

“Like a benevolent Poseidon”

Memories of Otto Tomek



Otto Tomek

If I had to describe Otto Tomek’s character in just one word, I would use the word uninhibited; not the basic instinct which has not yet been refined by passing through the filters of judgement, but the instinct with which he has gained a clear sense of judgement following numerous confrontations, while still retaining his capacity for enthusiasm. Not only did new ideas fail to frighten him, they actually increased his enthusiasm; this was a sense of judgement that had also preserved its originality.

As an eminent representative of those highly significant enthusiasts, Otto Tomek held a crucial position. His uninhibitedness not only became a refreshing characteristic trait, it made him irreplaceable in the music world today.

Pierre Boulez

I no longer remember exactly when and where we met – it was presumably

directly after the war whilst I was a student at the University Institute of Musicology. It was there that I came across him again years later – in the library. We saw each other more frequently after that, when he was working for Universal Edition, which is my publisher. Strangely enough, we had little contact with each other during this time in particular, although Otto followed my development as a composer attentively and was a loyal member of the audience at my concerts. His judgement was very independent, critical, and never followed a particular trend. I can vividly recollect a performance of *Spiegel V* in the 1960s, when he was Head of Music at WDR. He was very enthusiastic about the piece, even though “his” orchestra was very hostile towards my music at the time. After that we visited Cologne several times with “die reihe”; his interest in meaningful programmes was similar to mine and we gave some very good concerts with works by the Viennese School, including the world premiere of Webern’s posthumous *Pieces for Orchestra* (1913), and some elaborate, difficult works such as my *Exercises*. In the following decades he would often come to see me after concerts in a variety of different places, and we would sit down together and chat. Our conversations were full of irony and humour, which we both found immensely enjoyable. I was kept informed of his poor health and increasingly worsening condition by Clytus Gottwald, whom I asked to pass on my greetings and best wishes for a speedy recovery.

How frequently he was able to receive these sentiments, I do not know.

With Otto, I always had the feeling that we had a long-standing friendship, even though it was carried out, so to speak, at a distance; he belonged to my circle of friends, which has admittedly grown much smaller in recent years.

Friedrich Cerha

Otto Tomek is someone to whom I owe a great deal.

One could well say that he was the driving force that paved the way for cooperation between Universal Edition and me.

He was a fatherly friend.

His exuberant warmth always went hand in hand with the implacability of clear-cut decisions based exclusively on artistic considerations.

He will be missed.

Georg Friedrich Haas

Otto Tomek was one of those personalities who are difficult to figure out when you meet them, or when you are fortunate enough to have a

conversation with them for the first time. It seems to me as if he had always been present, even though there were sometimes long periods of time before we found an opportunity to undertake our friendly exchanges of impressions.

However, it is true that we engaged in interesting conversations about some project or other from the very start and that we devised ideas that would later become a reality.

We enjoyed a close friendship that lasted for many years. During this time projects seemingly arose out of nothing and were put into practice. Our conversations naturally also revolved around ideas, although these did not transcend the boundary between dreams and reality.

We experienced years in which so many things were possible and we were able to develop plans which could be brought to fruition thanks to a strength of will, a corresponding readiness to make sacrifices, and even physical exertion. However, it was only possible to reach this happy result with a person like Otto Tomek at your side, who knew where you had to use your strength and what every individual had to do who wanted to escape from mediocrity and produce something extraordinary. Rest in peace, my friend Tomek. You had the gift of creating an atmosphere in which composers could write music that was among the best of the 20th century. It will last for centuries. Thank you.

Cristóbal Halffter

There was always something encouraging about Otto Tomek – he encouraged you to live and be active. He always maintained a clear view of what was possible, and even where action was surrounded by adversity, by counteraction, Otto would see a way out; he recognised the range of possibilities that existed. This is how he caused history to be made, music history, from a very early stage.

Even in my youth, Otto formed a constructive part of my life as a participant – a passionate participant – always providing positive guidance in the oft-times close-knit scene surrounding the music, which he always towered over, even physically. He had the final say and something to say. We met on numerous occasions (and looking back it seems that each time it was a kind of great encounter) and our meetings opened up new paths to me, sometimes revealed a way out and always offered scope for development. A feeling of gratitude blends into the warmth and freshness sensed when remembering his

presence. I don't know how to explain this exactly, but it always seemed to me that Otto came in from the outside (in the sense that outside it is fresher and the air is better), and he spread a feeling of hope, immediately, in which habitual worriers became even more self-reflective.

I always felt Otto's endearing yet powerful character to be like a picture that has turned out well, showing that this is how a man can be. Focused on the senses, powerfully working his land, and radiating the confidence that encourages you to confront those petty goings-on all around you that are intent on preventing the development of anything beautiful.

His truly refreshing character will continue to show us a clear view of the world. It is how it is, but it has been made brighter by Otto Tomek.

Wolfgang Rihm

I got to know Otto Tomek during my studies in Karlsruhe. I didn't know his name at first. He was an elderly man who attended almost all of the New Music concerts, including innumerable pieces by composition students. Always curious, alert, interested. I only found out later on that this man was "the" Otto Tomek. I wondered what he could see in our initial attempts at composition after experiencing the entire repertoire of 20th century music first hand. What must it sound like to him? Why does he keep coming back? It was a mystery.

In later years I often met up with him after we had got to know each other. He knew me as a composer; I knew him as Otto Tomek. We frequently discussed various topics, but he always remained the same: interested and curious. Only now can I see it: his curiosity is an essential component of the phenomenon "Otto Tomek". Without this openness and driving energy for perpetual searching, music would have developed very differently in the second half of the 20th century. Great things can only happen if they are surrounded by attentiveness for that which is small and unknown. This is what I learned from him and took with me for myself.

Vykintas Baltakas

I met Otto in the spring of 2000, when I was 25 years old and still studying, at the premiere of my work *Vielleicht zunächst wirklich nur* performed by Ensemble Modern at the Konzerthaus in Vienna.

This first meeting, which was also the beginning of my wonderful time at Universal Edition, made me realise one thing: any company with such a clear-sighted, benevolent and warm-hearted man as this at its helm must be far more than just a publishing house. The Universal Edition employees and its composers seemed to me from the very beginning to be more like a large, colourful family, with Otto at its head keeping gentle watch over them with the fairness and humour of a grandfather, and always with a sympathetic ear.

Throughout all the years in which I was fortunate enough to know and meet Otto, he seemed to me like a benevolent Poseidon who offered young composers a safe haven and sheltered anchorage from harsh winds and freak weather. Otto always responded to the composition of new works with his own special combination of goodwill, a capacity for enthusiasm and unconditional curiosity. I miss Otto dearly!

Johannes Maria Staud

De mortuis nil nisi bene.

There is no need for this warning in relation to Otto Tomek: he was an extraordinary person, a great personality, and it was only possible to admire and love him.

He was also a modest man: any kind of praise or show of gratitude embarrassed him. Despite this, I repeatedly tried to tell him how much I valued and liked him – and to tell him during his lifetime the things that so often only appear in a tribute. When I dialled his telephone number the day after his death in order to convey my sympathies to his wife, the answer phone was still switched on. I heard his kind, jovial voice with the familiar smile: he promised that “whoever you want to speak to will phone you back.”

And with Otto it is not so unimaginable that he will get in touch in some way or other. He was convinced that death is a “gentle transition”, as he put it, into a different sphere, and that there are ways in which contact can be maintained. He had spent years preparing himself for this transition. His bag had long been packed because his health had been failing him for many years; the operations and treatments had led to unnecessary and unforeseen complications. His robust body could no longer keep going; weakened, tired, but cheerful, he said farewell.

A recurring theme in our conversations was the speed, which in my opinion

was far too slow, with which he was reviewing and organising his extensive archive of correspondence with the most important composers of the post-war era, along with their scores and manuscripts. I also attempted to persuade him to write down his memories of his activities in international music life, focusing on Germany and Austria, for future generations to read. But he refused.

It is our loss: Otto Tomek was one of the key figures in those epochal years after the Second World War, when the broadcasting stations in the Federal Republic of Germany had both the sense of artistic mission and the financial means necessary to promote contemporary music, award commissions, stage concerts and festivals, and to make a positive influence on the course of music history. He was one of the last – perhaps the last – of the generation which also included Heinrich Strobel and Wolfgang Steinecke. He leaves a void, in my personal life as well. Otto Tomek will, however, remain with us – within us, the heirs of his life's work.

Bálint András Varga