

A Memorial Tribute to Otto Deri

Jack M. Shapiro

Otto Deri would have been pleased with this issue of *Current Musicology*. He loved to read the works of his close friends and colleagues, to discuss their analyses, discoveries, and insights, and to be happy with them about the completion of a project. When he died so suddenly at the age of 57 in April 1969, the immediate selfish concern of his friends at City College, having been deprived of his person, was to find ways of holding on to his memory and to the influence of his work and style. Four different approaches to commemorate Otto Deri were suggested, each symbolizing a vital concern of his professional life. Together, they speak to the diversity of his interests and achievements.

The most obvious memorial was a concert. Although Otto was devoted to study, scholarship, and the written word, the performance, the *hearing*, of music was to him a constant joy and the ultimate goal. His first diploma, received from the Budapest Royal Academy of Music in 1933, was in performance. Later, as the cellist of the Lener Quartet (1945–48), the New York Trio (1951–61), and the Faculty Quartet of the City College of New York (1952–69), and through countless other appearances in solo, chamber music, and orchestral concerts, Otto continued to devote a major portion of his life to the art of making music. In addition to his own performance activities, he coached chamber music ensembles at the City College and instructed cello privately and at the Manhattan School of Music (1946–54) and Westminster College (1949–52).

Otto's professional activities were matched in intensity by his participation in informal chamber music sessions and by his indefatigable concert-going. His last minutes were spent doing what he enjoyed perhaps more than anything else—playing chamber music with his family and friends. Even during his vacations abroad he managed to join colleagues and friends in a few evenings of chamber music. On his last trip to Hungary he wrote from Budapest: "So we did get here, and it is wonderful to see my parents. Played chamber music with my father (he is 81!). Brahms sextet among other works." While others spent time listening to a recording, Otto Deri preferred to "play it himself" or to go to a concert. He enjoyed recorded music in its "proper" context; and his distrust of, contempt for, and refusal to cope with things mechanical did not usually extend to the phonograph. But he did preach the primacy of live music to his students and followed his own dictum by spending many evenings listening to music in concert halls. The fact that the performers were in many instances friends or students or that the music performed often had specific relevance to his special professional interest in contemporary music¹ was not the sole reason for this passion for hearing live music. He never considered attending a student recital a chore or

an obligation. He would have gone even if there had not been a special professional or social purpose.

A concert, therefore, was especially appropriate in honoring his memory. It was given on 10 April 1970 and served as the opening concert of the new auditorium of the Graduate Center of the City University. The program, performed by his friends and colleagues, reflected his special tastes and included Miriam Gideon's *The Seasons of Time*, dedicated to Otto, who had suggested the texts to her. Mark Brunswick delivered a special eulogy, and Hans Jelinek, in Otto's memory, contributed a woodcut for the cover of the program. (See Appendix for the program.)

The second item in the four-part memorial was suggested and implemented by his students. They insisted on something tangible toward which they could contribute their rarest possession—money. The students' admiration and respect for Otto and their devotion to his teachings, counsel, and friendship were matched by his skill, dedication, and success as a teacher, counselor, and friend. Sharing an office with him for more than sixteen years gave the present writer many opportunities to eavesdrop professionally on his endless conferences with students, as well as with younger colleagues whom he supervised in introductory courses. Most of these conferences concerned papers which students had written for his classes. Occasionally the students were not prepared, but Otto had always done his homework. The papers were covered with his comments, and any "inadvertent" use of source material without acknowledgement was given special attention complete with citation of author, chapter, page, and a few choice suggestions about integrity. His Ph.D. in Criminal Psychology, from Peter Pasmany University (Budapest, 1935), apparently reflected another continuing interest in his life. Many students received master lessons in style and expression, as well as flash-like diagnoses of their problems in areas of content. He insisted on precision of facts and logic. A favorite comment, written and oral, was: "Really?!!!"—with his eyebrows raised almost to the glasses perched on his forehead. Students would often bring nonmusical or nonschool problems for his advice. He always dealt with these situations with tact, firmness, and discretion. And students returned again and again just to talk with him. He was a marvelous listener, dispensing much comfort to his students and colleagues. To mark all this and more than can be expressed here, those of his students who were at the City College in May of 1969 presented the CCNY Music Library with a facsimile edition of Stravinsky's manuscript of *Le Sacre du printemps* in Otto Deri's name.

Because of his unusual interest in the quality of student research and writing, it is hoped, as a third part of his memorial, that an endowment fund can be established to provide annual prizes for the best undergraduate and graduate writing on music at the City College.

Finally, we have this issue of *Current Musicology*. Such a project was suggested by Professor Neal Zaslaw, now of Cornell University, as providing an opportunity for Otto's friends and colleagues to devote a portion of their scholarly activities to his memory and to offer an instance of his influence on

colleagues and on the art of music. Neal took the initiative in generating interest in the project, soliciting the articles, and making the early arrangements for publication. In the editorial hands of Michael and Margaret Griffel and their *Current Musicology* staff, the project has come to fruition.

An appreciation of Otto would be incomplete without a mention of his "big" temperament. He reflected in his life the mountains he loved, the skiing in which he delighted, and the world of nature which he very much appreciated. He was an omnivorous reader, especially of philosophy, psychology, and poetry, and delivered and published papers on aesthetics as well as on music. It is singularly appropriate, therefore, that a collection of such varied essays as are printed here be issued in his honor.

NOTE

¹ His book *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*, published in 1968 by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, won a Deems Taylor award.

Appendix

CONCERT IN MEMORY OF OTTO DERI

I. TRIO in D major, Op. 70, No. 1 **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Allegro vivace e con brio

Largo assai ed espressivo

Presto

Felix Galimir, violin, **Fortunato Arico**, cello, **Fritz Jahoda**,
piano

II. FOUR SONGS **Franz Schubert**

Suleikas zweiter Gesang

An den Mond in einer Herbstnacht

Wanderers Nachtlied

Auf dem Wasser zu singen

J net Steele, soprano **Fritz Jahoda**, piano

III. THE SEASONS OF TIME (1969)

Miriam Gideon

Written in memory of Otto Deri

Janet Steele, soprano

Fortunato Arico, cello

Fritz Jahoda, piano

Neal Zaslaw, flute

IV. QUARTET No. 2, Op. 17

Béla Bartók

Moderato

Allegro molto capriccioso

Lento

The Faculty String Quartet: Felix Galimir, violin, **Michael Tolomeo**, violin, **Jack Shapiro**, viola, **Fortunato Arico**, cello.

Woodcut by Hans Jelinek in memory of Otto Deri