

Johanna Senfter in Luxembourg

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Ellen Freyberg's helpful introduction to the life of Johanna Senfter (1879-1961) for MUGi is a good place to begin in studying this composer. As Freyberg points out, and as others have echoed, Senfter is best understood as a regional phenomenon. Much of her biography centres on her birthplace of Oppenheim (Rheinland-Pfalz) and its surrounding regions, with performances of works, mostly small-scale ones, throughout the 1920s and 1930s in Darmstadt, Wiesbaden, Erbach, Bad Nauheim, and Mainz.

Nonetheless, making a move westwards of 200km or so, we should also add Luxembourg to this list. In the early 1940s, Senfter enjoyed considerable limelight there, often with performances of her works in large and prestigious public genres, alongside more intimate chamber and Lieder recitals. Senfter's Violin Concerto, for example, was played by Anton Schoenmaker in March 1942 in the Luxembourg City Stadthaus (now Cercle Cité); a year later her Piano Concerto received its world premiere in the same venue with Grete Herwig (née Milzkott). Another world premiere, of Senfter's Seventh Symphony (F minor), was given there in July 1944.

How can we account for this sudden notoriety, especially remarkable since it sprang up in Senfter's seventh decade? Certainly it is bound up with Nazi Germany's invasion of the Grand Duchy in May 1940. A student and close friend of Senfter's, Hans Fleischer, had become a member of the Nazi party in 1931; ten years later he was made deputy to Hans Herwig, husband of the pianist Grete and the municipal music director of Luxembourg during the occupation, as well as leader of its now restyled 'Landesmusikschule' and thus one of those charged with implementing the Nazi cultural programme of 'Heim ins Reich' ('Back Home to the Reich').

It would be no exaggeration to say that Senfter too was part of this programme, and made a very specific contribution to it. Her works were performed, often directly alongside those of Fleischer and Herwig, as part of *Zeitgenössische Musiktage*: that is, 'contemporary music events' meant to showcase the best of new German composition in its grandest, complex-contrapuntal, and also most thoroughly recognisable nineteenth-century aspect. (According to Freyberg, Herwig died while rehearsing Senfter's Ninth Symphony, as if there could be any greater German-symphonic stereotype than that). In other words, Senfter's music was intended as proof that the new Nazi territorial designation of 'Gau Moselland', which incorporated Luxembourg, was the site of a 'healthy', 'organic' continuation of German art-musical tradition, far removed from the modernist baggage of the Altreich's bigger urban centres. One might even say that Senfter had long been identified to play this kind of role. Sketching her life and works thus far in 1915, Wilibald Nagel prefigures the Luxembourg-era criticism in identifying Senfter's quiet, retiring, modest, provincial nature; her love of line and melody; her adoration of Bach, Mozart, and her teacher Max Reger; and her conservative nature that shunned 'foreign' influences including those of dangerous modernisms like impressionism and futurism.

Thus Luxembourg-focused study opens up a number of research directions for Senfter, and vice versa, Senfter for music in Luxembourg under the occupation. One of these concerns one of the most often-repeated anecdotes about her: that, as the KPD critic Hans Krautmann alleged in 1947, she had written the tune of the Horst-Wessel-Lied

into the finale of one of her later symphonies. Some basic philological enquiry is still necessary here. It is not actually clear to which of Senfter's symphonies the critic meant to refer, a difficulty compounded by the fact that none of them has been professionally recorded nor published, and there is still no detailed authoritative account of the chronology of their composition. But assuming that the quotation is demonstrable, and is not (as Manfred Penning has proposed) of a similar but distinct tune, it may well relate to Senfter's years in the Luxembourg spotlight, which might in turn help in understanding what kind of gesture it was: whether one of political commitment, of gratitude to the regime that had promoted her cause, or of something else more complex. The context of her career in Germany would also assist us in this aim. To what extent, as a woman and a symphonist, could Senfter have made her public reputation in Germany before and after 1933? And to what extent had she come to rely on concert income? Freyberg reports that Senfter's considerable family fortune, earned in the pharmaceutical industry, had dwindled amidst the rampant inflation of the 1920s.

The second point emerges from the complaint at the end of Senfter's life that 'if I hadn't been a woman, I would have had it easier' (letter to Fleischer quoted in Freyberg 2014). This is a figure that has reverberated across biographical accounts. Again, the limitations imposed on her career in Germany should not be ignored, nor should the restricting sexist tropes that arose in criticism of her music there and again in Luxembourg. Yet the example of Luxembourg does mean that one possible implication of Senfter's complaint – that her music had been marginalised throughout her life – needs nuance. The large-scale public works were performed with some prestige at Cercle-Cité, after all. One might even argue that the status of being 'overlooked' and 'unknown' was precisely what powered the image of the aloof, difficult, challenging 'grande dame' of the contemporary-music concert series there; it probably also lay behind the sense of Senfter's uniqueness, and thus the astonishing claim, repeated throughout the Luxembourg press in the 1940s, that she was worth listening to as the 'only woman, up until now, who has proven creative in the musical realm' (Luxemburger Wort 1942) Still the question remains, of course, whether Senfter herself had any agency of control over this image, or whether, as one suspects, it was constructed by Fleischer, Herwig, and critics following in the footsteps of Nagel earlier in the century. Further research is here, too, a necessity.

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