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About My Friend, Hans Keller*

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Hans Keller begins the second part of his book "Criticism" with the words: "Man does not live on praise alone — which, as this book will show, may be a pity. In fact, much as he enjoys his own enthusiasm, he enjoys blame even more, and his favourite relaxation, once he has attained a measure of civilisation, is to find things wrong with things — a salutary compulsion where things are wrong, a tragedy where, as not seldom in art, they aren't" (p. 89).

No statement could be better suited to demonstrate Keller's genius, which, with his original way of developing ideas, never shrinks from human weakness. Since I, as a composer, was privileged to write the opera "Der Turm" (The Tower) for Keller's libretto, I was able to observe his critical powers in action daily during our close cooperation.

Self-criticism is a continuous process in the course of compositorial decision-making, like breathing in and breathing out. Self-criticism controls the balancing act on the tightrope of nerves stretched above the precipice of intellect and emotion. In this deep melting pot there is a marvellous broiling and hissing which forces the composer as well as every other artist again and again to encounter the adventure of creation. As soon as he has succeeded in reaching his goal, he is met by criticism from outside. This criticism is no longer an act of

* Hans Keller, the renowned Austria-born British music critic, was a member of the B.B.C. Music Division for many years, holding a variety of positions. The author of numerous articles on a wide range of subjects, including Mozart, Schoenberg, Shostakovich, Britten, serialism and film music, he also translated opera librettos and writings on music. Keller died in 1985.

balancing as it stands on the secure ground of the authorized — and frequently also unauthorized — judge. In those exceptional cases where the critic from outside is capable of reconstructing the inner experience of the artist in question, a sublime dialogue ensues between giving and receiving. These are the rare lucky cases, gifts of the heaven where the creator of the universe recognizes the small terrestrial creator of his own inner world. The artist needs this criticism as much as he needs his own self-criticism. However, both must be on the same level; otherwise there will occur only a sort of grotesque gibberish, at cross purposes. Such is often the case in newspaper criticism of which Keller's book makes short shrift. Keller calls the labors of such critics a "phoney profession". Not everyone may use such razor-edged tools. Aggression, as in deadly verbal rejection, risks the danger of eventually being turned against the aggressor. And it was exactly this contradiction which ignited in Keller a flaming but at the same time controlled enthusiasm either in dedicated defense of a worthy cause or in the pitiless devastation of a bad one. Keller fearlessly risked his head on the public stage by writing countless musical critiques, both in leading professional journals and the international press. A deep understanding of the complex processes entailed in musical composition, a restless examination and re-examination of new developments, in unusually oriented coherences, and changes in aesthetical criteria, saved his acute vision from being blinded by a modern creation for the sake of novelty. Thus, he knew how to analyze and revitalize a quartet by Haydn in the same spirit as he did one by Schoenberg. His starting point was always man in his honest quest for sources in his work.

This is how our friendship was born: In the beginning of the Seventies, on the occasion of a visit to London, I asked for an appointment with Keller, who held a leading position in the music department on the Third Program at the B.B.C. Before being received, I was led by a secretary to his office, which consisted of three small rooms. The central room was the waiting room. On the right side, an open door led to the secretary's room, and opposite, on the left side, an open door led to Keller's room. As I was thus sitting at a small table between the two rooms, a book suddenly came flying from the left room through the waiting room into the right room. A few minutes

later, a second book flew the same way. At a loss for some explanation of this ballistic display, I was called by Keller into his room. He was seated behind a desk in a tiny room flooded with books, journals and papers, spread over the floor so that only a narrow space was left where Keller and his visitor could sit. I voiced my request to play my Sixth Piano Concerto with Electronics for a studio recording at the B.B.C. for which I had already handed in the score. With a few provocative questions, Keller drew me out of my polite shell and into a state of animation equal to his own. The conversation became still livelier and led us into the Greek restaurant around the corner where Keller invited me for lunch. It turned into a culinary feast which was both tasty and stimulating, where office hours were of little concern. This was the beginning of a friendship which climaxed, after nearly twenty years, in our cooperation in the opera "Der Turm".

Both of us were guests of the Institute of Advanced Studies in West Berlin. We lived in adjoining apartments which enabled us to meet every day and discuss critically the growth of libretto and music. On this occasion I experienced the meaning of the remarks quoted above from Keller's book "Criticism". My work on the score started after the libretto had been drafted in broad outlines and highlights. This was necessary in enabling me to establish a time frame for the entire work, as well as a schedule for the relation of the scenes to each other. The length of the scenes was a function of the inner rhythm which, for its part, depended on the quantity of words. Keller demanded a copy of the score of each scene I had composed so that the musical treatment of his text could influence *his* own thinking about the continuation of the libretto. I, for my part, was deeply interested in Keller's critical remarks on my music, not only in relation to the libretto, but most of all, to the musical composition as such. From many previous conversations with him I was acquainted with his verbal interpretation of the events in a composition in all its aspects. He would never give marks, like the average newspaper critic. He analyzed the thought process of the author, aiming at novel ideas, movement or manifestations, whether the composition was dressed up or presented the naked truth. The composer's task in the complex medium of an opera is naturally full of pitfalls, particularly if the development of

the theme does not follow a conventional prescription. Even the most daring and seasoned composer can encounter doubt in a work like this. When he has a friend at his side who never loses his clear outlook even in the most complex score, then he naturally expects him to express an unbiased opinion. Keller terms such an attitude the composer's "favourite relaxation, once he has attained a measure of civilization". But here the surprising and for me disappointing event occurred. Keller's reaction to my scores was always complimentary and melted like warm honey, while I was asking for his sting. One day I lost patience and told him energetically and without restraint that I did not trust these compliments because the honey had an aftertaste of doubt. Keller's reaction was immediate. I can remember the early afternoon which lasted well into the late hours of the evening when he drank huge quantities of tea and delivered a detailed analysis of my score, which by then had progressed substantially. I listened breathlessly as he elucidated points which I had to formulate deep in my subconscious. He also showed the way these deep levels of consciousness merged with the higher levels, the way the material which had been learned from tradition interacted with the newly discovered and still to be discovered — in short a sort of psychological and material analysis of the score. It was an experience which will for the rest of my days keep Hans Keller alive in my memory in every note I write. Quite independently of my personal involvement, this analysis was a pedagogical masterpiece, a paradigm for education to self-criticism.

I cannot close this report on the experience of my work with Keller without saying a word about his wife the painter Milein Cosman, from whom he was inseparable. She participated in many of our conversations. She frequently drew while we debated. When I look at her pictures I can easily recognize the same musical textures and structures which returned constantly and in unending variations in our interchange of ideas. In the same way as a steady renewing power of conscience flowed in conversation with Keller, Cosman's pictures contributed to the world of the inner image. Eye and ear send their contrapuntal message on the identical stage. In my memory this natural phenomenon appears — perhaps for lack of an other explanation — as a *qualitas occulta*.