

Julius Burger had a musical gift, but hardly anybody knew about it until he was 93 years old—and his luck changed

The Concert of a Lifetime

JULIUS BURGER SAT DOWN at the piano. His fingers sure on the keys, his attack energetic, he began to play a song. It was a lovely song, by turns lyrical and moving, and it bothered me to think that, had this once-unknown composer not met a young man who “adopted” him as a sort of second grandfather, neither I, nor anyone else, would ever have had the chance to hear his music.

“Julius Burger’s music could have vanished from the face of the earth,” Ronald S. Pohl, 37, said. For Julius Burger—who has had a distinguished career as a conductor in Berlin and New York, and who coached Marian Anderson for her Metropolitan Opera debut—that would have been a great loss. Three years ago, Burger was retired, a widower living alone in a tidy apartment in Queens, N.Y. A cabinet in his living room was filled with the music he had written in his youth, when he studied with some of the great musical figures of a bygone age. But nobody was interested in that part of his life. Until Ronald S. Pohl came along.

Today, at age 96, Julius Burger has heard his Cello Concerto played at New York’s Lincoln Center, and his songs have been sung by world-class opera stars. He is negotiating for a record contract. And his career as a composer, disrupted by the Holocaust, finally has come to fruition. Words in English come haphazardly to Burger, who has had two strokes. But when I asked about his newfound success, he returned to his native German and pointed a wavering hand at Ronald S. Pohl. “He did it,” Burger said. “He pulled everything together, and now look what has happened.”

The remarkable union between a young lawyer and an old composer began as a routine business arrangement. “We met three years ago,” said Pohl, a Manhattan attorney who specializes in trusts and estates. “What happened is that Julius’ wife of 60 years died. He was devastated. He never took care of some of the estate matters that needed to be taken care of. He knew a stockbroker who told me that something had to be done and got us together.”

In their conversations, Burger told Pohl that he wanted to find a way to leave his money to help encourage young musicians in Israel. “He was telling me about his long career, how he studied in Vienna and Berlin and how the Nazis came to power, and he lost his job,” Pohl recalled. “Then he told me about the music he had written, particularly a cello concerto he wanted me to hear.”



Byron Greer

Julius Burger’s life as a composer began with great promise, in the Europe of his youth. He studied with Engelbert Humperdinck (the composer of the opera *Hänsel and Gretel*, not the ’60s pop star) and began the long road to recognition. After studying in Berlin, Burger took a job with the BBC in London. But his dream died in the ashes of the Holocaust. He and his wife were in Paris when they learned that Hitler was about to take over their native Austria. “My mother died in Au...” Burger began. “In Au...” But he broke into tears and stopped without ever completing the word: *Auschwitz*.

Burger came to New York, where he conducted *Song of Norway* on Broadway and worked as an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera. But his composing career was derailed. “He suffered the plight of every musician in the world,” Pohl said. “He was just trying to earn a living. He could have composed an enormous amount if he had the time.”

Ronald S. Pohl never had much interest in classical music. But he was deeply moved by his new client’s story. “I felt a compassion for him,” Pohl said. “I had found a charity that would do exactly what he wanted, using his bequest to endow scholarships, and I started thinking: ‘Instead of just getting a letter from them saying, ‘Thank you very much for this nice gift,’ maybe they could do something for him while he was alive.’”

Pohl spoke with officials of the America-Israel Cultural Foundation.

They found a young Israeli cellist, Maya Beiser, who read Burger’s concerto, liked it, and came to his apartment to play it, with Burger accompanying on the piano. “It was an extraordinary event,” Pohl said. “Burger was crying with relief and emotion.”

By now, Pohl was acting less like a lawyer and more like an impresario. Julius Burger’s dream had found a home in the younger man’s soul. “My father left home when I was 3,” he told me. “I was brought up by my mother and my grandparents. I was very close to my grandfather, and Julius reminds me of him. It just disturbs me to see someone who is old and alone. Sometimes doing little things can mean a lot.”

And sometimes, doing big things can mean even more. Pohl may not have known much about music, but he knew that Lincoln Center was the most important concert venue in America—and he decided that Julius Burger’s music could fill its marbled halls. After Maya Beiser’s enthusiastic re-

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The music of Julius Burger (l) was once stored in a cabinet. Now, it can be heard thanks to Ronald S. Pohl, who brought it to life, and to the stage.

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Three years ago, Julius Burger was leading a solitary, quiet life, surrounded by the music he had written—and the world had never heard.

B Y M I C H A E L R Y A N



Steve J. Sherman

sponse to the Cello Concerto, Pohl contacted New York's Orchestra of St. Luke's, which scheduled a Lincoln Center concert of Burger's music for June 3, 1991.

"I became a producer," Pohl recalled, amazed at himself. "Engaged the orchestra, arranged the reception, even picked out the food and wine." It may have been the most important evening of Julius Burger's long life. One critic called his music "revelatory." A composer's career was born.

A recording company has expressed interest in making a CD of the Cello Concerto and other compositions. Orchestras throughout America have talked to Pohl about performing Burger's work, and Pohl is planning to contact some of those that haven't yet contacted him. "My goal now—and I think we're almost on the verge of achieving it—is to see that Burger's music gets performed, and remembered, for years into the future," he said.

Pohl is in the process of setting up The Julius Burger Foundation—an organization devoted to promoting the work of unknown composers. "There are a lot of little guys out there who deserve the chance to be in the spotlight at Lincoln Center," he said. His dream is to stage an annual concert that will give those "lit-

After Burger's Lincoln Center concert (l-r): Paul Lustig Dunkel, the conductor, Sergio Schwartz, a violinist, Ronald S. Pohl, Julius Burger and Maya Beiser, the cellist.

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tle guys" a chance at immortality.

Ronald S. Pohl, Esq., squirms a bit when you ask him about all he has done for Julius Burger. He insists that—despite some media portrayals to the contrary—people in his profession are generally philanthropic.

"To be a really good trusts-and-estates lawyer, you have to not only be savvy with the tax law," he said, "you also have to have compassion and sensitivity, because you're dealing with such personal subjects: a death in the

family, preparing for death, disputes between family members." As if afraid that he will be portrayed as too nice a guy, Pohl points out that he has always billed for legal services—then concedes that legal services are a small part of what he has done for Julius Burger and his music.

I asked Burger why, after years of seeing his music languish, he had turned for help to a lawyer who was certainly no musician. He took a moment to formulate his thoughts, then answered slowly, in German: "Er war kein Musiker, aber ist Musiker geworden"—"He wasn't a musician, but he has become one."

And that, I realized, was what made their story so touching. That two men, one young, one old, had come together, and each had become something more than he ever could have been alone. ■