



Dimitri Mitropoulos.

Mitropoulos, Dimitri (1896-1960)

by Linda Rapp

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In the 1950s, at the height of his success as conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, composer Dimitri Mitropoulos became the subject of rumor and innuendo concerning the open secret of his homosexuality, in effect making him yet another victim of McCarthy-era homophobia.

For Mitropoulos music was a lifelong passion. He delighted in exploring its richness and variety, and never hesitated to stage performances of works that other conductors found too challenging or complex. Twelve-tone music was his specialty.

A native of Athens, Mitropoulos took an interest in music from his earliest years. At around age six he carved himself a little wooden flute to play. A few years later his parents provided him with piano lessons, at which he quickly excelled. His musical abilities brought him to the attention of a member of the faculty of the Athens Conservatory, who arranged for the boy to audit classes there and, in 1910 when he was old enough, to enroll as a regular student.

Although Mitropoulos was devoted to music and had already composed a sonata for violin and piano while in his early teens, he planned on becoming a monk after completing his education. He was particularly drawn to the example of St. Francis of Assisi for his humility, gentleness, generosity, and respect for all others. Indeed, throughout Mitropoulos's life, he had a reputation as a sweet-natured man who shared the characteristics of his revered saint.

Mitropoulos gave up the thought of becoming a monk when his advisor in the Greek Orthodox Church informed him that no musical instruments were allowed in the monastery.

To please his father, who hoped that he would become either a lawyer or a naval officer, he briefly attended the law school of the University of Athens. It rapidly became apparent, however, that his vocation lay elsewhere, and he soon returned to the Conservatory, from which he graduated with highest honors in 1919. In addition, the faculty voted unanimously to award him a special gold medal.

During his last years at the Conservatory Mitropoulos began appearing publicly as a pianist, occasionally as an orchestral soloist. He also composed an opera, *Soeur Béatrice*, based on a play by Maurice Maeterlinck.

Although Mitropoulos had already recognized his homosexuality, he had a brief love affair in 1920 with Katina Paxinou, a drama student at the Conservatory. The romance soon faded, but the two remained lifelong friends, exchanging frequent letters.

Paxinou, who came from a prosperous family, helped Mitropoulos stage his opera *Soeur Béatrice* in Athens in 1920. Among those who attended was composer Camille Saint-Saëns, who commented favorably on the work in an article published in a Paris newspaper.

Mitropoulos continued his musical education in Belgium and in Berlin, where he studied with Ferruccio

Busoni, who inspired him to concentrate on conducting rather than composition.

On Busoni's recommendation Mitropoulos was chosen as an assistant conductor of the Berlin Staatsoper in 1921. Three years later he returned to his native city to become the conductor of the Athens Symphony, a post he held for twelve years.

During his tenure in Athens, Mitropoulos was much in demand as a guest conductor and performed with most of the important orchestras of Europe.

His first trip to America came in 1936, when Serge Koussevitzky invited him to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra. His appearances there and in Cleveland and Minneapolis were enthusiastically received.

Mitropoulos returned to the United States the following year to become the conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra.

Mitropoulos was like nothing the staid midwestern town had ever seen. His vigorous and physical conducting style was uniquely his own. Until the last years of his life he eschewed a baton, instead energetically using his whole body to communicate with the musicians.

Sans baton, Mitropoulos was also usually without a score. His amazing ability to commit every detail of vast numbers of scores to memory was legendary.

Mitropoulos considered himself a missionary of music, and part of his mission was to bring new and challenging works to audiences. Soon after arriving in Minneapolis he announced that each season would include at least three "intellectual concerts" with programs featuring modern composers such as Arnold Schönberg, Paul Hindemith, and especially Gustav Mahler, whose music he greatly admired. The public response was wildly positive. Biographer William R. Trotter notes that by 1940 "Minneapolis . . . officially had the largest per capita concert audience in America."

Mitropoulos left Minneapolis in 1949 to share with Leopold Stokowski the duties of conductor and musical adviser of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The next year Stokowski left, and Mitropoulos was named full musical director, a position widely perceived as the most prestigious in classical music in the United States.

His tenure at the Philharmonic was marked by a number of signal successes including a concert performance of Richard Strauss's opera *Elektra* during his first season there and a presentation of Alban Berg's monumental atonal opera *Wozzeck* in 1950.

As he had in Minneapolis, Mitropoulos lived in modest lodgings in New York and avoided high-society parties. He also continued his habit of following the model of St. Francis when dealing with his musicians, leading through mutual respect and gentle persuasion rather than force and fear. The egos that he confronted at the Philharmonic made this approach problematic, however, and music critics began to carp that he was losing control of his orchestra.

Another element working against Mitropoulos was his sexual orientation, long an open secret in the music community. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism, it was not a good time to be known as a homosexual. Mitropoulos had always dodged questions about his bachelor status by claiming "I married my art" when queried by the press.

In a 1952 letter to a friend Mitropoulos wrote, "for me music is another expression of my un-lived sexual life." Trotter states that Mitropoulos did indeed lead a celibate life in both Minneapolis and New York, although perhaps "very occasionally" not on tour, his "sexual drive . . . sublimated ruthlessly into his music-

making."

Although true close friends--including composers Ned Rorem and David Diamond--viewed Mitropoulos's existence as monkish, rumor and innuendo swirled around him, often fed by orchestra members and contributing to a lack of respect for Mitropoulos on the part of his players. Ironically, among those encouraging the whispers was the closeted Leonard Bernstein, who, since he was married, could present himself as the sort of "family man" that the orchestra wanted in the decade of conformity.

Bernstein got his wish, being named co-conductor with Mitropoulos for the 1957-58 season and taking over as sole musical director the next. Typically gracious, Mitropoulos bowed out with praise for Bernstein's talent, but the loss of his position as director of the leading American orchestra was deeply hurtful to him, a wound from which he never fully recovered.

He also mentioned his desire to devote more time to "that very tempting mistress, the Metropolitan Opera," which he had also been conducting for several years and with which he had recently staged a triumphant performance of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*.

In the last years of his life Mitropoulos undertook a demanding tour guest-conducting with European orchestras. The accumulated stress proved too great, however, and he suffered a fatal heart attack on November 2, 1960 while rehearsing Mahler's Third Symphony with the La Scala Opera House Orchestra in Milan.

Tributes poured in for Mitropoulos, not only for his prodigious musical abilities but also for his gentleness and decency as a person. "He was a dear, good man who was always so kind and full of understanding," commented diva Maria Callas.

Mitropoulos is remembered for his extreme generosity. Throughout his life he gave away nearly all his money, often to help struggling musicians and orchestras. In addition, during World War II he eschewed the opportunity to supplement his income by going on tour as a guest conductor, choosing instead to volunteer his time coordinating blood drives for the American Red Cross.

After Mitropoulos's death he was largely forgotten in the United States. One can only wonder if the lack of support from the musical community in New York contributed to this. In recent years, however, there has been renewed interest in his work, and many of his recordings have been reissued on CD so that they may be appreciated by new generations of music lovers.

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