

Warm corners, fog and cheap cotton: sundry journeys from Leipzig to Manchester

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Slide 1 – Title

In 1958, a man named Leon Picard died in the Cheshire village of Bowdon, an affluent suburb some 24km south of Manchester. He was 78.

Slide 2 – Leon Picard

He had never married and lived as a recluse after the death of his mother only four years previously at the ripe age of 102. Olga Picard née Skadovsky was Russian; she had married a Frenchman but was already a widow when she came to Bowdon in the 1920s to escape the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and to be with her now invalid sister Anna.

Slide 3 – Anna Brodsky

Anna was married to the Russian violinist and Principal of the Royal Manchester College of Music Adolph Brodsky.

Slide 4 – Adolph Brodsky

After the death of Adolph and Anna in 1929, Olga and Leon continued to live in their house. As the eventual sole occupant Leon let the house fall into disrepair and it was only the intervention of the composer and near neighbour Thomas Pitfield and his Russian-speaking wife Alice that prevented much of the contents ending up at the local rubbish dump.

Slide 5 – Thomas Pitfield

We have a lot to thank Thomas and Alice Pitfield for. Their timely intervention prevented the destruction of what is today the Adolph Brodsky Archive at the Royal Northern College of Music. It contains over 1,000 items, including (**Slide 6a**) autograph letters from, among others, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Grieg, Busoni and Elgar, (**Slide 6b**) photographs, (**Slide 6c**) concert programmes and posters, (**Slide 6d**) press cuttings and (**Slide 6e**) performing material, including some of Brodsky's quartet parts (**Slide 6f**) and his annotated copy of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, which he premiered in December 1881.

Thomas Pitfield first brought the collection a wider audience, when in 1964 he published an article on the Tchaikovsky letters in *The Listener*, a journal formerly published by the BBC, and spoke about them on BBC Radio.

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Pitfield, Thomas Baron. "Letters from Tchaikovsky to Brodsky". *The Listener*: 19 April 1962, pp.683-684.

Three years later, Øystein Gaukstad discussed some of the Grieg letters over three consecutive issues of the *Norsk Musikk Tidsskrift*.

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Gaukstad, Øystein. "Edvard Grieg og Adolf Brodsky". *Norsk Musikk Tidsskrift*: 1967, No.1 (March) / No.2 (June) / No.3 (October).

Yet, far from accelerating any scholarly interest in the collection, these publications remained isolated examples of attempts to disseminate its importance. The former Royal Manchester College, into whose possession they came, was a conservatoire which, typically for its time, had little interest in academic music or research. Even after the Royal Manchester College merged with the city's Northern School of Music to form the present Royal Northern College in 1972, the new administration sought to distance itself from the legacy of its predecessors, which it regarded as provincial and conservative. It showed no interest in either promoting or simply conserving this and other archival material.

Consequently my first encounter with the Brodsky material was with numerous items wrapped in copies of the *Manchester Guardian* from the 1930s, except for the most important letters, which lived in a tin box in the Librarian's office.

Fortunately attitudes have changed and in the last twenty or so years our archival collections have received the attention they deserve from a series of in-house conservators and archivists. More significantly, their potential as research collections has been increasingly recognised. Christopher Fifield, for example, was able to draw on material in the Brodsky collection for his monograph on Hans Richter.

Slide 8 – Grieg op.45

An autograph violin part of the Grieg op.45 Violin sonata was used as source material for the Henle Urtext edition of the work, and my own research on Adolph Brodsky would have been impossible without the collection.

So – where does Leipzig fit into all this? One answer – many documents in the collection originated in, or have links to, Leipzig. The reason for this lies in the following document – which in this case is from Leipzig rather than Manchester.

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This is the entry from the registry of teaching appointments at the then Royal Leipzig Conservatoire from 11 January 1883, recording the appointment of Adolph Brodsky as a Professor of Violin. He took up his appointment in April of that year and remained at the Conservatoire until 1891, when he left to assume the leadership of Walter Damrosch's New York Symphony Orchestra. Anna Brodsky was not initially impressed with the city:

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My first impressions of Leipzig were not favourable. It is neither beautiful nor picturesque: it lies by the side of a small river, too low to be healthy. (Recollections, p.138)

It was here that Brodsky met Grieg and Busoni, and renewed acquaintances with Brahms, whom he'd first encountered as a pupil of Hellmesberger in Vienna, and Tchaikovsky, whom he had known since at least 1874. These last two got on tolerably well, even if they had little liking for each other's music. Anna, again, recalls an occasion when both dined with them, together with the Griegs:-

Slide 10b

Nina Grieg was seated between Brahms and Tchaikovsky, but we had only been a few moments at the table when she started from her seat exclaiming "I cannot sit between these two. It makes me feel so nervous". P.159

And

Slide 10c

I can see Brahms now taking hold of a dish of strawberry jam, and saying he would have it all for himself and no one should get any. It was more like a children's party than a gathering of great composers.

It was in Leipzig that Brodsky formed his first string quartet. Initially this consisted of his pupil Ottakar Nováček, Hans Sitt and Leopold Grützmacher. Grützmacher was replaced by Julius Klengel during the 1885-86 season, at which time Hans Becker replaced Nováček as second violin. Nováček rejoined the quartet, but as violist, in 1888; conversely Sitt replaced Nováček after the latter also moved to the USA in 1891. The RNCM is fortunate in possessing programmes for almost all of the concerts the quartet gave at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. They are important, not just in showing the collaboration of the notable musicians in Brodsky's circle, such as this programme from 1884,

Slide 11 – Concert February 1884

but in offering a comprehensive record of the performed repertoire. The illustrated concert is typically of many, with a “modern” piece sandwiched between two classics of the Austro-German canon, of which the second is in many cases a Beethoven quartet. All in all, Beethoven features in 37 of the 43 programmes we possess. The pattern, and the allegiance to a fairly narrow Austro-German repertoire, is one which Brodsky was to maintain throughout his many Manchester concerts. Even the Haydn quartet on this programme – op.17 no.5 – crops up time and again. Another oft-repeated work was the Beethoven String quintet, op.29, which the *Leipziger Nachrichten's* critic Bernhard Vogel noted as being “not often encountered in chamber music circles”.

The “modern” works in the Gewandhaus concerts are in many cases also by those in Brodsky's Leipzig circle. With Grieg he gave the première of the composer's op.45 Violin sonata in December 1887, and with Busoni the latter's first Violin sonata in February 1891. Vogel, again in the *Leipziger Nachrichten*, was surprisingly impressed:

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The whole sonata appears to us as the fortunate work of an earnestly striving Janus-like composer. It doesn't prattle on like that orchestral fantasy with which Busoni

once brought the Gewandhaus audience halfway to despair; it has measure and purpose and secures for its composer... genuine sympathy.

There are fewer works by Tchaikovsky. The op.30 String quartet does appear, in November 1888, noted as “Zum ersten Mal” which, here as elsewhere, often indicates a first performance in the Gewandhaus concerts. Another work so described is the op.111 String quintet by Brahms, given in Brodsky’s final Gewandhaus concert in April 1891, and concerning which an interesting letter has survived. Brodsky must have pointed out the difficulty of balancing the dynamics of the opening.

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Brahms replied:

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...the two fiddles should at least bluff their *forte* from the third and fourth bars [of the opening]. That way they can flatter with a really nice *mezzo forte* and be rewarded during the course of the movement with a beautiful *piano*.

Various other new works appear in Brodsky’s Gewandhaus concerts, many of them by composers associated with the Leipzig Conservatoire or sympathetic to its predominantly conservative compositional ethic. They include such names as Carl Reinecke, Felix Draseske, August Klughardt – and Ethel Smyth, a former student whose op.7 Violin sonata Brodsky premièred in November 1887. What links these works is that Brodsky chose not to revive them in his Manchester concerts. Those that he did promote there outline a Leipzig-Manchester journey with its own significant narrative.

The Brodskys left Leipzig for New York in 1891. Grieg and his wife were grief-stricken, fearing that they would never see their friends again.

Slide 15 - Tchaikovsky

Tchaikovsky was more optimistic.

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I have long known through Damrosch about your appointment, and approved your decision to move to America. I am convinced that you will settle there favourably,

and that you will be satisfied from every angle. But will you not fret just a little about the warm corner you made in Leipzig?

In truth, Brodsky's New York career ended disastrously after two and a half seasons. That's a narrative in itself; suffice to say that it caused him to reconsider his artistic values and cultural roots and to seize Charles Hallé's invitation to come to Manchester. Anna was initially against it. To her Manchester

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...figured as a large smoky place where cotton was very cheap, and where people could not possibly care for music or have any idea what really serious music meant...

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For Brodsky, Manchester offered the opportunity to reconnect with his artistic comfort zone, and not least with that warm corner of Leipzig. In a city whose musical patronage relied heavily on its large and predominantly middle class German community, he found an audience both culturally aware and sympathetic to his own Austro-German repertoire. To say that he wanted to recreate that warm corner is not so wide of the mark. Although it was no longer possible to invite the now deceased Tchaikovsky, Brahms or Novaček to Manchester, he did his utmost to introduce their music to his new audiences. Of the Manchester première of Tchaikovsky's Piano trio, given as in Leipzig with the pianist Alexander Siloti, the Manchester press commented on the special imprimatur they brought to the work – which moreover Brodsky repeated many time over the coming years.

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In association with Mr. Brodsky and Mr. Fuchs [Siloti] introduced to the Manchester public Tchaikovsky's extremely remarkable trio in A minor... The performance of this most interesting work was quite masterly... The performers did not always follow the printed indications of tempo... but, seeing that two out of the three executants... besides being performers of world-wide reputation, were intimate personal friends of the illustrious composer, it may be surmised that they had good reasons for what they did. The trio was heard throughout with evident interest...

Although his quartet repertoire was never a large one, consistent promotion in Manchester of music by composers from his Leipzig circle, or of that of Robert Volkmann which had often featured in his Leipzig concerts, speaks of a subtle reformer beneath the apparently conservative exterior.

With Grieg and Busoni, bringing them to Manchester became a priority. Brodsky had come to Manchester to lead the Hallé Orchestra and teach at Hallé's recently opened music college. Within weeks of his arrival, Hallé died and Brodsky found himself appointed Principal; yet in the thick of his new responsibilities in late 1895 his paramount concern was his determination to bring Grieg to Manchester. Correspondence on the matter is divided between the RNCM and the Griegsamling at Bergen Public Library and often reveals Grieg's dry sense of humour. For example in November 1895 he wrote that:

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This is a sure sign that you are enjoying being in Manchester. Yes, we learn to console ourselves! Here in Leipzig we've got so far as believing that the damned coal dust is very healthy! Really, if you subscribe to such a pessimistic outlook, then it's even healthy to lie down and hide in the ground!

It wasn't until 1897 that Grieg made it to Manchester, and then under different circumstances and not without various changes of plan.

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Finally a request: that during our stay in Manchester you send the damn "fog" packing!

Grieg had written in advance of his visit. Brodsky had taken advantage of Busoni's first concert tour to Manchester to plan one of his concerts as a kind of Leipzig reunion for the three of them. His quartet would play Grieg's op.27 quartet and Busoni would take part in Beethoven's "Ghost" trio. Grieg's being laid low with 'flu delayed him in London and the concert went ahead without him. It was Grieg's last visit to Manchester, but after his death his widow Nina maintained an association with the College's alumni association and continued to write to both Anna Brodsky and her sister Olga. Their correspondence is a research project in waiting.

Busoni's visit proved to be the first of several to Manchester. His letters to Brodsky at the RNCM are complemented by those from Brodsky, now in the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek Berlin. Taken together they reveal the extent to which Brodsky valued Busoni's artistry for, in seeking a Professor of Piano to replace Hallé, he did his level best to persuade Busoni to take the post. In May 1896 he countered Busoni's reluctance with:

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I told my wife beforehand that you wouldn't take up the position in Manchester, otherwise I would have turned to you earlier myself... But we can offer you 10,000 Marks for 36 weeks, at 12 hours a week...I also think England would be a great place for you to be. Travelling distances are very short, and you could perform all over without abandoning your teaching hours, and even after most of the out of town concerts you could be home the same evening. Liverpool for instance can be reached by rail from Manchester in only three-quarters of an hour...

As the above suggests, Brodsky guessed that he was asking the impossible, just as he did when some ten years later he tried to tempt Elgar to join the staff as Professor of Composition and Orchestration, but both demonstrate his wish to have the best for the Royal Manchester College. With Busoni though, one gets the impression that he also wished to have a tangible link to that warm corner in the foggy cottonopolis of Manchester.

To sum up what must be only a lightening tour of a substantial archive – There are several journeys here. One is the actual journey of one particular musician from Leipzig to Manchester. But there is also the journey of a chamber music repertoire and, more significantly, the journey of those friendships forged in one city and kept alive in another. It only remains for me to say:

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Grüsse aus der Musikstadt Manchester an die Musikstadt Leipzig!