consulted intensively during the composition of Bartók's Sonata for Solo Violin a few years later. "Is it playable?" the composer asked him with increasing urgency. Kolisch, who could remember when Beethoven's Great Fugue was considered unplayable, reassured him. Anybody lucky enough to have heard Kolisch play Bartók's sonata himself—including the quarter-tones Bartók wrote in, and the published edition leaves out—knows he was right.

The relationship of performer and composer has been a lifelong preoccupation since the first meetings with Schoenberg in the postwar winter of 1918-19. A demobilized lieutenant of artillery with his face turned resolutely to the future and no regret at all for the mythical Old Vienna of his schooldays, Kolisch had registered at the Conservatory and the university to prepare for a new career. Profession: intellectual. Occupation: musician.

Schoenberg, his harmony teacher at the Conservatory, enlisted him on the spot for a new campaign. As a member of the legendary Society for Private Musical Performance, Kolisch found himself in the dedicated cadre, recruited to play Schoenberg as the composer wanted his music played, before audiences the composer himself selected. Schoenberg thought inadequate performance was the reason his music had failed, Kolisch recalls. After years of reflection, he is no longer sure that Schoenberg was right. The problem, in his opinion, was not the performance, and certainly not the music, but the audience. "Schoenberg's music is hard," he says characteristically. "It's not supposed to be pleasant." If audiences can't take unpleasant music, so much the worse for them.

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From his student days, Kolisch has never doubted that performance is an inferior activity to composition. Performers exist to play music properly, *i.e.*, as the composer wrote it. "You mean you've never heard *Winterreise*, the greatest of all song cycles, sung by a tenor?" he asked a recent visitor in obvious horror.

His view of musical education reflects his performer's conscience. He wants students to learn to read scores as an actor might read a play, to perceive music as a language with its own vocabulary, syntax, and grammar. Above all, he says, "I want to influence students." In a teaching career going back to his appointment to head the Pro Arte Quartet at the University of Wisconsin in 1944, he has found American students both responsive and difficult. Profoundly respectful of language himself both verbal and musical, he observes sadly that "Americans have no respect for their language."

As an enthusiastic basketball, tennis, and hockey fan, who even hangs a photo of Bobby Orr in his Boston office, Kolisch admits to a certain weakness for virtuosity in music as well as sports. But his performers hall of fame is predictably small: Ysaÿe the violinist, Schnabel the pianist, Casals the cellist, Fischer-Dieskau the singer. His composers' pantheon is also select. Stravinsky, Bartók and, of course, Schoenberg, are the most recent entries, though not necessarily the last ones. If anybody had asked him about the future of music around 1850, he says, he would also have found the question hard to answer.

But as a man who staked his career on the future at twenty-three, he is not about to live in the past as he reaches eighty-two. "Don't you think all this excitement about pornography is pretty silly?" he asked a recent visitor unexpectedly as they reflected on the future of Western civilization in the middle of Harvard square.

A Viennese and a lifelong citizen of the musical world, who has seen and made a lot of history, he was saying with particular authority that it takes more than a few million copies of *Playboy* or *Penthouse* to finish off a great tradition. △