

contact

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Brigitte Schiffer

14 July 1909 – 21 January 1986

This is the first opportunity we have had to pay tribute to the music critic Brigitte Schiffer, a former contributor to *Contact*, who died over a year ago after a long period of poor health.

In the 1960s and 70s, Brigitte was a familiar figure to anyone who went at all regularly to concerts of contemporary music in London. She was, indeed, a tirelessly inveterate concert-goer at this time, keeping abreast of everything and everyone on the metropolitan new-music scene in her own extraordinary way. She was passionately committed to the contemporary cause and yet also capable of a reasoned detachment, her views being conveyed more often in private conversation with her own special brand of wry humour and sometimes barbed wit than in her published writings which, in those written in English at least, were frequently designed more to report than to 'criticise'.

Officially she was known as the London critic for the German music magazine *Melos* for much of this period, and she was certainly important in providing both *Melos* and a large number of other German-language magazines, newspapers and radio stations with a regular insight into the fast-developing British contemporary-music scene. Her writing must surely have done a great deal to dispel any lingering doubts in her German, Austrian and Swiss readers' minds about the new compositional vitality of what used to be called 'das Land ohne Musik'.

Yet Brigitte was much more than just a music critic. In London, which she made her home for over 20 years, she was known as a friend to composers and to anyone at all interested in new music. She was a vigorous supporter of many people and many causes: not least of *Contact*, for whom she voluntarily provided a flood of concert reviews after *Melos* ceased publication – more copy than our infrequent publication could possibly find space for, as is probably fairly evident to anyone looking through issues 20, 21 and 22,

those in which we drew most extensively on her services. Though having more reason than most to be impatient with our erratic ways, she was actually among *Contact's* staunchest and most understanding supporters, offering advice on matters promotional as well as editorial both in conversation and in a steady stream of letters and postcards.

Most of us who knew her were aware that Brigitte had had several other 'lives' before settling in England and taking up writing about new music. Details were hard to come by, since she was much less forthcoming about herself than in voicing her opinions about the state of new music. We gathered, though, that she had studied in her native Berlin with Hindemith, among others; that she had gained a doctorate in ethnomusicology; and that she had spent long periods in Egypt, where I think she was involved in music education.

Yet even those who were much closer to her than I was were surprised to discover just how intimate she seems to have been with practically all the composers of the post-war avant garde. Xenakis was a familiar favourite concern of hers, yet she seems also to have been familiar with Boulez and Stockhausen from the earliest days, before they established their current reputations here; I also recall how tenderly Cage treated her in the course of a conversation in Peter Greenaway's Channel 4 documentary about him, recently reshowed.

If Brigitte's filing system for unpublished materials relating to her wide range of friends in new music was anything like as extensive and thorough as that for her enviable collection of published materials, it ought to be possible to celebrate and commemorate in some way what must have been a richly varied and rewarding life in music. Brigitte gave so unstintingly of herself for so long; we surely owe her something in return, in order that her contribution is not entirely forgotten.

Keith Potter