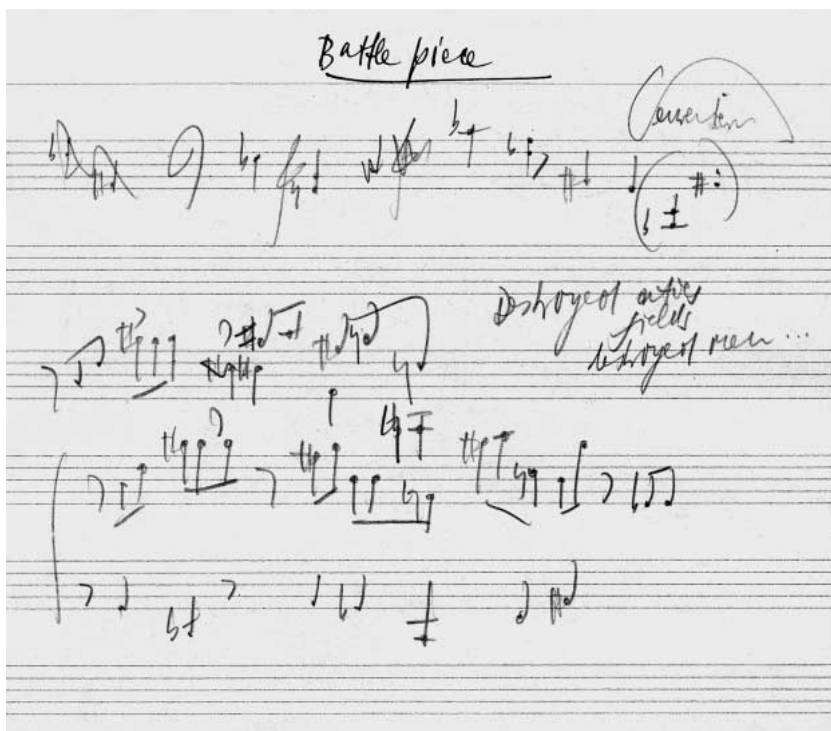


## From *Tendenzmusik* to Abstract Expressionism Stefan Wolpe's *Battle Piece* for Piano

by Austin Clarkson

Stefan Wolpe (1902–1972) learned modernism from playing Satie, late Scriabin, Schoenberg, and Bartók at the piano, but it was Ferruccio Busoni, the *dadas*, and the masters of the Bauhaus at Weimar that set him on his own path of a music strongly influenced by visual experience. His music was then strongly politicized by Hanns Eisler and the workers' movement between 1929 and 1933. Thereafter Wolpe continued to insist that music on the leading edge of modernism should also be music for use. A case in



Example 1: Stefan Wolpe, *Battle Piece* for piano (1943–47), pencil sketch leaf (Stefan Wolpe Collection).

a) Bass clef, melodic line with a chord marked "erweitern".

b) Treble clef, melodic line with lyrics "Destroyed cities, fields, destroyed men...".

c) Treble clef, melodic line.

Example 2: Transcription of Example 1.

point is *Battle Piece* (1943–47), which began as an occasional piece with an anti-war theme and became an epic, self-consistent, cyclical work that was a harbinger of American abstract expressionism.

During the war years in New York City Wolpe was active in various German and Jewish cultural organizations, including the Forum for Free German Literature and Art, an association of emigré authors and artists. It was for such occasions, at which support for the war effort was combined with left-wing politics, that Wolpe planned a series of pieces called *Encouragements*, which he hoped would raise the spirits of the people during the darkest days of the war. The first was a march fantasy for piano, *The Good Spirit of a Right Cause* (May 1942), and the second was a set of agitprop songs, *Simple Music with Definitely Political Intentions* (1942).<sup>1</sup> For the third piece, which he began early in 1943, he set out the following program: "Battles, hopes, difficulties, New battles, new hopes, no difficulties." Beside a sketch of the thematic material Wolpe wrote, "Destroyed cities, fields, destroyed men ...," which made explicit the anti-war theme (*Example 1*). He added the title *Battle piece* in ink some years later to identify the sketch leaf.

The sketch material delineates the core motif of conflict with two radically opposed types of material. The transcription of the sketch leaf (*Example 2*) shows that one element has third-rich harmony, steady quarter notes in duple rhythm, and a direct melodic contour (*Example 2a*), while the other element is third-poor in harmony, has steady eighth notes in triple rhythm,



Example 3: Stefan Wolpe, *Battle Piece* for piano (1943–47), ink on paper holograph, p. 1 (Stefan Wolpe Collection).

and an indirect melodic contour (*Examples 2b, 2c*). The first page of the ink holograph shows that Wolpe assigned these materials to the left and right hands, respectively (*Example 3*).<sup>2</sup> By simultaneously combining two such strongly contrasted elements the theme of *Battle Piece* contains within itself conflict and negation. Part 1 carries on the furious dialectic between those elements, while part 2 translates that dialectic to a meditative adagio, and part 3 returns to allegro with a march topos. The third movement is based on a single pass through a complex of material that is derived from the

three-fold transposition of an eight-bar passage abstracted from part 1. The fourth movement takes a second pass through the same complex of material, but this time disrupts the continuity with oppositional material. At the end of the fourth movement Wolpe reached a point of extreme dissociation of the material, and he marked the last page “erbittert, ausser sich.” Not knowing how to proceed, he set the score aside in 1944. David Tudor (1926–1996), who was studying the piano with Irma Wolpe and composition with Stefan, began to work on the first four parts of *Battle Piece* in 1946. It was while helping Tudor to solve the problems of performing the stupendously difficult fourth movement that Wolpe was inspired to complete the work. During July of 1947 he composed the last three parts and proceeded to copy out the piece on vellum masters.

The transformation of *Battle Piece* from occasional music to a major concert work can be traced in the succession of title pages:

1. Pencil draft: “dedicated to Friedrich Alexan/III/das ist mein Original/Battles hopes difficulties/New battles new hopes no difficulties/Stefan Wolpe/1943.”
2. Ink copy: “dedicated to Friedrich Alexan/Encouragements first piece/Third piece [crossed out], Battles Hopes Difficulties/New Battles New Hopes No Difficulties [crossed out].”
3. Extra sheet taped over the title page of the ink copy: “Encouragements/First piece Battle piece/finished 1947/Stefan Wolpe/for my friend Friedrich Alexan [heavily hatched over], to Friedrich Alexan Max Raphael and David Tudor [heavily hatched over].”
4. Vellum master: “to David Tudor/Encouragements for Piano/First piece Battle Piece/Stefan Wolpe/1943–44 finished 1947.”

By the time Wolpe completed *Battle Piece* the war was over and the earlier items in the series of *Encouragements* had become redundant. He renumbered *Battle Piece* as the first of the series, but did not renumber the earlier items, nor did he compose any further pieces in the series. The dedication also underwent changes that mirror the emerging aspects of the music. The first dedicatee, Friedrich Alexan (1901–1994), was a Communist, art critic, and the director of The Forum. Alexan was one of Wolpe’s closest friends and represented the Marxist ideology at the core of the program. Alexan remained the only dedicatee until 1947, at which time Wolpe added the names of Max Raphael and David Tudor.

Max Raphael (1889–1952), Marxist sociologist and art historian, was also a friend of Wolpe’s. During the 1940s Raphael was writing an essay on form and content in Picasso’s *Guernica* mural, about which he and Wolpe had lengthy discussions.<sup>3</sup> The mural, which had been on view at the Museum of Modern Art since 1939, had an enormous impact on the artists of New York, who at the time were divided between social realists who were conservative in style and abstractionists who held aloof from politics. *Guernica* showed how political outrage could be expressed in a heroic artwork on the cutting edge of modernism.<sup>4</sup> There is every reason to believe that *Guernica* had a similar impact on *Battle Piece*, with its all-over intensity

and aggressiveness of address and the remorseless dialectic between contrastive materials. Wolpe's technique of simultaneously drawing on multiple transpositions of the primordial theme is analogous to Picasso's analytic cubism, with its conjunction of several aspects of an image. Tellingly, Irma Wolpe wrote the word "Guernica" at the head of the second part in her performing copy of *Battle Piece*, as though it were the title of the movement. Like the Picasso painting *Battle Piece* infuses modernism with a tragic awareness of human suffering on an epic scale.

The final dedicatee was David Tudor, the young prodigy who brought the work to its first performance. The fourth part presented conceptual and technical problems that Tudor had to solve on his own. As he said, "The details of articulation in the fourth movement, I had to do that by myself."<sup>5</sup> Tudor collaborated with Wolpe on the interpretation until the première in 1950, and they continued to work on the score together until 1956, when Tudor performed *Battle Piece* for the last time.<sup>6</sup> Wolpe's score was fully determinate with respect to pitch but quite indeterminate with respect to temporal processes. The extent of Tudor's role in shaping the temporal aspect of the score was evident during our preparation of the critical edition. Tudor had entered many tempo indications that he and Wolpe worked out in his performing scores, but Tudor had still to devise notation for solutions that Wolpe had authorized but for which the notation had still to be determined. As he and I prepared the score for publication it became clear that it was while working on *Battle Piece* that Tudor discovered his genius for realizing scores that made seemingly insuperable technical demands on the pianist but that also called on the compositional imagination of the performer.<sup>7</sup> An indication of the importance of Tudor's role in the realization of *Battle Piece* is that Wolpe not only made him finally the sole dedicatee but gave him all of the manuscript materials.<sup>8</sup>

Having cut his teeth on *Battle Piece*, Tudor went on to give the American première of the Second Sonata of Pierre Boulez and the first performance of the *Music of Changes* of John Cage. He soon became the central figure among the next generation of American composers, collaborating with those who, like Wolpe's student Morton Feldman, explored the liminal zone between determinacy and indeterminacy. It is from this perspective that *Battle Piece* can be understood as a bridge between the politically engaged modernism of the 1930s and 1940s and American abstract expressionism of the 1950s.

<sup>1</sup> *The Good Spirit of a Right Cause* is published in *Piano Music 1939–1942* (Peer), but the songs of *Simple Music* are incomplete (Stefan Wolpe Collection).

<sup>2</sup> Wolpe placed the original title at the head of the ink holograph, but then hatched it over when he decided on *Battle Piece*. Irma Wolpe performed from this copy and entered her markings, including the tempo "♩. = 104 ungefähr," pedalling, and many fingerings. She also added such comments of Wolpe's as "etwas breiter deklamieren Anfangsth.[ema]" (below m. 9). Wolpe added "108" to suggest that she take it slightly faster.

<sup>3</sup> Max Raphael, "Discord between form and content. Picasso: Guernica", in: id., *The Demands of Art (Bollingen series, vol. 78)*, New York: Pantheon 1968, pp. 135–79, esp. p. 135. Hilda Morley Wolpe reported that Wolpe disagreed with Raphael's contention that there was a disjunction between the form and the content. Taped interview with Matthew Paris (Stefan Wolpe Collection).

<sup>4</sup> Ellen C. Oppler, *Picasso's Guernica*, New York 1988, esp. p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> Austin Clarkson, "A Creative Collaboration: Stefan Wolpe's and David Tudor's *Battle Piece*," in *Musicworks 73* (1999), pp. 26–35, esp. p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Tudor's only known recording of *Battle Piece* was made in 1956 and is on the CD accompanying *Musicworks 73*. The original tape is in the Stefan Wolpe Collection.

<sup>7</sup> David Tudor, "On Performing *Battle Piece*," in: Stefan Wolpe, *Encouragements, First Piece, Battle Piece*, Hamburg: Peer 1995, pp. iv–vi.

<sup>8</sup> The principal sources are in the Stefan Wolpe Collection; Tudor's two performing scores are in the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.