

TWO AFTERNOONS

BY DINA MICHELSON NAMER

I met Dr. Helmut Kallmann on several occasions in Ottawa over the years, at concerts or social functions, but we had never really had an extended conversation. Each time we met I was sure that he did not remember me, nor did he know that I was a professional musician who had given concerts over a period of 40 years in Ottawa. In May of 2011, a mutual friend, Edith Pahlke, gave me a manuscript that Dr. Kallmann had written about his early years in Germany before the Second World War. For the most part it was a loving and joyful memoir of his parents and siblings, their practice of playing music in the home, humorous stories, memories of friends and neighbours. Of course, since Dr. Kallmann's family was Jewish, the end of the memoir was tragic, sorrowful and poignant. I was very moved by his story, in particular as it echoed the life my own parents had led in Europe before the war. When I expressed this reaction to my friend Edith, she suggested we visit Dr. Kallmann together to return the manuscript in person.

Dr. Kallmann and his partner Traute were living in an assisted living residence at the time. He appeared with her in the lobby, looking very frail, obviously unwell. He seemed to have great difficulty hearing or understanding the animated female conversation taking place around him. "How will I ever even make contact with him about the memoir?" I asked myself. We all sat down for coffee, we three women trying to engage him in conversation, but rather awkwardly, since Helmut seemed rather dispirited and remote.

Eventually, Traute mentioned that Helmut had donated his piano to the residence, and that it was located in the reception area downstairs. Would I be interested in reading through a few four-hand duets with him? Of course I accepted, wondering how this obviously ailing old gentleman would manage to play.

Downstairs was an elegant little grand piano and a stack of well-worn music from Mozart sonatas to Beethoven symphonies to Schubert duos. We sat down together, Helmut taking the bass and I the treble side of the bench. As soon as we began the first piece I saw and felt a complete transformation. Helmut launched into the music with enormous gusto, as if he had suddenly shed all his infirmities and was back in his father's home making music for sheer pleasure. At times he flew ahead, forcing me to make some very quick adjustments to keep things together, but his energy was obviously completely renewed. We stopped occasionally when things ran aground, but spoke very little, just quickly agreeing where to begin again, and off we flew! These were all old favourites in his repertoire and he seemed to forget everything but the music. At one point he stopped, looked at me quizzically, and said: "Very Good!" Traute tried to explain that I was actually a professional musician, but to Helmut the main thing was to keep going, just to keep making music! The session went on without a break for over an hour, all thoughts of age or illness forgotten.

The power of music was so apparent to the little group of us that day, experiencing something close to a rebirth in this wonderful man as he sailed through the beloved repertoire of so many years. Even without having known him well, I sensed the entire span of a life devoted to music in that one hour of fiercely energetic duet playing. We played once more about a month later, again reading through many pieces together almost wordlessly. Sadly, due to his increased illness and a medical procedure I had to go through during the summer, it was our last session. I will always be grateful for those two afternoons with this wonderful man.

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*As an educator Dina has taught piano performance at Ottawa, Carleton and Queen's Universities in Canada. Currently she teaches piano, harpsichord and chamber music at Queen's University in addition to running a busy private studio. As a chamber musician, Ms. Namer has been a member of the Aulos Ensemble, the Ottawa Baroque Ensemble, the Kingston Baroque Soloists, and the Sh'ma Ensemble, a group devoted to performing works of composers who died in the Holocaust. Her work with the Aulos Trio culminated in the release of the CanSona CD entitled Playing Tribute, which features chamber works of several Canadian composers. More recently she collaborated with violist Lisa Moody in a CD release of Canadian works entitled Magdalene Wood.*