

Musical Pioneer & Beacon of Idealism:

Sigurd M. Rascher (15 May, 1907 - 25 February, 2001)

by John-Edward Kelly



The music world has regularly produced remarkable personalities whose skills and determination have served to redefine future standards. Only rarely, however, has a musician actually been allowed momentarily to assume command of the rudder of history and thus single-handedly exert his influence upon its ultimate course. Sigurd Manfred Rascher, who passed away quietly in the early hours of February 25th near his adopted home of Shushan, New York, was unquestionably one of those extraordinary persons, anointed by fate to guide for a relatively brief but hugely significant period the saxophone's destiny.

Born the son of a medical doctor in the Westphalian town of Elberfeld (today Wuppertal), Rascher's parents relocated several times to various parts of Germany and Switzerland. As a pupil at the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, the development of the free-thinking individual as envisioned in Rudolf Steiner's

Anthroposophy was a central pillar of his education. Later in life, Rascher would frequently express his deep gratitude for his years at the Waldorf School: "*Without that firm foundation, many things would have been much more difficult to bear.*" Having grown up surrounded both at home and at school by the music of the masters, a life in music seemed a natural path, and he was readily admitted into the clarinet class of the illustrious Philipp Dreisbach at the Academy of Music in Stuttgart.

True greatness, it must be noted, lies in the manner in which a challenge is met. Without a need, it can lie dormant an entire lifetime without ever having been noticed. Once called to duty, however, greatness arises out of the courage and optimism with which misfortune is seized upon as an opportunity-in-waiting. When simple economic reality demanded that Sigurd Rascher postpone his formal studies to begin earning a living by playing in dance bands, he found the very idea of playing entertainment music — much less the saxophone — repugnant. It wasn't long, however, before his innate optimism led him to start asking questions about his newfound musical acquaintance: "It must be possible to do more with the saxophone!" (We should bear mind that, in the late twenties, the saxophone enjoyed a deservedly dismal reputation among classical musicians. There was nearly no worthwhile repertoire, and the great enthusiasm with which the instrument had been received by leading composers after its invention in 1841 had long-since been forgotten.)

When a dance-band colleague ridiculed the saxophone for its tiny range, Rascher took offense — and then went to work. By applying the overblowing techniques he had learned on the clarinet and experimenting until deep in the night, he soon had expanded the standard 2½ octaves of the instrument to a completely dependable and powerfully expressive four full octaves — something virtually unimaginable at that time. Simultaneously, he extended dramatically the expressive palette of the instrument to include unheard-of shades of color and dynamic nuance. Rascher's newfound respect for the saxophone launched him upon an odyssey unparalleled in the annals of music. He settled in Berlin, the hub of cultural activity in the 1930s, and began playing for composers. Those who heard him were flabber-

gasted, and new pieces began flowing in by the dozen. The list of composers who wrote for Rascher within a single decade constitutes a mini-compendium of 20th century music: Hindemith, Glazounov, Coates, Ibert, Milhaud, Martin, Osterc, Larsson — to name but a few.

Sigurd Rascher combined a personality as engaging as his fire-red hair with enormous technical mastery, extraordinary musical maturity and an uncompromising vision for the saxophone. When in 1932 he played Edmund von Borck's Saxophone Concerto at the Musicians Congress in Hanover and then again at the Philharmonic in Berlin, his career skyrocketed: invitations to hear the young saxophone-wizard poured in from across Europe and beyond. Whichever orchestra invited him, he was invariably the first saxophone soloist it ever had seen. In the course of his 50-year performing career he played with nearly all of the world's major orchestras, many of which to this day have never had another saxophone soloist. Just the list of conductors he performed with reads like a veritable *who's who* of classical music: Szell, Koussevitzky, Barbirolli, Mengelberg, Ansermet, Scherchen, Sacher, Bour, Mann, Wood, Sargent, Arnold, Ormandy, Jochum, Cluytens, Ozawa, Bernstein, etc. One concert in Strasbourg was particularly memorable, as the daughter of Adolphe Sax was in the audience: she wrote to Rascher afterwards that she finally had heard the saxophone "*as her father had imagined it one day would be played*".

Sigurd Rascher's brilliant career would have been impressive even had he been a pianist or a violinist; as a saxophonist, it was absolutely unbelievable. He is the only saxophonist ever to have achieved such recognition in the most hallowed chambers of classical music: even half-a-century later, no-one else has even come close. His career, however, was only a part of the whole picture. Despite his great successes, he was never the slightest bit *élitaire*: he always found time to play for school children, for retirees or for tired river workers on a hot afternoon in Copenhagen. Like for many in those times, there were also enormous problems: In 1933, just as his career was blossoming, a clear message was pinned to the door of his apartment in Berlin: "*Saxophon kommt aus Cohn - weg davon!*" The implications were clear enough, and Rascher left immediately for Copenhagen.

His first tour to the United States took place in 1939, when he performed to enormous success with the New York Philharmonic under Barbirolli and with the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky. When he returned again to the States in 1940, Arturo Toscanini himself attended his Town Hall recital and embraced the young musician, but it now seemed imprudent for him to return to Europe. Attempts to obtain an American "green card" finally ran amuck in Cuba, where he spent the better part of a year, not playing concerts, but harvesting sugar cane. It was wartime, so he did not complain, but instead took one day at a time. Finally, he made it back to New York and was reunited with his wife Ann Mari and their little son, Staffan. Mrs. Rascher played her own part in the history of the saxophone: had she not brought with her and protected the manuscripts of numerous works written for Rascher — not least of which was Hindemith's *Konzertstück* — many would have been lost forever. They settled in upstate New York in the most rural setting imaginable, thereby fulfilling Rascher's long-stated ambition to live close to nature and "*be a farmer*". After the gardens were cleared of brush and tons of rocks and stones and the house renovated, the homestead flourished: three more children, plus a horse and a cow. The Raschers became naturalized American citizens and were rightfully proud of their beautiful, rural surroundings. When, years later, the sinister prospect of radioactive clouds passing overhead loomed on the horizon, Rascher read everything he could find about nuclear physics and initiated a successful anti-nuclear campaign with a few neighbors.

Sigurd Rascher's gifts to the saxophone do not end with the entire repertoire he bequeathed to those following in his footsteps, nor with his myriad publications and transcriptions, nor with the famed Rascher Quartet he founded in 1969. Equally significant was his early recognition of the instrument's noble origins — he was the first person to have done so openly and deliberately since Adolphe Sax's

death in 1894. At every opportunity, Rascher wrote and spoke out about the saxophone and its inventor's true musical intentions. When ignorance and commercial interests combined to sabotage the brilliantly conceived acoustical principles of Adolphe Sax's most famous instrument, it was Rascher — and for decades ONLY Rascher — who steadfastly refused to join ranks. (For some 50 years now, not a single saxophone has been manufactured according to the original acoustical specifications of Adolphe Sax.) In countless articles, courses and lectures, he patiently explained the profound differences between the creation of the saxophone and development of the traditional instruments. He understood that the *tone* of the saxophone is its central, identifying characteristic, and that rendering the "*Tone of Sax*" physically unattainable by changing the saxophone's mouthpiece and bore constituted a moral affront to its creator. He perceived the truth clearly and never wavered. When ultimately no real saxophone mouthpieces were made anymore, he had his own copied and produced — not so that he could earn money from them (he donated his proceeds to an education fund), but so that the truth would stand a chance to prevail in the end. Today, countless saxophone players all over the world are again recognizing how wonderful the saxophone in its original form really is. Yet for many, many years, there was only one. Without the tireless efforts of Sigurd Rascher, all awareness of the dignified stature and noble beauty of the original saxophone would have vanished.

Rascher always welcomed possibilities to share his wisdom, never complaining about his lot and never finding any task beneath him. Whether it was teaching woodshop in Berlin, general music in elementary school in upstate New York, formal music education at various music academies, or conducting his uncounted dozens of master-classes around the world: he gave of himself selflessly out of a genuine desire to help others. "*I have been given so much; how could I not share it?*" Rascher's remarkable career as a teacher began in earnest during his years in Copenhagen, and by the time he retired from formal teaching, he had held several professorships, including at the prestigious Eastman School of Music. His knowledge of details — whether of history, geography, music, or the biography of Adolphe Sax — was truly colossal, and he was always ready to help others become enthusiastic about learning. He had little patience for the merely curious or those who wanted nothing more than to add his name to a résumé, but for a genuine question — no matter how trivial it might have seemed to others — he always had time and energy in abundance.

Those having a breadth of knowledge as extensive and well-founded as Rascher's are often inclined to conceal any remaining deficiencies, but not Rascher: it was characteristic of his deeply inquisitive nature to seek a learning experience at every opportunity. When, only a few years ago, we spoke about a technical field far-removed from anything he had ever had cause to think about, his eyes glistened with joy at the prospect of learning something new: "*Now there's a field I know absolutely nothing about!*" He was always looking for a new task, a new opportunity to learn, a new way to help others grasp the things he perceived so clearly.

Yet when asked about his phenomenal accomplishments, Rascher remained remarkably humble: his characteristic response was a mere, "*Someone had to do it!*" Perhaps it really was that easy for a person possessing such clarity of vision, purposeful conviction and an unyielding will to resist compromise concerning essential truths. Indeed, Sigurd M. Rascher saw what needed to be done and accepted the task as his calling. Rarely in history has the noble challenge 'carpe diem' been fulfilled so completely. Rest assured, oh Great Captain: the course you have charted shall not be abandoned.

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