

Wladyslaw Szpilman



Wladyslaw Szpilman Photo: © A. Szpilman

Wladyslaw Szpilman's Warsaw Ghetto Memoir of 1939–1945 appeared in 1998. Initially in Germany but soon in all continents, publishers became convinced of the necessity to make this unique document about the Shoah accessible to the public. Through Roman Polanski's award-winning film *The Pianist* (2002), which is based on Szpilman's book, the authentic story of this Polish musician of Jewish origin reached an audience of millions, winning three Oscars. *Death of a City* was the original title of Szpilman's book (first appearing in 1946 in Poland) about his survival through the Second World War in Warsaw under German occupation. Immediately after the war, under the vivid impact of his sufferings, Szpilman gave an account of the hellish ghetto, of the deportation of his family into the death camps of Treblinka which he himself had escaped (due to the fact that he had been recognized as a famous musician and picked out of a crowd of deportees). He also told of the solidarity of Polish friends who had risked their lives to shelter him after his flight from the ghetto, until he was saved from starvation shortly before the end of the war by the German Wehrmacht officer Wilm Hosenfeld in an almost totally destroyed Warsaw. Far from being politically correct, Szpilman's book, however, quickly fell victim to the censorship rules of the new communist regime. After the horrors of the Shoah, a German officer was not to be portrayed as a saviour and Polish and Ukrainian collaborators who had taken part in the annihilation of Polish Jews were not to be named. Therefore half a century needed to pass by before the book could (thanks also to the initiative of Szpilman's son, Andrzej) finally receive the historical place it deserved. However, the real personality of Wladyslaw Szpilman was so much more than the charming, dazzlingly good-looking pianist of the Polish Radio in the thirties that the book and film portray him to be. It is time the artistic output of this Orpheus polonicus, whose work had a profound impact on Polish musical life for decades, and yet whose name remains absent from music dictionaries, was recognised. Credit must therefore be given to his extant compositional work, now being brought before the public for the first time in this Boosey & Hawkes Edition, and which conveys an idea of the versatility of his talent, a talent that had to remain in internal exile owing to political circumstances. Born in 1911 in Sosnowiec, Szpilman initially received his musical training at the Chopin Academy in Warsaw, where he studied piano with Alexander Michalowski and Josef Smidovicz, first- and second-generation pupils of Liszt. Like so many other Polish musicians, he then felt drawn to Berlin where he perfected his skills with Leonid Kreutzer and Artur Schnabel, and, as a composer, entered tutelage of none other than Franz Schreker. He then returned to Poland in 1933 embarking on a brilliant career as a soloist, while performing as a chamber music partner of

such famous violinists as Henryk Szeryng, Roman Totenberg, Ida Händel, and Bronislaw Gimpel. By 1935 he was the house pianist of the Polish Radio. In this function he played a Chopin recital on the 23rd of September 1939 in the last broadcast by the radio station. Part of this recital was the Nocturne in C-sharp minor, the piece that he would later play for his rescuer Hosenfeld, and that would reopen the service of the Warsaw station in 1945. After the war Szpilman played a significant role in the rebuilding of musical life in Poland, directing the music division of the Polish Radio until 1963. In 1961 he founded the first Polish popular music festival *Music Knows no Borders* in Sopot. After his traumatic experiences during the war Szpilman was forced to discontinue his solo career as a concert pianist owing to a slight nervous condition. However he recorded numerous solo programmes for the radio and performed as a chamber music partner, most often with the violinist Bronislaw Gimpel with whom he founded the legendary Warsaw Piano Quintet in 1963. As the only existing chamber music formation of its kind they gave hundreds of concert tours throughout the world until 1986. Szpilman's great passion from the start had been composition. Judging from the extant works it is more than deplorable that the largest part of his work composed before the war was lost in the destruction of Warsaw, including a violin concerto that had been performed by Roman Totenberg, Bronislaw Gimpel and Konrad Winawer. Handwritten copies of works might one day turn up in an archive or a personal estate, as was the case with the piano suite *The Life of the Machines*, written in Berlin in 1933. This copy was found in Los Angeles in the personal estate of Jacob Gimpel, Bronislaw's brother. After the war Szpilman himself had reconstructed the last movement of this work, the *Toccatina*, from memory. He had done the same with the *Concertino*, completed in 1940 as the gates of the Warsaw Ghetto closed (and recorded 1948 and 1968 by the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Stefan Rachon), and also with the *Waltz in the Olden Style* composed in 1936, re-constructed in 1968 and supplemented by a new coda. Szpilman's *Mazurka*, composed in the style of Chopin for a *Revue*, bears witness to musical life in the ghetto when such was still possible, and had to stand in for the real Chopin, whose music (a symbol of Poland's struggle for national and cultural independence) the Nazis had categorically forbidden. The *Paraphrase on an Original Theme* is a series of Jazz-variations written in 1947 on a song composed before the war. Some of his most beautiful children's songs published in the '50s were compiled in three Suites after own *Children's Songs*. In the Introduction to a Film Szpilman used material that he had composed in 1957 for a Polish-Czech film production (in which Roman Polanski had appeared in a minor role). The *Little Overture* was commissioned by the radio in 1968 while the *Ballet Scene* from the same year, originally intended as dance music for a fairy tale by Grimm, received its premiere as a concert piece. During Szpilman's lifetime all of these works, the *Waltz in the Olden Style*, the *Concertino*, the *Paraphrase* and the *Little Overture* were only played on the radio – never as a public performance. On the initiative of Schönberg's grandson Randol Schoenberg the *Concertino* received its first public performance on April 29, 2001 in Los Angeles by the Jewish Symphony Orchestra under Noren Green with the young soloist Arthur Abbadi. The *Waltz* and the *Little Overture* received their first live performances as part of the Szpilman Memorial Concert on September 10, 2002 in the Warsaw Philharmonie under the direction of Antoni Wit. Szpilman himself did not push the distribution of his symphonic works, which despite their originality he most probably viewed as occasional pieces. Having been unable to compose during the war years, Szpilman did not reconnect to

musical modernism (evident in his Suite for piano) after 1945. However, this did not mean that he did not support the Avantgarde in his function as musical director of Polish Radio. Witold Lutoslawski, who belonged to the group of courageous people who had helped Szpilman after his escape from the ghetto, was a lifelong friend, as was Grazyna Bacewicz, whose works Szpilman premiered. The immense success of his works in the entertainment field was possibly quite enough for Szpilman. Here he reigned without competition for decades: he effortlessly composed up to 500 songs in various styles, many of which are still evergreens, with 150 of them having entered the Polish charts. The album Wendy Lands sings the music of Wladyslaw Szpilman (produced in Los Angeles in 2002) introduced Polish songs for the first time in the USA. Szpilman's efforts on behalf of Polish popular music must be understood against the backdrop of the Stalinist era. He cultivated and propagated this music with western – especially American and French – and therefore “bourgeois decadent” methods quite in opposition to the aesthetic pressure of Socialist Realism, and therefore contributed in a significant way to the independence of Polish popular culture from the dictates of Moscow. Honoring him for this achievement, Wojciech Kilar, the composer of the film score for *The Pianist*, wrote: “Every graduate at the conservatoire is able to compose a symphony, and maybe it will even receive a performance. But to write a melody which is sung and played by hundreds of interpreters is something one really has to be born to – ideally in America. A good thing for us (not for him, as one has to admit) that Wladyslaw Szpilman, our Cole Porter, Gershwin, McCartney, was born in Poland.”

Within their biographical context Szpilman's surviving orchestral compositions are rather disturbing in their expression of lightheartedness and affirmation of life, contradicting what we are accustomed – and allowed – to listen to as music related to the Holocaust. We ask ourselves how he could possibly have worked on his *Concertino* in the ghetto, where he witnessed the most horrible crimes committed by people against other people on a daily basis. But today we know of so many composers, musicians, artists and poets imprisoned in the ghettos and concentration camps, and who through their work created an oasis of defense against the permanent assaults on their human dignity by the Nazis. In his introductory note Krystian Zimerman speaks of the “positive energy” of this music, about its “almost resurrection-like character”. And indeed: we witness in Szpilman's compositions – also in his piano performances – an energy that originates neither in the gut nor in the intellect but stems from the centre of life itself. One seems to be able to sense that certain *élan vital* that sustained him throughout the years of permanent mortal fear and physical sufferings.

With the exception of the piano suite from 1933, which is related to the repetitive mechanical style of Honegger, Antheil, Prokofiev and Mossolov, Szpilman's music is situated between the poles of popular and serious music. Most importantly his music is not confessional and it rejects grandiose rhetoric or grand gestures. Instead of epic breadth we find concentration of material (the *Concertino* lasting ca. 12 minutes is the longest of the extant works), instead of depth of feeling we find ironic refraction. Szpilman loves to masquerade, to play with idioms which, as in the *Concertino*, can sparkle kaleidoscopically. Here the pianist-composer, with tongue in cheek, evokes the masters – such revered musical personalities as Chopin, Rachmaninoff and Ravel – only ultimately to reveal his kinship with his contemporary Gershwin. An example of music about music is the *Ballet Scene* which juggles familiar but nevertheless stylistically incompatible icons of ballet music. It seems as though Debussy's *Faune* has strayed into Stravinsky's *Sacre*.

Szpilman's music, like his piano playing, is marked by strong rhythms and traces of dance-music. In *Paraphrase*, which is a veritable compendium of advanced jazz harmony, Szpilman swings in the big band style of the '40s, while pursuing artistic mimicry in his *Waltz in the Olden Style*: as the American journalist Robert Everett-Green aptly remarked, this is “ballroom music which used only to exist in Hollywood, when Jewish exile composers such as Erich Korngold and Max Steiner were setting the tone.” Each of these works is prototypical and indicates the multiple directions Szpilman's talent could have taken after 1933, had he been able to follow the path of many of his Jewish colleagues and settle in American exile instead of returning to Poland; indeed, Szpilman might well have become the Polish Gershwin, a description often applied to him.

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