

Toch's Spoken Music Rediscovered

by Diana Castelnovo-Tedesco for Vocal Area Network

Posted June 3, 2006



When we think of the great masters of German Music in the last century, certain names--Schoenberg, Webern, Weill, Hindemith--come to mind. According to choreographer Christopher Caines, the next name on the list should be that of Ernst Toch (1887-1964).

Toch's three-movement suite *Gesprochene Musik* (*Spoken Music*) made a sensation when it premiered in 1930. Thanks to the advocacy of John Cage, the third movement, "The Geographical Fugue," became famous in the United States. But as far as the Ernst Toch Society has been able to

ascertain, the work has never been performed in its entirety since its premiere.

Caines, who takes special pleasure in creating dances to music under-represented in today's recital repertoire, recently rediscovered the work and enlisted his frequent collaborator Kristina Boerger (Artistic Director of the Cerddorion Ensemble, and a noted singer with the Western Wind and Pomerium) to conduct the first complete performance of *Spoken Music* in more than seventy-five years.

Spoken Music will be performed this June in New York City as part of *WORKLIGHT*, Caines' new suite of études-experiments in spatial structure and musical form. For the project, Caines prepared an annotated performing edition of the scores from the composer's holograph, which he will donate to the Ernst Toch Society, to make it easier for choirs to perform *Gesprochene Musik* in its entirety.

VAN talked recently with Christopher Caines and Kristina Boerger about *Spoken Music* and how it fits into *WORKLIGHT*.

Vocal Area Network What is *Gesprochene Musik*?

Christopher Caines: Ernst Toch composed *Gesprochene Musik* for the Berlin Festival of Contemporary Music in 1930. With this piece, he invented the "speaking choir," although, if you think about it, use of spoken rather than sung text with music had very deep roots in German music, for example, *Singspiel*, which have spoken rather than recitativo dialogue.

Gesprochene Musik is a three-part suite: the first part is called "O-a," the second part is called "Ta-Tam"; both sections use only nonsense syllables. Toch's grandson, Lawrence Weschler, calls it "Weimar rap." It's a little like that, and it's a little like Meredith Monk. The third movement is the famous "The Geographical Fugue."

VAN: Tell us a bit more about the history of the piece.

CC: After its premiere, *Gesprochene Musik* was recorded and published. Then, as Toch wrote stoically in the notes for the English publication of "The Geographical Fugue," "the record got lost or was destroyed, likewise the music, except for the manuscript." Toch lost a lot of his early music when he fled Germany in 1933.

VAN: The work's third movement, "The Geographical Fugue," is quite well-known to choruses in the U.S. How did that happen?

CC: After Toch emigrated to the United States and settled in Los Angeles, John Cage--who was a rather scrawny young man at that time--knocked on Toch's door and asked him, "Are you Ernst Toch, the composer of 'The Geographical Fugue'?" It speaks to the impact this piece must have had at the time, if Cage had heard about it as far away as L.A.! Though Toch claimed it was simply a youthful *jeu d'esprit*, Cage believed it was a work of great genius. Cage arranged to have the music translated into English and published in Henry Cowell's *New Music* magazine.

VAN: How did you discover this work?

CC: I heard "The Geographical Fugue" on the radio many, many years ago and never forgot it. Then, last year, at a friend's house I was leafing through an exhibition catalogue about the European émigré composers who ended up in Los Angeles during the war years. The catalogue explained that "The Geographical Fugue" was part of a larger work, *Spoken Music*. That sparked my curiosity. I eventually tracked down Lawrence Weschler [Toch's grandson], who is the director of the New York University Institute for the Humanities. We met, and with his help, the Toch Society provided me with copies of the holograph manuscript of "Ta-Tam" and "O-a." I then deciphered them and edited them to prepare for this performance.

VAN: How does Toch's music fit in to your new suite of dances, *WORKLIGHT*?

CC: *WORKLIGHT* is a suite of études, each of which is a different experiment in spatial structure and musical form. Each is set to an intricate piece of music, and the evening includes music by Bach, Mozart, Thomas Tallis and Gaspar Cassadó. The fugue is one of the more intensely structured musical forms the Western tradition has invented. Toch's "Geographical Fugue" is a strict fugue, and it's a purely rhythmical fugue. There's no melody. I'm also doing Glenn Gould's *So you want to write a fugue?*--a fugue about writing a fugue--so I thought that it made an interesting counterpoint with the Toch.

VAN: In *WORKLIGHT*, you have added Toch's 1960 work, "Valse," into the suite. What is this piece, and how does it relate to *Spoken Music*?

CC: In the "Valse," Toch returned to the form he had created thirty years earlier. By inserting it within *Gesprochene Musik*, we've put together Toch's complete works for speaking choir. There's an interesting story about this piece. Herr Toch had what you might call perfect pitch for rhythm, so he couldn't go to restaurants because the conversation always sounded to him like bad, disorganized music. Lawrence Weschler told me that Toch wrote "Valse," in part, to give the world the experience of how social conversation should sound if it were rhythmicized. The text is very funny, because it is meant to be clichés of social discourse from the 1960s, but also filtered through the ears of someone speaking English as a second language. It's very playful. Also, it's a waltz about waltzing, which connects to the Gould fugue about writing a fugue.

VAN: Kristina, you must have already performed "The Geographical Fugue" in the past, since it's a big favorite with choruses. What are your memories of this piece?

Kristina Boerger: There are two times in recent and more distant memory when I have conducted or coached the "The Geographical Fugue." When I was conducting at Lake Forest College, I had my students do this piece. It's very useful when one has an amateur chorus with uneven section membership. You don't have to have five equally good sopranos matched up with five equally good

altos. You just have to have people who can count! It really solves some of those problems of range and vocal quality.

The most recent time that I used it was teaching with my sextet, the Western Wind, at one of our annual summer workshops. I chose it because I didn't have a sung piece for the particular group of voices in the room, and I found that it revealed how rhythmically limited amateur musicians in this country can be. It was almost impossible for these avocational musicians to pull off. They had trouble keeping to the tempo, and they were trying simultaneously to decipher the rhythms and to pronounce the place names. But we came up with a fun way to present at the workshop seminar, which is kind of a master class of works in progress. On site, where we were working at Smith College, there were two empty plastic pumpkins, the ones that kids take around trick-or-treating and fill with candy. There was one woman in the group who was not part of the piece herself but had very reliable tempo. She took these pumpkins, put one on each hand, and used them like pom-poms. She stood in front of the choir counting "One, two and three..."--it was the hit of the seminar.

VAN: What is it like to sing this music?

KB: It's extremely fun to perform. I'm also an amateur percussionist, so I love playing with rhythm.

CC: Although it's often sung by non-professional choirs, that doesn't mean that it's not great to do it with real pros.

KB: The better musician you are, the better it sounds.

CC: And it benefits from bringing a lot of imagination to it--to all four of the *Spoken Music* pieces.

VAN: What other vocal music is on the *WORKLIGHT* program?

KB: There are three pieces on the program that are showcases for the singers alone--where there is no choreography. They are three pieces by Ernst Krenek, who was a friend and contemporary of Toch; three pieces in four parts, built like a madrigal for a small number of singers to sit around the table and sing one or two on a part. The texts are very unpoetic, narrative prose texts, "Archeology Lesson," "Astronomy Lesson," and "Geography Lesson." When you came in, we were rehearsing a tourist's account of having gone to what are commonly referred to as the La Brea Tar Pits [in Los Angeles, where Krenek emigrated during the Second World War]. Very pedestrian text is being elevated to this art form--rather an elite form, because not everyone can sing a cappella--plus, they are atonal pieces, so they are quite challenging. The pieces are funny, on the face of them, because the texts are so low, and the music writing is so high. While avoiding tonality, at moments Krenek does imitate traditional choral textures. Other vocal music on the program includes *Misere nostri* by Thomas Tallis, and, as Christopher mentioned, Glenn Gould's parody of contrapuntal practice, *So you want to write a fugue?* Silvie Jensen will also perform several Mozart songs to a duet performed by Christopher and Sabra Perry.

VAN: Who are the Lake Titicaca choral soloists? Tell us where the name came from and who's in the group.

CC: The name for the group was my idea. Of course, Lake Titicaca is one of the places mentioned in "The Geographical Fugue." The name itself is a joke, but I really wanted the singers to think of themselves as a "real" choir while they were working together on the project. I called them the "choral soloists" to reinforce the idea that they are an amazing, handpicked group. In my performances the musicians are not just in the background. They are not down in a pit--they are characters on stage. They are as much a part of my company as my dancers.

KB: It has been an opportunity to choose and work with a fantastic group of performers--a combination of professional and avocational singers, most of whom I have worked with before on other projects. The group is: Laura Christian and Jeanmarie Lally, sopranos; Alison Cheeseman and Silvie Jensen, mezzo-sopranos; Michael Lockley and Chris Ryan, tenors; and Staffan Liljas and Joshua Parillo,

basses.

VAN: Why should choruses consider performing all of Toch's works for "speaking choir" instead of just "The Geographical Fugue"?

CC: Toch deserves to be much better known. If his early career had not been cut short by the Nazis, I'm sure he would be among the best-known German composers of the twentieth century. About this piece specifically, I think it's really interesting to hear "The Geographical Fugue" in the original context, as the final movement of a suite. Combined with the "Valse," it's about ten minutes that comprise the composer's entire works for speaking choir. One of my goals in donating my edition of the score to the Toch Society is to make it possible for choruses to perform the entire work. I hope that the Toch Society will be able to have the entire work published in the future. For now, interested choruses can contact Dina Ormenyi of the Toch Society (dormenyi@flash.net).

The Christopher Caines Dance Company will perform *WORKLIGHT* on Friday-Sunday, June 2-4; Tuesday, June 6; and Thursday, June 8, 2006 at 8 PM at City Center Studio 4, 130 West 56th Street (between Sixth and Seventh Avenues), New York City. Admission: \$20. Reservations: (718) 554-1948 or www.christophercainesdance.org (Seating is limited; reservations recommended.) Musical performances by The Lake Titicaca Choral Soloists, conducted by Kristina Boerger; Silvie Jensen, mezzo-soprano; Marija Ilic, piano; and Tania Simoncelli, cello.

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Revision Date: June 3, 2006.

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