

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I’m Mark Oppenheimer. I’m the director of Open Learning at American Jewish University, and I’ve spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI’s archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history...beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI presents...the art of exile.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): In 1922, in Salzburg, Austria, a group of musicians got together to host a festival focusing on modern music. It became the International Contemporary Music Festival, which is still around today. Back then, these musicians were seen as misfits subverting the classical genre. One reporter called them “musical Bolsheviks.”

MUSIC UP: “DIE GEHEIMNISSE” FROM *DANTE IM EXIL* BY EGON LUSTGARTEN

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Egon Lustgarten was one of the inaugural participants—a composer. You’re hearing a piece of his that was performed at an event earlier this year, hosted by the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. The LBI event was in honor of several Jewish musicians who were a part of the first year of that modern music festival over 100 years ago. Some of whom, later on, ended up in exile, like Egon Lustgarten. But before he left Europe, Egon’s name had cachet in Austria. He was part of a vibrant classical music scene in a city that was the hub of classical music the world over.

MUSIC OUT

ALEXIS RODDA: Of course, we had Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, just all these greats that had shaped classical music. So I think based on, let’s say, the celebrity recognition alone, Vienna had really put itself on the map.

THEME MUSIC UP

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Alexis Rodda is an opera singer and the program coordinator of Elysium Between Two Continents. She's also a graduate student studying Egon's life and work.

ALEXIS RODDA: I found his music absolutely gorgeous. And the fact that, after emigrating, his main goal in life was still to compose and have his music be heard, even if it was on a small level. And I think that was just an incredibly beautiful kernel of love for music and love for the artistic expression that drew me to him.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Egon's story of a promising artistic career cut short by circumstances outside his control is a tragic one. But it's not unique. As you'll hear, Egon Lustgarten is one of many examples of how exile can impact a creative life. And of how exile can sustain the desire to keep inventing.

THEME MUSIC OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So Alexis, in a city where practically everyone loved classical music, were the Jews more or less likely to have had a classical education? Were they more in that musical tradition or somewhat on the outside of it?

ALEXIS RODDA: So that's a really wonderful question. Okay, why this is such a fascinating time is because this is a time when there was a new class of an educated Jewish bourgeoisie who is entering the universities and the conservatories in a way that we hadn't seen before. So because Jews had recently become full citizens of Austria, because of the, you know, legal changes in 1867, they were able to enter universities alongside other non-Jewish people. So we're seeing a new kind of population of very educated Jewish middle class people who were engaging very much culturally. So I think they were very much on the inside of the musical scene, but in a way that they hadn't been before.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And your research focuses pretty heavily on one in particular, an Austrian Jewish composer named Egon Lustgarten. Now, he went into exile in the United States in 1938, but before that, he was at the heart of this world, right? He was at the center of the Viennese classical community. Like most Americans, I've never heard of this dude. Can you tell us about him?

ALEXIS RODDA: Yeah, of course. So he was born in 1887. He lived in Vienna, obviously, as we've been discussing. His parents wanted him to join the family business, which was woodworking. And so they sent him to the Technical Institute of Vienna, which is still in existence today. He, however, always loved music. His wife has a recollection of, even as a child, that he had perfect pitch. He was just born with perfect pitch, and that even the street musicians he could hear when they were playing wrong notes. And this is someone with no musical education up until this point. So Egon Lustgarten spent about two years training privately with a composition teacher and then enrolled at the Vienna State Academy of Music where he received his degree and then really entered the music world in a very vibrant, exciting way. He was a composer. He was a pedagogue. He was a music critic. You know, he did receive some critiques of not being particularly innovative at that time. From a modern perspective, to me, it does sound innovative. His music was being performed regularly by many different organizations. And he really was coming to, I think, the cusp of an interesting point of his career. He had just written an enormous four act opera that was getting a lot of attention. This is all anecdotal, so it's hard to prove. But in his writings, he was saying that there were talks of the possibility of this opera being brought to the Vienna Staatsoper, the state opera in Vienna. And then, of course, there was the Anschluss of Austria. And in 1938, he emigrated to the United States. He continued to compose, but he's completely unknown. His wife and daughter, after his death, continued to promote his music and try to get it performed. But, you know, eventually it died out kind of with them. So this has been my project to bring his music back to life and bring his biography back to life.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So here we have this Austrian Jewish composer, first generation in the musical arts. He's beginning to make a name for himself. He has this opera that you referred to, *Dante in Exile*, or *Dante im Exil*. And then he has to go to New Jersey, of all places.

ALEXIS RODDA: Yes.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Where he struggles to make a living. But is basically a bridge-and-tunnel New Jersey composer. What was his life like in exile?

ALEXIS RODDA: I mean, frankly, I think it was quite difficult. He did have English language skills prior to emigrating, so I think that helped compared to other emigres. But he struggled financially. So while there was some community there, it was nothing like he had in Vienna. He had a bit of stubbornness in that he didn't want to leave what community he did have in New York. And so he was not one of these composers who wanted to go to California and maybe try to take his luck at the Hollywood compositional scene. But again, what drew me to him and what I think is so fascinating about him, is that in this really difficult state of financial struggle, struggle with security, even like housing security, he was composing constantly. Constantly trying to make new works and promote them. Like writing letters, asking people, will you perform my work? Are you interested in my work? Writing to singers, pianists. Would you like to try out this aria I wrote? Just so still trying to make his music happen, even in a very strange time and a strange world for him.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You've said that he was seen as more traditional than some of the avant garde composers, and I know that, to musicologists, traditional is always a bad thing. Everybody's supposed to sound more like Schoenberg, or at the very least Bartok. But God forbid you sound like Brahms. Did his style change when he was in exile? Can you talk about the hallmarks of his style in Austria and what the hallmarks of his American style became?

ALEXIS RODDA: Sure. What I find fascinating about him is that he was experimental within styles that already existed, if that makes sense. He just wasn't experimental in the way that maybe his contemporaries thought he should be.

MUSIC UP: ARIA FROM *DANTE IM EXIL* BY EGON LUSTGARTEN

ALEXIS RODDA: So I think what I would listen for is that tonally, he's quite romantic, but sometimes there is some tonal ambiguity. He would take you on quite a journey sometimes where you're not quite sure where you're going musically. So this particular aria is from *Dante im Exil*. This was his major operatic work that he composed right before emigration. And in this aria, it's in the prologue of the opera. So the opera, the way it's set up, is that it is prologue, epilogue with Dante, who was telling stories in order to avoid his eventual punishment. And so he is about to tell the story, a very dramatic love story, that of course ends in tragedy. But in this particular moment, it's his former beloved who comes back in a spectral form to comfort him in this time of need. Part of why I love this aria is

that because it's just a moment in the opera where everything sort of starts to stand still and brings this moment of clarity, both in the music and also in the lyrics. And I think this is an excellent example of his romantic compositional style, but also the fact that he had quite a flair for the dramatic, in that it starts in a very gentle, even like vocally, a gentle way, and eventually goes into a more...I would say dramatic musical style, in terms of the tonality gets more complex. It starts so gently and so atmospherically, but then quickly goes into almost like a cry from the female singer or from the soprano.

MUSIC UP AND OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So Alexis, when he leaves Vienna and comes to the United States, how does his work change?

ALEXIS RODDA: I would say how things changed for him pre-emigration, post-emigration, it really has to do with subject matter. So he was composing based on poetry, based on some very grand storylines, such as *Dante im Exile* is a very grand tragedy. So I think things that feel very familiar to someone who thinks, what is typical opera? I think he was very much composing within that framework.

MUSIC UP: "OF HELGE HAL" FROM THE BLUE MOUNTAIN BY EGON LUSTGARTEN

ALEXIS RODDA: Post-immigration, he had this very strong idea or desire to compose music that was going to be instructional. And there's such a stark contrast between how he was thinking about music prior to immigration and post-immigration that I feel like, of course, there has to be some, you know, psychological reason or some reason that he didn't come out and say this is why I'm doing this. But he really thought that music should not just be for entertainment purposes, but to instruct. I would say all of his music after immigration was based on fairytales. So he decided to use the structure of a fairytale to teach people about morality, about the way to live life. He also spoke a lot about how music can reach youth and how youth can be instructed to live a more moral lifestyle through the lessons, kind of like the timeless lessons of fairytales. Some of the topics that are touched upon in these *Märchenoper*, these fairytale operas, have a lot to do with greed. For example, *The Blue Mountain* is about a kind of an evil troll who is going around collecting other people's goods and money and is threatening violence on them if they

don't give over what they have on their land. The main overarching theme is a real triumph of good over evil.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: I mean, those themes seem very linked to what he experienced in Austria, right?

ALEXIS RODDA: I think so. And I think also the idea of greed really underlying a lot of these fairy tales is that he was particularly experiencing his own struggle with Nazi greed. A lot of his struggles post-immigration—of course, there are many struggles post-immigration, such as loss of your community, the trauma of fleeing. But I think in particular for Lustgarten and for many composers, there was a loss of financial stability and career. He had an excellent career in Vienna and he was very middle class. He owned property. His mother owned property. And I think they were very financially secure. And I'd love to just read you a quote that he said. So he was trying to recover his property after the devastation of the Nazis and he's facing obstacle after obstacle. I went through many letters where he's just writing letters saying, how can I get my property back? Like this is my property, my mother's property. And he was just thwarted at every turn. So in a letter in 1948, he writes, "After the Austrian offices work so slowly and every justified expectation repeatedly proved to be irrelevant, a certain lethargy entered me." So he basically just gives up after a certain point because this struggle to maybe have some semblance of the lifestyle he had in Austria, it's just not going to happen. And so I think it absolutely makes sense that some of the topics of his composition have to do with this kind of larger than life figure that is greedily taking from all the people who deserve to have their farmland or their treasures.

MUSIC UP AND OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER: One thing you've said about him in the past is that there is this inevitable nostalgia and homesickness in his pieces. How typical is that of exilic composers?

ALEXIS RODDA: It really depends on the composer, I think. We can't really make a sweeping statement about this because there were so many, obviously, exiles. We had composers who quickly integrated themselves into the American scene, like Korngold, for example, became a prominent composer of movie scores in Hollywood. Kurt Weil

immediately integrated himself into the musical theater American Broadway scene. He was quite happy with the career that he found here. So of course, then you have other composers who were not so happy with the scene here. A lot of what composers complain about in some of their writings is that there are just not as many musical performances here in America. If you compare, like, the amount of opera companies in the US to the amount of opera companies, let's say, in Germany, there were just not as many opportunities to have your music performed. There are not as many orchestras. So I would say that, I often observe moments of nostalgia in some of the composers that I've explored that are contemporaneous with Egon Lustgarten. But I think it's just hard to make a sweeping answer about whether, you know, every composer had that experience or not. Dr. Michael Haas writes a really interesting article that says, when I compose, I'm back in Vienna, and he posits that some composers were using their music as a way to return to their homeland. As kind of like, to a lexicon that was familiar to them when they were in Austria. So I do think there was a certain level of nostalgia in certain compositions. But I don't know that, of course, every composer was dealing with that.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So, what do you think Egon's experience tells us about how that exile can impact a composer's work?

ALEXIS RODDA: This is a very difficult topic to tread into because then we're potentially getting into, again, is there a through line between a composer's emotional state to their music and what they're composing? But it's a topic that is... It can be dangerous to go down that route. However, there was one composer, Erich Zeisl, who said that he thought that being forced to come to America had improved his music because now he had a struggle and a deep emotional wound that helped him access a different type of music that he never would have been able to access if he had just stayed in Vienna. But, one composer, who's not very known right now, does say that it has to have been affected for the worst because of what we went through and because of what we're struggling with. So that is not to say that every exiled composer's music got worse. That's absolutely not at all what I'm saying. I'm just saying that it's difficult to imagine a world where these exiled composers just kept composing exactly as they composed pre-emigration.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You were involved in what we could call a reclamation project. You were rescuing someone who otherwise could fall into obscurity. He's someone who

you think deserves, on the merits, to be rescued. Are there a lot of Egon Lustgartens? What percentage of the people we forget actually deserve to be canonical?

ALEXIS RODDA: That is kind of the crux of all my research. So that is the question. I think we don't know why certain composers make it into the canon and certain composers don't. I mean, we can hypothesize that there were obviously prejudices against many different populations of people. You know, women were not mostly making it into the canon. People of color were not making it into the canon. And even, let's say, until political changes in Vienna, a lot of Jewish composers were not making it into the Western classical canon. I think there are a lot of Egon Lustgartens, especially from this particular group of Austrian Jewish composers who were in Vienna at the same time as Egon Lustgarten. I think it's almost hard to understand or believe the level of composition that was happening and how...what an artistically fruitful time period this was and how many composers have been lost to this, you know, really political event. If we want to, like, encapsulate, you know, World War II as a political event. But anyway, I think there's a real movement towards that now, to get to know composers who have been neglected from the canon and get to have their music performed alongside those that we consider...just, of course they're part of the canon.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So make the case for Egon Lustgarten. Who would love Egon Lustgarten? If you like this kind of thing, if you like this flavor of mustard or this kind of quartet or this period of composition, you'll love Egon Lustgarten.

ALEXIS RODDA: Sure. I think if you love Brahms, if you love Schubert, if you love Strauss, you're going to love...I think Strauss actually is the best example. But I just will say, like, for example, he's someone who made it into the canon because a lot of his competition emigrated. And I'm really not here to say anything bad against Strauss because I love him. But, you know, a lot of the competition was suddenly gone for really uncomfortable reasons. So that's actually a great example of someone who gets into the canon and who doesn't. Anyway, if you love Strauss, you're going to love Egon Lustgarten. If you love grand opera. I think also, his music is very emotional, I think that's the other thing. And he was trying to do that. He was trying to evoke an emotional, spiritual reaction. And so I think that experience alone would make audiences enjoy listening to this type of music.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Alexis Rodda, Thank you.

ALEXIS RODDA: Of course. No problem.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Alexis Rodda. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org.

On the next episode of *LBI Presents*...Where do we draw the line between fact and fiction? When it comes to memoirs, including Holocaust memoirs, that line is often blurred.

RUTH FRANKLIN: It struck me just as sort of a category mistake that we expect people to be able to write about their histories with this sort of journalistic precision when we're talking about periods when they weren't taking notes or making recordings. They're relying on their memory.

PRODUCER: Fact, fiction, and finding yourself. Coming up on *LBI Presents*.

LBI Presents is a production of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York and Antica Productions. It's hosted by Mark Oppenheimer. Our Executive Producers are Laura Regehr, Stuart Coxe, and Bernie Blum. Our Senior Producer is Debbie Pacheco. Our Associate Producer is Emily Morantz. Our intern is Maizie Solomon. Our associate sound editor is Cameron McIver. Sound design and audio mix by Philip Wilson. Alexis Rodda is the singer you heard performing Egon Lustgarten's work—pieces from *Dante in Exile* and *The Blue Mountain*. Special thanks to her, and to Elysium Between Two Continents, Gregorij von Leitis, and The Lahr von Leitis Archive.