

Constructing a Biography of Lev Aronson

Description of the Project

Background

Lev Aronson (1912-1988) was an exceptional cellist, teacher, and composer. He was born in Germany, grew up in Latvia and Russia, survived imprisonment in five concentration camps during World War II, and then immigrated to the United States, winning a position as principal cellist of the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. His incredible life story was the subject of Frances Brent's book, *The Lost Cellos of Lev Aronson*. However, this is the only significant record of Aronson's life (he lacks even a short entry in the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*), and it stops telling his story in the early 1950s. Nothing beyond a few newspaper articles has been written about his years as a performer and prominent cello teacher in Dallas (he taught Lynn Harrell, Robert Kirshbaum, and numerous other leading cellists), which lasted from 1948 until his death in 1988.

The project I have undertaken is to fill in the many gaps in Aronson's biography and share his amazing life story with others. While I have already conducted a great deal of research and have presented my findings to several audiences, I wish to do much more with this project. I plan to publish one or more articles on Aronson, his compositions, his cello playing, and his impact as a cello teacher. I intend to submit a biographical entry to the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Within the next five years, I will begin work on a comprehensive biography of Aronson. In order to do this, I must conduct much more research, and the Walter Gerboth Award would make some of that research possible.

I have already investigated Aronson's collection of scores and personal papers, held by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). While there is much material in this

collection, it is not exhaustive, and I must look to other sources of information. I have conducted research at several archives, including those at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Baylor University, and Southern Methodist University. I have begun interviewing former students and acquaintances of Aronson and plan to continue doing so. Several of Aronson's former students have offered to put me in touch with Frances Brent and with Aronson's step-daughters, who hold some personal papers and records not in the archives of UNCG or other institutions.

I have already presented my research on Aronson at scholarly conferences, including those sponsored by the Southeastern Music Library Association (2014), the Music Library Association (2015), and the International Association of Music Libraries (2015). I was also asked to speak at the Lev Aronson Legacy Festival in Dallas, Texas, in June 2015.

Specific Activities

I would like to use the Walter Gerboth Award to facilitate two important parts of my research. First, I would like to use the funds from the award to hire translators for the large amount of material in Aronson's collection at UNCG written in German and Yiddish. Aronson corresponded extensively with cellist Rudolph Matz, with whom he co-authored *The Complete Cellist*, an important cello technique study. The majority of their correspondence was in German. I believe from preliminary rough readings that the correspondence could provide valuable information about Aronson's teaching style and techniques. Using Google Translate or similar tools does not yield accurate translations of the highly-specialized musical vocabulary in much of Aronson's German correspondence, so hiring a translator is the best option for these materials.

Many of the songs Aronson composed after World War II feature Yiddish lyrics. Translating poetry is challenging and often requires an expert to preserve the meaning of the text

beyond the simple word constructions. Further, the Yiddish used is an archaic dialect that demands more than a rudimentary knowledge of the language. Because of these challenges, I must hire a professional translator for these songs.

Second, I wish to expand my efforts to collect interviews from Aronson's former students and acquaintances. So far, I have been slow conducting interviews because I do not have time to transcribe them or integrate this new information with the data I have already collected. I wish to transcribe the interviews myself, rather than hiring a professional transcriber, because the process helps me to better understand my research subject and organize my ideas. I have looked into transcription software to hasten my work, but few programs can handle the specialized vocabulary of musicians. I believe that I will actually save time by transcribing the interviews myself rather than relying on transcription software and then going through the script and the recordings again to correct mistakes.

I would like to use a portion of the Gerboth Award to, in effect, grant myself research leave from a portion of my work to transcribe approximately ten¹ interviews between April 2016 and September 2016. I will conduct these interviews between July 2015 and July 2016. I work as a contract cataloger, lecturer, and adjunct professor. Because of the nature of these numerous part-time jobs, I often end up working 60 or more hours a week. Between the end of April 2016 and the beginning of September 2016, I would like to retain my cataloging work but refuse summer teaching opportunities. Being able to say no to teaching during the summer 2016 terms because I have some added financial security will open up at least 10 hours per week, which I can use to conduct and transcribe interviews and organize my data.

¹ With Brian Thornton (Cleveland Symphony), Mitch Maxwell (Dallas Opera Orchestra), Chris Adkins (Dallas Symphony), John Sharp (Chicago Symphony), Karen Terbeek (University of Colorado Denver), Alicia Randisi-Hooker (Cello LEAP Studio), Kevin Dvorak (Houston Symphony), Lynn Harrell, Frances Brent, Andrew Anderson (Dallas Public Library).

Statement of Significance

Lev Aronson is not a household name among cellists and music lovers like Yo Yo Ma or Mstislav Rostropovich. In a 1986 interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Aronson said of his reputation, “I am not famous. I am known.”² However, he is an important figure for several reasons. First, he was a highly influential teacher. Second, he was an accomplished performer. Third, he is a significant composer. Finally, his life story is riveting.

Many of Aronson’s former students are prominent cellists and teachers, including soloists Lynn Harrell and Ralph Kirshbaum, orchestral principal cellists Brian Thornton (Cleveland Orchestra) and John Sharp (Chicago Symphony), and teachers Karen Terbeek (University of Colorado Denver) and Alicia Randisi-Hooker (Cello LEAP Studio). With so many successful students, Aronson’s teaching techniques alone warrant research. However, this material is not only valuable for cellists. String teachers and performers can benefit from Aronson’s notes on bowing and fingering. Teachers and performers of other instruments and voice will also find Aronson’s teaching philosophy and his ideas about musical expression to be valuable. For example, I have learned from informal conversations with former students of Aronson that he viewed teaching music as a way to also teach the student about life. He talked about art, literature, and his life experiences (including the Holocaust) in lessons, encouraging students to learn as much as they could about more than just music. Lynn Harrell wrote that Aronson “was, for a young boy finding his own way with music, a mesmerizing influence.”³

Aronson was an accomplished performer. Before World War II, he was establishing a promising solo career. He was able to recapture much of his technique after nearly five years in

² Carol Lesh, “High Profile: Lev Aronson,” *The Dallas Morning News*, (2 March 1986), Section E, pp. 1, 4-5.

³ Lynn Harrell, “Early Influences, Part 1,” Blog, (23 September 2009), par. 3.

concentration camps, suffering abuse to his hands and the lack of a cello to play, and go on to a 20-year career as principal cellist with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. His former student, Ralph Kirshbaum, praised Aronson's playing, saying, "I wouldn't say that he had a unique technique, though, perhaps because of the profound experiences he had in Europe and in the concentration camps, he really spoke with the bow. He enunciated with the bow in such a way as to speak with a sound that had great character, which is something that comes from within, not from a special technique."⁴

Aronson composed and arranged several pieces in the years after World War II, and they chart a path through his emotional and professional life, beginning with pieces focused on the trauma of persecution and abuse and ending with arrangements for students to perform. His unique musical voice often reflects his Jewish identity through his use of other Jewish composers' themes, Yiddish lyrics, and subject matter revolving around being Jewish. Further, the fact that Aronson, a cellist, wrote a number of songs for voice and piano raises many questions about his post-Holocaust musical life. For example, are these songs a reflection of the fact that he did not have reliable access to a playable cello for months after escaping his final (Russian) concentration camp, or are they a way to work through his emotions with a fellow survivor, tenor Gregor Shelkan?

Finally, this research is important because Aronson's life story is fascinating and inspiring. It is a story with near-universal appeal, for musicians and laymen alike. Aronson has nearly been lost to music history, remembered only by former students and recorded only a few times in performance. His former student Brian Thornton said in an interview that Aronson "felt

⁴ Tim Janof, "Conversation with Ralph Kirshbaum," *Internet Cello Society*, (1997), available from www.cello.org/Newsletter/Articles/kirshbaume.htm, par. 2.

he was a failure” in large part because he could not have a solo career after World War II.⁵

Thornton founded the Lev Aronson Legacy Festival to help ensure that Aronson would not be “lost twice.” My goal with this research is the same as Thornton’s. Aronson’s story of survival and resilience, and his passion for music and education, should not be lost. My research will fill gaps in his life story and prepare me to share that story with others.

⁵ Carlo Wolff, “Cleveland Orchestra Cellist Honors Storied Jewish Mentor,” *CJN*, (22 May 2013), par. 13.