

Deutschlandradio Kultur



Heinz TIESSEN

PIANO MUSIC

ZWEI PHANTASIE-STÜCKE, OP. 26
ENTARTETES WEIHNACHTSLIED
SECHS KLAVIERSTÜCKE, OP. 37
FÜNF KLAVIERSTÜCKE, OP. 52
EINE NATUR-TRILOGIE, OP. 18
DREI TANZCAPRICEN, OP. 61

Matthew Rubenstein

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

FROM SAUL TO PAUL: HEINZ TIESSEN AND HIS PIANO MUSIC

by Tobias Fasshauer

Heinz Tiessen (1887–1971) was among the most prominent composers of the Weimar Republic. He began his career as a disciple of Richard Strauss, but he soon moved on to occupy a kind of middle position between the two main currents of the German and Austrian musical avant-garde: Schoenbergian expressionism on the one hand and the audience-oriented *Neue Sachlichkeit* on the other. Although Tiessen was able to avoid direct persecution during the years of the Third Reich, he was marginalised for both political and aesthetic reasons – a position from which he never fully recovered after the war; as a consequence, Tiessen, a leading figure of his own generation, is known today only to a few specialists. In his autobiography, *A Composer's Paths*, of 1962, Tiessen describes his situation at the end of the Second World War as follows: ‘The world of yesterday was shattered; for people outside Berlin, I was a non-entity, and a whole generation of musicologists had no opportunity to really come to know me.’¹

Born in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad), Tiessen studied composition and music theory at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin from 1905 to 1908, with secondary studies in literature, history of music and philosophy. In 1914 he met Richard Strauss, and in that same year his one-movement Second Symphony, *Stirb und werde*,² Op. 17, was premiered under Hermann Abendroth in Essen. In 1917 Strauss recommended him for a position as a rehearsal pianist at the Royal Opera in Berlin, and the following year he began working as Kapellmeister and composer at the Berliner Volksbühne. In Berlin Tiessen was the very first musician to join the Novembergruppe, a union of artists that arose out of the November Revolution of 1918 and would go on to play a leading role as a forum for a democratically oriented cultural avant-garde during the Weimar Republic. His progressive political outlook manifested itself in several works for the workers’ music movement, to which he had regular contact as the director of the Berlin ‘Young Chorus’ after 1924.

In autumn 1922 Tiessen was among the founding members of the German section of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), and in 1925 he took a position teaching

¹ Heinz Tiessen, *Wege eines Komponisten*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1962, p. 58.

² ‘Dying and Being New-born’, after a line in the poem ‘Selige Sehnsucht’ in Goethe’s 1819 collection, *West-östlicher Diwan*.

theory and composition at the State Music Conservatoire in Berlin. During the First World War, he had taught theory and composition to the young composer and pianist Eduard Erdmann privately; his students as a teacher and professor at the Conservatoire came to include Sergiu Celibidache (who would later become famous as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic) and the composer Josef Tal. In 1930 Arnold Schoenberg's recommendation led to Tiessen's accession into the Prussian Academy of Arts. Then came Hitler and the Nazi *Machtergreifung*: '1933 wasn't just the temporary end of my creative work; it was the beginning of a life-crisis.'³ Although he was permitted to keep both his teaching position at the Conservatoire and his membership in the Academy of Arts, his works were now viewed as undesirable and would hardly be performed during the twelve years of Nazi rule. After the war Tiessen occupied several positions in the musical life of Berlin. From 1946 to 1949 he was the director of what used to be the Stern and now was called the City Conservatoire of Music. Thereafter he was a professor at the Hochschule für Musik, and in 1956 was among the first board-members of the newly founded Academy of Arts in West Berlin. As a composer, he was never able to attain the productivity and influence he enjoyed before 1933.

'In order to understand Heinz Tiessen's music, especially in the crucial years from 1921 to 1928, one should see it as a part of German expressionism' – so wrote Tiessen's friend, the prominent musicologist and critic Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, in a 1962 laudatio in honour of Tiessen's 75th birthday.⁴ Stuckenschmidt went so far as to propose that Tiessen himself, in a lecture given to the Königsberg Goethe Society in 1918, was the very first critic to employ the term 'expressionism' with reference to music.⁵ In his book *On the History of Recent Music* (1928), Tiessen enumerated the elements of musical expressionism:

Separation from the stuff and model of nature was its most important demand; art is the *expression of the inner physiognomy!* The soul becomes active, a force of its own. [...] In the forefront was the rejection of models, the total working-out and increased concentration of the musical material. This expressed itself in a *rejection of literary programmes and texts*; in the *dissolution of the tonal system and the reorganisation of the tonal material*; in the avoidance of sound atmospherics by reducing things to their *essentials*; in replacing harmony as the basic constructive principle with *linear activity*; and finally in a resolute terseness (doing away with large surfaces and the lyrical stagnation of mood and affect), which even goes so far as to shrink the entire musical form.⁶

³ *Wege eines Komponisten, op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁴ Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, 'Der Begriff des Expressiven als Schlüssel zu Heinz Tiessens Kunst', published in Manfred Schlösser (ed.), *Für Heinz Tiessen 1887–1971*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1979, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ Tiessen, *Zur Geschichte der jüngsten Musik (1913–1928): Probleme und Entwicklungen*, Melos/Schott, Mainz, 1928, pp. 39 and 43 (italics in original).

In his autobiography Tiessen traces the origins of his own expressionist tendencies back to his experiences writing music for the theatre, which forced him to get the most expressive effect possible in the shortest time and with the fewest resources.⁷

Tiessen himself accepted the label ‘expressionist’ only with reservations. In *A Composer’s Paths* he remarked about his “second start” as a composer of linear polyphony’ after 1917:

Of course I didn’t become an ‘expressionist’ out of doctrinal considerations; but all sorts of conditions came together to push me palpably in the direction of expressionism. Stuckenschmidt, who clearly saw Schoenberg’s influence on my development, had good reasons to describe my most important works as ‘the best kind of German expressionism’, even though – or perhaps because – they didn’t represent an extreme version of this type.⁸

Elsewhere Tiessen wrote:

Freed from my ties to Strauss, I was able to find my own thematic language in multi-voiced textures, in expressivity, a dense style that encompassed all sorts of degrees of tension and even, at times, even an un-doctrinaire form of dodecaphony.⁹

In retrospect, the path Tiessen took seems all the more remarkable in light of his early essay *Progress and Creative Function* (1913), in which he accuses Schoenberg of replacing ‘the tradition of craftsmanship’ with ‘arbitrary instinct’ (*triebhafter Willkür*), going so far as to dismiss Schoenberg’s *Kammersinfonie*, Op. 9, as ‘ugly’.¹⁰ Tiessen would later take the trouble to write in two copies of this text: ‘Not long afterwards, I converted from Saul to Paul!’¹¹

The influence of Schoenberg on Tiessen had more to do with the surface sound of music than with its inner organisation. Beyond a certain flirtation with dodecaphony, Tiessen kept his distance from Schoenberg’s idea of the equality of all twelve tones (i.e., atonality). Not unlike Hindemith, he always saw the elements of tonality as something natural. Thus, in an essay from 1952, *Teaching Music Theory* – which restated the positions he took in *On the History of Recent Music* – he declares:

⁷ *Wege eines Komponisten, op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

The basic cell (*Urzelle*) of tonal relationships is [...] the fact that the overtone series and combination tones produce the triad, in addition to the fact of tonal proximity based on fifths; this can no more be denied in music than the colour-scale based on the spectrum or the laws of optics can be denied in painting.¹²

But this view didn't lead Tiessen to embrace a return to the tonal tradition or even to reject atonal procedures. What he strove for was a unitary theory that would undergird both tonal music in the traditional sense and atonal music – in this sense he came close to Schoenberg's own preferred concept of 'pantonicity' rather than 'atonality'. Tiessen wrote:

The main feature of a general theory – a theory not dependent on the musical epoch – must be its ability to look backwards as well as forwards [...]. A truly valid ordering of the tonal world should meet the demands of an unlimited universalism, without leaving anything out; the atonal composer on its outer periphery should be as fully explained as the folk-music at its centre [...].¹³

In *On the History of Recent Music*, Tiessen declares one 'timeless law' of such a system to be the 'balancing-out of intensities of tension and release'¹⁴ – that is to say, a principle taken over from tonal harmony. And in Tiessen's posthumously published essay, *Remarks on the Logic and Meaning of Modulation*, he mentions a related principle: the 'sense of tonal distance, of narrowness and broadness, of perspective'.¹⁵ For Tiessen, these aspects both point to his differences with the Schoenberg school. In his autobiography he credits Schoenberg with a 'decisive influence' on his musical language, but conditions this observation with the remark that he never abandoned 'the hierarchy of intervals and the spatial sense of proximity and distance (that is, perspective)'.¹⁶

Tiessen's universalist understanding of tonality reflects the way, as a composer, he moved back and forth between the poles of expressionism and its antithesis, *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Beginning with the stylistic development represented by his *Drei Klavierstücke* Op. 31, his piano music becomes more 'modern', but without the kind of esoteric or experimental aura to which this rather intimate genre might lend itself. Instead, he lets both basic tendencies – expressionism and the attitude of the 'musicus redivivus' of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, as Tiessen called this type of composer – at times flow seamlessly into each other and at

¹² Für Heinz Tiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–45.

¹⁴ *Zur Geschichte*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Für Heinz Tiessen, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁶ *Wege eines Komponisten*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

other times collide with a bang. ‘Situating Tiessen’s piano music among the tendencies of the 20th century is no easy task’, writes the pianist Gerhard Puchelt:

The individual stylistic elements are too diverse. What comes across is a composer who understood the instrument profoundly and was himself a virtuoso. His principal concerns were at once expression and the maintenance of the musical form. He therefore avoided the form-dissolving elements of impressionism at all cost.¹⁷

In terms of its reception, the *Natur-Trilogie*, Op. 18 (1913), was Tiessen’s most successful piano piece. Premiered by Margarethe Ansorge (the wife of the composer and pianist Conrad Ansorge) in 1916, it would subsequently be performed by pianists as prominent as Erdmann and Wilhelm Backhaus. The work belongs to what Tiessen himself described as his ‘first creative period’, encompassing works from the years 1911 to 1917. In *A Composer’s Paths* he says of these works:

Despite a certain contrapuntal freedom and steps in the direction of atonality, they clearly take Richard Strauss’ harmonic style as their starting point. That is hardly surprising: I learned the most from his works – from *Don Juan* to *Ariadne* – and from his wise and modest words. I’ll never forget our conversation on that afternoon [in March of 1914], when I played him the *Natur-Trilogie*, and he found artistic value in it.¹⁸

In a ‘chronological works list’ from 1914 Tiessen recorded Strauss’ reaction more fully:

He finds the first piece very expressive and coherent; in the second, he complained of a lack of melodic flow and said that you couldn’t write that way for orchestra; the third piece pleased him the most, and he found creative impressions in it.¹⁹

But, as Tiessen reveals in *On the History of Recent Music*, the style of Op. 18 isn’t simply derived from Strauss but has other roots as well: ‘The *Natur-Trilogie* (1913) represents [...] a pianistic response to impressionism, in which the diction is loosened without undermining the overall architecture based on a kind of enhanced song-form.’²⁰ In other words, Tiessen appropriated impressionistic techniques without taking on board the formal looseness they might engender.

¹⁷ Gerhard Puchelt, ‘Wandlungen eines Klavierstils’, *Für Heinz Tiessen*, op. cit., p. 65.

¹⁸ *Wege eines Komponisten*, op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁹ Akademie der Künste Berlin, Heinz-Tiessen-Archiv, Catalogue Number 1794.

²⁰ *Zur Geschichte*, op. cit., pp. 43f.

Another sign of the influence of both Strauss and the impressionists in Op. 18 can be seen in its programmatic references. In the movement titles, Tiessen pays homage to the scenery and atmosphere of the Baltic coast, his East Prussian birthplace. Now in Lithuania, the 'Dead Dune' referred to in the title of the first movement is on the Curonian Spit, a long, thin land-bridge separating the Curonian Lagoon from the Baltic Sea. The *Natur-Trilogie* as a whole can be heard in the long tradition of musical sea-portraiture, particularly so in the second and third movements. Whereas the first movement [1] is a sombre meditation (in ABA form) in the tradition of late Liszt²¹ – in mood and colour not unlike the ruminative second movement from Schoenberg's Op. 11 piano pieces – the second movement, *Barcarole* [2], seems to evoke the placid waters of the Curonian Lagoon. The third movement, *Notturmo tempestoso* [3], portrays the wild storm-waters of the Baltic, combining the advanced harmonic language of the later Liszt with the heroic pianistic sweep of earlier Liszt pieces such as the B minor Sonata or *Vallée d'Obermann*.

But as with Debussy's *La Mer*, the programmatic aspect of the *Natur-Trilogie* is not merely a question of descriptive naturalism. As Tiessen explained in 'The Pure Effects of the Straussian Programme Symphony', a 1913 essay for the *Neue Musik-Zeitung*:

The programme [of a tone poem] has only one function, which is to limit, delimit and in a sense confine and concentrate within a closed circle the full spectrum of subjective, extra-aesthetic feelings and associations, which in so-called 'absolute' music are limitless; the point is not to establish fixed physical or conceptual associations, but to heighten the music's [emotional/affective] receptivity.²²

With or without an explicit programme, for Tiessen there was never a question of doing away with the 'absoluteness' of music – that is to say, the self-sufficiency of the musical organism. Tiessen revised the *Natur-Trilogie* along with some other works after the Second World War. According to his own account in *A Composer's Paths*, he 'mainly just smoothed out some details', leaving 'the total picture [...] more polished than before.'²³ It is the revised version which is heard on this recording.

The *Zwei Phantasiestücke*, Op. 26, an homage to Robert Schumann, were originally conceived as the first and last of a group of three movements. In this earlier conception, they were premiered under the title *Drei Phantasiestücke* by the composer's wife and former student Anneliese Schier-Tiessen in March 1964 in the 'Haus der ostdeutschen Heimat' in Berlin. The second movement, the dance-like 'Papillon' (written presumably around 1920), was eventually moved to become part of an entirely different opus number, the

²¹ As observed by the pianist on this recording, Matthew Rubenstein.

²² Heinz Tiessen, 'Die reine Wirkung der Straussischen Programm-Symphonie', *Neue Musik-Zeitung*, Vol. 34 (1913), No. 8, p. 145.

²³ *Wege eines Komponisten*, op. cit., p. 61.

Drei Tanzcapricen, Op. 61 [18]. The first piece of Op. 26, ‘Erinnerung’ [4], dating from the same time as ‘Papillon’, shows Tiessen’s emancipation from his idol Strauss. What remains of the compositional practice of the *Natur-Trilogie* is the arrangement of voices into a thick web of chromatic lines. ‘Erinnerung’ harkens back to the piece by the same name in Schumann’s *Album für die Jugend* (which in turn was intended as a ‘tombeau’ in memory of Mendelssohn). Tiessen’s ‘Erinnerung’ is based on the ABA song-form typical of lyrical Romantic piano character-pieces, only that when the A section re-emerges toward the end it is displaced an octave higher than before. The B section is clearly offset from the A section by a short, contrapuntally developed motive made out of repeated notes and dotted rhythms. A still stronger contrast comes with the second movement of Op. 26, the late-Romantic virtuoso piece ‘Florestan’ [5], which alternates between breathlessly voluptuous and lyrically ruminating sections and explicitly carries the sub-title ‘Homage to Robert Schumann.’ The programme for the first performance of the piece comments about this movement: ‘The manuscript (composed in 1915) was thought to be lost but, surprisingly, was recently discovered in the estate of a friend.’²⁴

The *Sechs Klavierstücke*, Op. 37, were written between 1925 and 1928. In his autobiography Tiessen says of them:

Just as too many aggressive sounds can make you yearn for something gentler, I found that, in the middle of a phase of writing simple choral works, I had the urge to go to the opposite extreme. So I turned to writing my radical-sounding, at times even twelve-tone, *Sechs Klavierstücke*, Op. 37.²⁵

Their hard edges notwithstanding, these pieces are on the whole rhythmically vivacious, frequently dance-like, and transparent in texture, and they can be heard to reflect the aesthetics of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, particularly in the final Foxtrott with its lively ragtime syncopations [11]. In the case of the three-voiced Fughetta, which has an ethereal, glass-like sound in a high register [8], there is even a neo-Baroque element. The etude-like opening *Allegro* [6] begins with a motto composed of a series of declamatory chords opening up a symmetrical ‘wedge’ between the hands; the parallel fourths in the upper voices can even be heard to evoke the opening horn fanfare of Schoenberg’s Op. 9 *Kammersinfonie*. The *Adagio* [7] harkens back in its style and harmonic language to Tiessen’s own ‘Erinnerung’ of Op. 26. By contrast, the Scherzino [9], with its fast-paced changes of metre and galloping tempo, seems more like Stravinsky, whereas the equally energetic Improvisation [10] alternates between march- and tarantella-like sections. In 1929 Hans Stückenschmidt, writing in exile, wrote a review of the pieces for the Prague-based magazine *Bohemia*:

²⁴ Akademie der Künste Berlin, Heinz-Tiessen-Archiv, Catalogue Number 2213.

²⁵ *Wege eines Komponisten*, op. cit., p. 50.

The six rather short but formally well-constructed pieces are masterful throughout, with the most vivid colours, dazzling in their virtuosity and very clear in their melodic design [...]. The harmonic language is based mainly on figurations comprised of four-note chords that alternate chromatically [...]. It is hard not to admire this severe and very German music, which is at once anti-Romantic and full of the strongest feeling.²⁶

The Six Pieces, Op. 37, were premiered (without the first piece) in a performance for radio in 1929 by Franz Osborn, to whom the first five pieces are also dedicated.

The *Fünf Klavierstücke*, Op. 52, were composed in 1944 as a Christmas present for Anneliese Schier-Tiessen and premiered by her in 1946. They show a certain stylistic affinity with the pieces of Op. 37, but they refer more freely to older historical models. The rhapsodic Improvisation [12] seems to repeat the opening gesture of the first piece from Op. 37. But where the earlier piece is cast in the hard hews of the Neue Sachlichkeit, here Tiessen offers a warm *Andante* in decidedly softer tones. At certain moments in this movement one can almost hear echoes of the *Natur-Trilogie*. The song-like second piece, 'Zueignung' ('Dedication') [13], once again harkens back to the lyricism of Schumann; the *Notturmo* [15], with its *cantabile* melody floating above a gently arpeggiated accompaniment, intimates Chopin. Wedged between these two pieces, the neo-Baroque 'Scherzino fugato' [14] ruptures the Romantic atmosphere with dry two- and three-voiced counterpoint. The final *Allegro ritmico* [16] does the same: its primitivist driving rhythms bring the cycle to a close firmly in the 'mechanistic' manner of the Neue Sachlichkeit.

It is not exactly clear when Tiessen compiled his *Drei Tanzcapricen*, Op. 61, which were put together out of earlier material. 'Tanz bei Amsels' (1960) [17] originally bore the title *U-Musik bei Amsels* (loosely, 'Pop Music at the Blackbirds' Home') and expresses what might be Tiessen's most peculiar passion: his virtual obsession with blackbirds and their song, to which he dedicated an entire book in 1953 (*Musik der Natur*). Here Tiessen turns his birdsong into ragtime. With its jumping three-eight metre, 'Papillon' (extracted from the group of pieces that later became the Op. 26) pays homage to Schumann's famous cycle *Papillons* and its many waltzes [18]. The finale, a lively Foxtrott (1954) [19], was originally published as *Weltstadtrhythmus* ('Rhythm of the Cosmopolis'); it uses material from a piece for wind-band that Tiessen wrote for the world-renowned 1928 'Berlin im Licht' festival, a city-wide event sponsored by the then cutting-edge light-bulb industry. (Kurt Weill's song *Berlin im Licht* was composed for the same occasion.)

The *Entartetes Weihnachtslied*, a simple arrangement of the Christmas carol 'Silent Night' [20], is a terse reminder of Tiessen's fate as an artist during the dark years of the 'Third Reich'. The autograph²⁷ is

²⁶ Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, 'Zu op. 37 Sechs Klavierstücke (Mai 1929)', *Für Heinz Tiessen, op. cit.*, p. 205.

²⁷ Akademie der Künste Berlin, Heinz-Tiessen-Archiv, Catalogue Number 1532.

dated December 1937 and bears a dedication 'to Paul von Heinz', by whom Tiessen presumably meant his friend, the composer Paul Höffer (1895–1949), who was then on the staff of the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin. The term 'entartet' ('degenerate') is borrowed caustically from the lexicon of Nazi propaganda and is in a sense doubly ironic: the somewhat dissonant and mildly unconventional harmonies, which sound almost like post-War jazz, could hardly have sounded radical even then.

Translation by Matthew Rubenstein

Tobias Fasshauer is a musicologist and composer in Berlin, Germany. From 1997 to 2010, he was research assistant on the Hanns Eisler Complete Edition. He is co-editor of the new critical edition of Eisler's collected writings, 1921–1935, and editor of Eisler's Chamber Symphony. In 2005 he completed his doctoral dissertation on the subject of Kurt Weill's song-style at the Technische Universität, Berlin. From 2011 to 2014 he taught at the Humboldt-Universität Berlin and in 2015 as a guest lecturer at the Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia. As a composer and arranger, he has worked regularly with the wind band Zentralkapelle Berlin.

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Matthew Rubenstein has performed as soloist and chamber musician on four continents. The German magazine *PianoNews* said of his recording of the complete piano works of Aribert Reimann (cpo, 2007): 'With virtuosity and sensitivity, Rubenstein gives life to every note; his playing expresses a profound understanding of contemporary music'; the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* also praised his 'vivid rendering' of the music. In 2011 his recording of music of the Berliner Novembergruppe (*Berlin im Licht*, Berlin Classics) enjoyed a warm reception and was selected that year by the Berliner *Tagesspiegel* as one of its 'best CDs of the summer.' Among other enthusiastic reviews, RBB-Kulturradio praised Rubenstein's 'stylistically sensitive, unflinchingly musical and rhythmically flexible' performances.

In 1993 Matthew Rubenstein won the Artists International Debut competition in New York City, which led to a performance in the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall. In 1999 he was awarded First Prize in the Bartók-Kabalevsky-Prokofiev International Competition in Radford, Virginia. In the United States he has given recitals in Chicago (WFMT Radio), Washington, DC, and New York City. He spent 1989–90 in São Paulo, Brazil, in order to study with the Brazilian pianist Daisy de Luca (a student of Friedrich Gulda and Magdalena Tagliaferro) and returned to Brazil throughout the 1990s to give solo and chamber recitals, including several performances on television in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

In 1999 Matthew Rubenstein was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study in Berlin, where he now lives and performs regularly. In 2009 he was invited by the German Embassy and the Goethe-Institut in the Ivory Coast to give concerts and master-classes in the capital city, Abidjan. A pianist with wide-ranging musical interests extending from the Baroque to New Music, Matthew Rubenstein has worked with both up-and-coming and established composers in Germany, Brazil and the United States. He holds degrees from the Manhattan School of Music and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and his teachers include Jerome Lowenthal, Edward Aldwell, Charles Timbrell, Constance Keene and Ian Hobson.



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