

Wolpe's "Geschichte der Verknüpfungen" **Reflections on Writing and Community**

by Brigid Cohen

Included in the Wolpe Collection are over one thousand pages of personal writings by the composer, mostly in the form of correspondence and diary entries. Collectively, these pages testify to Wolpe's commitment to fostering creative relationships for the sake of his and others' work, artistic identities, and daily lives. In part due to the multivalent intensity of Wolpe's effort, his personal writings are not easy to categorize by genre. Even the boundary between his correspondence and diary entries is not easy to distinguish. He sometimes quoted diaries in his letters, and he often framed diary entries as letters. The diaries include both drafts of letters he may well have intended to send to friends, and also letters that would have been impossible to deliver: letters to friends, for example, who had died.¹ Especially in the 1920s, he also included in his diary letters to himself, which served as forms of self-exhortation or admonishment, often laced with self-irony. A diary letter from 1924, for example, begins, "Mein sehr lieber St., Vielleicht wirst du wissen, daß mich das alles schon lange interessiert, was du machst." [My very dear St., maybe you will know that I have long been interested in what you're doing.]²

Throughout his life, even diary entries that were not explicitly formatted as letters would nonetheless easily slip into a second-person address, as though constantly engaging in dialogue with an "other" were imperative to Wolpe's working through important personal and artistic questions. All of his personal writings revolve around key interlocutors who were involved in various ways with the avant-garde movements in which he participated. Primary among these were his three wives Ola Okuniewska, Irma Schoenberg, and Hilda Morley and his close mother-figure friend and patron Else Schломann.³ I have referred to Wolpe's diaries and letters as "personal writings;" yet by virtue of their place in particularly intimate social networks – which were also professional and artistic in nature – those writings actually constitute something *in between* public and private forms of self-expression. Some of his diaries were written with the outright intention that others would read them.⁴

Wolpe's personal writings are a site of tremendous conceptual work. The

composer – who fled Berlin in 1933, immigrated to Palestine via Vienna, Moscow, and Budapest in 1934, and arrived in the United States in 1938 – is known for having cultivated a multitude of affiliations with diverse avant-garde circles and movements across three continents, from the Bauhaus and agitprop theater to serialism, the kibbutz movement, bebop, Abstract Expressionism, and many more. Wolpe consistently sought opportunities to confront diverse experimental forms of representation – whether written, musical, visual, or otherwise. He constantly assimilated new specialized vocabularies and arguments, mixing them together to form unique discursive hybrids through which he articulated his musical thought. Wolpe’s personal writings were the medium through which he reflected back on his group participation and translated the knowledge and stimulation he had found there into specific new possibilities of artistic practice. The language through which he grappled with new concepts was densely poetic and metaphorical; many letters and diary entries read like fully worked-over artistic feats in themselves. Especially after his migration, he developed an elaborate polylinguistic idiom reworking the conventions of language, supplemented by poetic use of spacing, script size, and calligraphy:

Old as lilies
as oil
as *Geschichte*
der Verknüpfungen
(connections)⁵

Wolpe managed to preserve an extraordinary quantity of his personal writings, despite his multiple dislocations as a migrant, and he even inscribed them with layers of commentary over the years.⁶ He also sometimes requested from his interlocutors that old letters he had written be returned to him, so that he could submit them to further study.⁷ And, crucially, Wolpe also went through occasional purges of the immense collection he had accumulated. “Air me!” Wolpe exclaimed to his wife Hilda Morley in 1953, “I have to air me out (I guess there is more of it in me) Although I threw out lots of old letters which had always some meaning of a personal belongings ... Off, less ballast (burden) trash.”⁸ The very quantity and poetic quality of Wolpe’s personal writings – the “it in me” of which there was ever more – reveals how deeply grounded his artistic activities and identity were through his relationships with close interlocutors and the tight social networks they shared.

In addition to sharing entire diaries with friends, he also sometimes quoted passages in his letters, finding new meanings for them in different situations many years apart in time. So, for example, in 1946, he wrote the following observation in his diary: “Wenn es den kleinsten Übergang gibt, gibt es auch die grösste Distanz (im Zeitlichen und in der Gestalt)” [if there

is the smallest transition, then there is also the greatest distance (in the temporal and in shape)].⁹ In its original context, this idea dealt with two concerns. First, it articulated Wolpe's desire to juxtapose densely developmental motivic textures in his music with prolonged "static" ones – the "greatest distance" "wenn etwas 'nicht geschehenes' komponiert werden soll" [when something "not having happened" should be composed].¹⁰ Second, it had biographical significance: it exhorted him to overcome the shock of his physical and cultural displacement, during a period when the coming to terms with his interrupted life – and his attendant worry about "not enough having happened" in his career and artistic development – dominated the pages of his letters and diaries. This complex set of meanings was entirely transformed when Wolpe reiterated nearly the same idea, slightly modified, in the context of a letter to his student Netty Simons in 1955. "If there are close links of connections existent," he told her, "then there are wide leaps as well alright."¹¹ In this second context, the idea also addressed two issues. On the one hand, he encouraged Simons to "take a leap" and find value in the music of John Cage, about which she had expressed skepticism. At the same time, it also alluded to the quality Wolpe found most appealing in Cage's music: its explosive textural discontinuities and intervallic leaps.¹²

Wolpe's practice of quoting his old writings in the new was a literal way of ensuring that traces of his life and thought – which had been jeopardized by experiences of violence and displacement – would survive. Wolpe's personal writings are written for posterity, and one gathers the sense from reading them that the composer continuously wanted to share his personal story of survival with an intimate circle of friends in need of encouragement. This tendency began from the early years of his flight. In early 1934, he signed one letter, "Stefan, greifbar unauslöschlicher Mensch" [Stefan, graspably inextinguishable human].¹³ In another letter to Schlomann, Wolpe even asked her to resend his letters back to him at her convenience: "Ich habe etwas Biographisches in Arbeit und ich brauch sie dazu." [I am working on something biographical and need them for it.]¹⁴ And, most revealing of all, he wrote in his diary in 1950: "Ich schrieb in einem Brief an Schlo [Else Schlomann] eine Stelle, die mir viel Mut machte: 'Ja, da muss man die Dokumente dieser aufbrechenden Zeit komponieren und sein Testament dazu.'" [I wrote in a letter to Schlo something that gave me much courage: "yes, in that case one must compose the documents of this de-camping open time and [one's] testament alongside it."]¹⁵

It would appear obvious that Wolpe's unpublished personal writings are indispensable to Wolpe research, and some very important contributions have already been made through their close study.¹⁶ This collection, by virtue of its very character as a testament to the composer's survival and his investment in communities, poses several important problems to traditional historiographies of modernism. First, the materials encourage an

interpretive strategy that does not separate “music” and “life,” or “personal” and “professional,” into deceptively reliable categories. Wolpe overwhelms such distinctions by consistently translating his music and life in parallel terms.

Second, Wolpe’s writings cry out for poetic interpretation, with its attendant sensitivity to issues of tone, style, diction, syntax, rhythm, and so on. Though they were never intended for the broad audience of a gallery, concert hall, or mass publication, Wolpe’s letters and diaries still generously reward close reading, which in turn can bring new perspectives on the composer’s musical poetics. Furthermore, the texts’ expressive qualities speak to their social contexts by foregrounding the important reading relationships Wolpe nurtured and relied upon.

Third, because they so vividly document one person’s involvement with diverse avant-garde communities across various media, they reveal that such communities were invariably more fluid and complexly imbricated than they might seem at first glance. The complexity of these communities’ cross-relations could make possible, for example, Wolpe’s simultaneous, mutually sustaining involvement in mid-century developments in serialism, on the one hand, and in the New York School of painters and circles around John Cage, on the other.

Finally, the “ever-present” quality of Wolpe’s past – embodied in the personal documents he preserved year after year – encourages a different way of regarding a composer’s past in relation to his present and future. In Wolpe’s case, with his fragmented history, the past could and can not easily be understood as a set of abstract or material conditions from which consequences gradually unfolded, whether in the shape of a developing life trajectory or musical style. Rather, the past inheres in a set of problems, ideas, or situations the composer abandoned or returned to recursively, wielding memories selectively to understand and change present circumstances. One pictures Wolpe at Black Mountain College reading and rereading his papers, discovering a diary entry from 1932 that illuminates a problem he faces in composing *Enactments*, offering to a friend the very words of encouragement he had given himself fifteen years earlier, and clearing out the closet (“was überaltet ist throw out”¹⁷), always taking care to distinguish between what should be forgotten and what remembered.

¹ Letter to Else Schломann, 11 September 1959 (this and the following letters, diaries, and notebooks, are preserved in the Stefan Wolpe Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation).

² 26 May 1924 entry from 1924–26 Diary.

³ Okuniewska was an artist who had studied art at the Bauhaus when Wolpe attended classes. Schoenberg was a pianist specializing in avant-garde music performance. Morley was a poet affiliated with the Black Mountain School of poetry. Else Schломann was a patron to young artists like Wolpe and Mordecai Ardon and participated in intense dialogues with them about art and politics.

⁴ For example, his 1928–32 diary contains entries from his first wife Ola Okuniewska. In a letter to Else Schlomann dated 8 May 1933, he announced he would write a diary for her and her family.

⁵ Letter to Hilda Morley, 4/5 November 1953.

⁶ Wolpe's 1928–30 diary, for example, is scattered with commentary from the 1940s and early 1950s.

⁷ Letter to Else Schlomann, 13 September 1933.

⁸ Undated letter to Hilda Morley, 1953.

⁹ Notebook "Thesen Sommer 1946."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stefan Wolpe, letter to Netty Simons, 26 October 1955 (Netty Simons Papers, New York Public Library).

¹² Austin Clarkson, "Composing the Performer: David Tudor Remembers Stefan Wolpe," *Musicworks: Explorations in Sound*, no. 73 (Spring 1999): 26–32, esp. 30.

¹³ Letter to Else Schlomann, 12 May 1934.

¹⁴ Letter to Else Schlomann, 13 September 1933.

¹⁵ 8 September 1950 entry from Diary "Ich bin in einem grenzenlosen Sinn," 1946–50.

¹⁶ These include Austin Clarkson, "A Creative Collaboration: Stefan Wolpe's and David Tudor's *Battle Piece*," *Musicworks: Explorations in Sound*, no. 73 (Spring 1999): 32–35; *id.*, "Stefan Wolpe: Broken Sequences," in *Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny, 1933–1945*, ed. Michael H. Kater and Albrecht Riethmüller (Laaber: Laaber, 2003), pp. 219–40. Thomas Phleps' introduction to Wolpe's *Lieder mit Klavierbegleitung 1929–1933* (Hamburg: Peer, 1993). Anne C. Shreffler, "Wolpe and Black Mountain College," in *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 279–97. Reinhard Voigt, "Identitätsrettung durch Rückzug in die Komposition: Stefan Wolpe und sein Exil in Palästina und den USA 1934–1953" [Saving One's Identity by Retreating into Composition: Stefan Wolpe and His Exile in Palestine and the United States, 1934–1953], in *Die Macht der Töne: Musik als Mittel politischer Identitätsfindung im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Tillmann Bendikowski et al. (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2003), pp. 76–97. Also articles by Clarkson, Phleps, Jehoash Hirschberg, and Andrew Kohn in *On the Music of Stefan Wolpe: Essays and Recollections*, Dimension and Diversity, no. 6, ed. Austin Clarkson (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2003).

¹⁷ Undated entry from Diary "Spätere Interpretationen," 1950.