“In Case of Sudden Death, Burn This”: The Simon Bucharoff Collection at the University of North Texas Music Library

Abstract:

The recently completed Simon Bucharoff Collection at the University of North Texas provides an effective example of how music special collections support the educational mission of the university and facilitate original research. Organizing the Bucharoff Collection has also filled in many gaps in his biographical information, and uncovered a dramatic story of a promising artist frustrated at nearly every turn. This article outlines the collection’s provenance and arrangement, offers an updated and expanded biography, and discusses the description of and access to the collection.

I. Introduction

Special collections are not simply trophies or curiosities; rather, they support the educational mission of a university in many ways. Often, they correlate in subject matter with a given institution's areas of emphasis, enriching and expanding the contents of a library’s regular circulating collection. In particular, they afford opportunities for original research by undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty, and may become an asset in recruitment by contributing to a unique educational experience that cannot be found elsewhere. Additionally, they preserve valuable cultural history for current and future generations, and primary source materials serve to confirm, contradict, or fill in gaps in an existing historical narrative.

Of course, none of the above may come to pass if those collections are not effectively arranged and described, if no one can make sense of them, or if no one knows they exist. Before research and comprehension can occur -- before a collection can be "used" -- it must be organized and its intellectual content made accessible. Upon being acquired by a library, special collections run the gamut from being reasonably well organized to utterly scrambled. Often, they are transferred by the heirs of the collection’s primary creator, who realize the materials are important, but may not be well versed in the subject matter, and who may have other matters to
attend to in the disposition of the estate; it is up to the library that receives the collection to make sense of it.

The Simon Bucharoff Collection at the University of North Texas Music Library, which contains the papers and compositions of the 20th-century composer, film music orchestrator, and educator, is a prime example of the fascinating stories that await discovery in unprocessed special collections. In order to tell the story or perform the works contained therein, however, one must first piece together the puzzle. In Bucharoff’s case, processing his papers and compositions gradually filled in details of a maddening tale of thwarted destiny, along with shedding light on his creative process and personality.

II. Provenance and contents

Bucharoff’s papers document that he willed his possessions to his brother, Isadore Buchhalter, and his sister-in-law, Elisabeth Hoffman Buchhalter. Tammy Ravas of the University of Montana, formerly of the University of Houston, explained that his papers had been passed to a nephew or great nephew who had come to reside in Houston, but was apparently leaving the area. According to documents that accompanied the collection, the University of Houston acquired it in the spring of 2004. After an initial inventory and a proposed schedule and budget for organization and preservation, it apparently awaited further processing until Katie Buehner of the University of Houston arranged its transfer to the University of North Texas Music Library in 2010.

After about five months of work, interspersed with various other projects, The Simon Bucharoff Collection consists of fifty boxes organized into ten series according to material type: manuscript scores; oversized scores (also manuscripts); published works; libretti and other writings; correspondence and personal papers; photographs, clippings, and publicity; materials
related to the musical career of Bucharoff’s brother Isadore; one piece of realia (a memento from the premiere of *Sakahra*); and the documentation which accompanied the collection from the University of Houston.

Scores comprise the majority of the collection, followed by correspondence and papers, libretti, and the other materials. For the most part, the scores as well as the papers arrived in no particular order, and the large manuscript scores often had to be re-assembled from disconnected segments – a task made far easier in the scores by the frequent presence of lyrics, distinctive instrumentation, and page numbers.

In general, the scores, published works, and libretti are now arranged in alphabetical order, except where a particular notation by Bucharoff, such as “to be revised and destroyed,” suggested maintaining the original order as it was clear they were grouped together by the composer for a reason. The contents of the finding aid in this area also serve as the most complete list of Bucharoff’s works that has yet been assembled.

Correspondence is arranged in chronological order by category, with particular attention given to his protracted struggle with German publishers, Numerous clippings from 1906 through the 1950s are organized in two categories: those which trace Bucharoff’s career (arranged chronologically), and those which he marked and set aside while preparing his philosophical work, *The Wisdomites* (arranged as much as possible in the order of numbers assigned by Bucharoff). It is through the sum of these materials that Bucharoff’s story comes to life.

I. Early Life and Career

Simon Bucharoff was eager to define his own history and public image. He was born Simon Buchhalter in 1881 to Aaron and Sarah Buchhalter; Bucharoff’s father was a Jewish cantor, and
his older brother, Isadore, grew up to be a well known pianist and educator in the Chicago area. A draft of a rather hagiographic and evidently self-composed biography in Bucharoff’s papers explains: “Even as a child of four he showed his musical leanings and at five he was already singing in the choir. His definite musical education however commenced only after his arrival in America at the age of eleven, when he began working with Paolo Gallico and Leon [sic – Leopold] Kramer and producing original compositions.”

Several documents in Bucharoff’s papers note that he briefly pursued studies for a career in pharmacy before firmly deciding on a career in music. He married Jeanette Grace Bluestone in a ceremony presided over by his father in 1902, and returned to Europe that same year to study composition with Stephen Stocker and Robert Fuchs, and piano with Emil Sauer and Julius Epstein at the Vienna Conservatory. He was naturalized as an American citizen in 1904. According to a résumé among his papers, he joined the faculty of the Wichita College of Music in 1907, and quickly became a respected artist and rising star in the area, as local papers recorded. He was, as he later wrote, “doing what he could to raise the musical standards in the middle west.”

Between 1910 and 1912, Bucharoff relocated to Chicago, and began to identify himself more with composition than with the piano. His first “big break” arrived with the patronage of future Vice President of the United States, Charles G. Dawes, and in securing a hearing of his first opera, *A Lover’s Knot*, by the Chicago Opera, which performed it under the direction of Cleofonte Campanini during the 1915-1916 season. However, Bucharoff felt he had to return to Europe to fulfill his destiny as a composer, thus ending the first chapter of his career.
Here, two curious changes merit discussion. In May of 1919, Simon Buchhalter obtained a court’s permission to change his surname to Bucharoff. News articles about Bucharoff in the subsequent decade emphasized a Russian composer who was a proud, naturalized American. One may only speculate upon his motives, but perhaps he wished to avoid being pigeonholed into whatever the broader population might have considered a “Jewish” composer at the time; more pragmatically, perhaps he wished to avoid harassment in his travels.

In addition, Bucharoff’s biographical materials through the late 1920s give his place of birth as the Ukranian city of Berdychiv, which was then under Russian control. The most extensive existing biography of Bucharoff, that in E.E. Hipsher’s American Opera and Its Composers, concurs, and Bucharoff’s entry in The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, which relies heavily on Hipsher, follows suit. There is no evidence to suggest that this account is inaccurate, but by 1928, Bucharoff had changed his story in numerous documents to say he had been born in Kiev. Berdychiv is only one province to the west of Kiev, but was historically a major center of Hasidic Judaism. Again, it seems Bucharoff wished to emphasize his identity as an American composer of Russian extraction, though he never stated his motives outright, and invoked his Jewish roots in comments on music, and in his choice of libretti and plot material for operas.

II. Europe

The composer formerly known as Simon Buchhalter sailed for Europe in 1919, spending some time in Paris composing and working on a project under Pierre Maudru, which he ultimately found unsatisfactory and abandoned. He arrived in Germany in 1921, beginning a period in which he achieved his greatest success, but which also set the stage for the struggle that would consume him for the rest of his life.
Bucharoff reports that he finished the opera *Sakahra* in 1919, but encountered resistance in attempting to have it performed in the United States. The plot, which involves a brother and sister who are separated at birth and later fall in love, may not have played well. Additionally, the setting, largely in a Catholic community in French colonial Algeria (complete with a monk and a hymn in honor of Mary) may not have resonated with an American audience at that time.

However, by 1924, Bucharoff had secured its performance in Germany, and this was no small feat. The English libretto, written by Isabel Buckingham, was translated by Rudolf Lothar, and was premiered on November 8, 1924 by the Frankfurt Opera. According to the *American Hebrew* issue of October 26, 1928, it was “the first opera by an American to have its world premiere on German soil.” The *New York Herald’s* Paris Edition of October 21, 1924 observed that only other American operatic work given a hearing in Germany thus far was Ethelbert Nevin's *Poiea*, and that “the fact that so conservative a house as the Frankfurt opera will stand sponsor for [Bucharoff’s] work heightens the interest of the forthcoming event.” Bucharoff reports that *Sakahra* not only survived its premiere, but enjoyed eight performances in six weeks. *Sakahra* and *A Lover’s Knot* also won Bucharoff the prestigious David Bispham Award in 1925.

For a fleeting moment, Bucharoff seemed poised to take his place as an heir to the great operatic tradition of Western Europe. But gathering nationalist sentiment and anti-Semitism in a bitter, struggling Germany between the wars conspired to make the country an increasingly inhospitable place. Bucharoff’s relationship with his publisher, Steingräber-Verlag, went sour, and thus began a dispute over finances and who owed money to whom. However, the situation in Germany deteriorated to such a degree that Bucharoff could not stay to fight with Steingräber. He later explained:
“Much was expected of this opera [Sakahra], since it was to be produced by many German opera organizations, but the advent of Hitler and other matters spoiled all that, so I thought it would be best to go to Italy, thinking that the political situation would blow over in a short while. Instead, this situation became a world catastrophe, so that I was compelled to store my score with the Hofmeister-Verlag in Leipzig, witnessed by the American Consul Mr. DeSoto, and left for America.\textsuperscript{19}

Bucharoff composed while in Menaggio, in northern Italy, and eventually, accounts were settled between Bucharoff and Steingräber, albeit not to Bucharoff’s satisfaction. Even the American consul, one Hernando DeSoto, agreed that Steingräber was “difficult and stubborn,” and that it was one of the most “annoying and exasperating” cases he had handled.\textsuperscript{20}

To add insult to injury, Bucharoff’s other major work, based on the European Jewish legend of the Golem of Prague, was passed over in favor of another composer: As he explained in a letter from April of 1926, Emil Herzka of Universal Editions, of which Hofmeister was a brand, had contracted with Bucharoff for the rights to Sakahra and Der Golem. Bucharoff said he notified Herzka that the vocal score was finished, and Herzka said he would be in Italy, where Bucharoff had taken refuge, shortly. Before Herzka ever scheduled a meeting with Bucharoff in Italy, the Frankfurt Opera premiered Eugene D’Albert’s Der Golem, and Herzka said Hofmeister had contracted for publication of D’Albert’s Der Golem.\textsuperscript{21}

At first, it seemed that Der Golem had disappeared without a trace from the Bucharoff Collection, but his compositions and papers confirm a tenacious perfectionism and habit of revising compositions until they met his expectations, and discarding the earlier versions. Indeed, one such file of a work in progress even bears the instructions: “\textit{In case of sudden death, burn this.}” Such directions may be found on at least two items in the collection, along with the aforementioned folder of compositions which Bucharoff had set aside “to be revised and destroyed.”
Der Golem, in reality, underwent the same ongoing transformation as other works. Bucharoff indicates he began work on the opera in the early 1920s, and it appears in one incarnation in the collection as Der Seele Israels (The Soul of Israel); the work of Rudolf Lothar was apparently again to be part of the production. However, amid many delays, Der Golem evolved with Bucharoff’s worldview and spirituality into what was known by the end of his life as Jewel: The Indestructible Man (sometimes “The Everlasting Man”).

III. Return to America

Despite the disappointing end of his time in Europe, the remainder of the 1920s was quite kind to Bucharoff. He secured a tentative agreement to set the works of Eugene O’Neill to music, though no such collaborative works materialized; O’Neill later spoke ill of Bucharoff in his letters, complaining of a lack of progress. Meanwhile, Bucharoff enjoyed other successes.

In 1928, his arrangement Scene de Ballet from Sakahra was performed by the New York Philharmonic under Willem Mengelberg at Carnegie Hall, on a program with works by Berlioz and Kodály broadcast on the radio station WOR. Scene de Ballet was also performed at the Hollywood Bowl under Eugene Goosens. A general gap in ephemera indicating compositions and performances in the collection coincides with the onset of the Great Depression, as Bucharoff turned again to teaching through various organizations, and relocated to southern California in the early 1930s. Correspondence with German publishers continued up to an eight-year gap between 1935 and 1943; one of the later letters from Hofmeister in 1934 said none of Bucharoff’s works had sold, and they did not expect that any would.

In 1937, Bucharoff and began working as a music editor and orchestrator for Warner Brothers on such films as Between Two Worlds (1944) and The Sea Hawk (1940), along with a
number of other films scored by Erich Korngold, who also penned an endorsement of Bucharoff’s piano method. Bucharoff also worked on at least one film under Dmitri Tiomkin (Meet John Doe, 1941), and two under Roy Webb (Arizona Legion and Trouble in Sundown, 1939). Still, he wrote that despite having “drifted to Hollywood,” he was always “waiting for the right opportunity to return to Europe and resume my career as composer of Opera and Symphony.” Indeed, one experience Bucharoff held in common with Korngold is that both were shut out of their dreams of greater prominence in Europe.

Bucharoff continued to compose, and his works became more philosophical in nature. At some undetermined point, he embraced Christian Science, and penned metaphysical works of his own that show an affinity for the New Thought movement. He also had high hopes for what a supra-national organization such as the United Nations could bring about in terms of world peace (as seen in “The March of Freedom” and “To the United Nations”), and Jewel: The Everlasting Man in its final form put forth a vision of a free, enlightened, and united world overcoming a dictator. His Parable of Nothin’ and Somethin’ illustrates hopes for the creation of a civilization in which no one could be cheated as he felt he was. Naturally, these works were a more difficult sell to a general audience, and his correspondence indicates that NBC declined to perform one of the works of this nature.

The fight over Sakahra continued. As it became clear that the Nazis were headed for defeat, he resumed efforts to track down his works in Germany. Initially, he was instructed to wait while a formal structure for claiming lost property was established, which finally came with the War Claims Act of 1948. After the Second World War, however, it was time for a different dictator to stand between Bucharoff and his plans: this time, Stalin. In 1946, the State Department informed Bucharoff that since his works were believed to be in Leipzig, they were in the sector of
Germany under Soviet control and therefore inaccessible.\textsuperscript{31} Carl Günther of the Hofmeister company later explained to Bucharoff that the East German government had begun appropriating private property,\textsuperscript{32} saying his entire firm and personal property in Leipzig had been seized. Bucharoff did not abandon his claim, but in the 1950s, got tired of waiting and reworked the opera from scratch as \textit{The Raising of Sakahra}. He attempted to secure a performance of the new work in Frankfurt, but Günther diplomatically replied that the chances were “very slight.”\textsuperscript{33}

Bucharoff fought to the end to recover what he had lost and to get his works performed despite changing tastes and how vastly different a world it was from the one in which \textit{Sakhara} premiered. His own writings conveyed a sense of incredulous bitterness, as he explained:

\begin{quote}
“The question now facing the composer of serious works – does our United States of America, the leader of all good human efforts, want to produce such works, or must he leave his beloved land and go to his foreign brother to do what his American brother should do. I hereby challenge all America to give me the answer!”\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Perhaps it seemed that after all of the twists and turns of the battles over \textit{Sakahra} and \textit{Der Golem} that any kind of malfeasance was possible, and Bucharoff even accused 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox of stealing his ideas for \textit{Jewel} for the movie \textit{The Day the Earth Stood Still}.\textsuperscript{35} He died of cancer in 1955 at the age of 74 in Chicago, where his brother Isadore and sister-in-law Elisabeth lived. Elisabeth, an attorney, continued the fight to claim $150,000 in restitution for lost property and earnings via the War Claims Act, as well as to attempt to get Bucharoff’s works performed, for, according to Elisabeth, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers had advised Bucharoff to get \textit{Sakahra} performed on stage, and that afterward, they “might” be interested in making a film of it.\textsuperscript{36}

Finally, in 1966, the U.S. government denied the claim.\textsuperscript{37} Isadore and Elisabeth appealed, but the claim was definitively rejected almost 12 years after Bucharoff’s death, in 1967, on the general grounds of a lack of evidence for the actual monetary value of Bucharoff’s loss, and that
“The commission holds that losses of intangible personalty, such as the loss of income and royalties, were not intended by Congress to be compensable under Title II of the Act.”

IV. Access to the collection

The full finding aid for the Simon Bucharoff Collection may be found online via http://findingaids.library.unt.edu/, the portal to all special collections in the UNT Libraries system, music and otherwise. As of 2012, UNT employs the Archon finding aid platform, and both the Music Library and Archives and Rare Books are in the process of transferring existing finding aids to Archon, as well as adding new ones. At the same time, the Music Library is also currently working to establish a presence in Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO), which aims to be a “union catalog,” as it were, of all archives and special collections in the state of Texas. Of course, one may also access the documents themselves by special arrangement with the UNT Music Library, and each special collection in the Music Library also has a brief record in the public catalog to direct the user to the collection’s finding aid.

The Simon Bucharoff Collection is but one of many collections which amply demonstrate how the UNT Music Library’s special collections support the educational mission of the College of Music and of the University. Advances in technology and cooperation among institutions of within the state of Texas afford enhanced description of and access to special collections in a logical extension of Ranganathan’s stipulations that library items are for use, and that librarians must strive to match each user with his or her information resource and vice-versa while also saving them time. The fulfillment of those laws of library science in special collections often lies first in solving the puzzle of a given collection’s contents, so that stories like Bucharoff’s may be told.
31 Letter from Kenneth C. Krentz to Simon Bucharoff, January 21, 1946, Bucharoff Collection, Series 5, Sub-Series 2, Box 1, Folder 3.
32 Letter from Carl Günther to Simon Bucharoff, January 14, 1952, Bucharoff Collection, Series 5, Sub-Series 2, Box 1, Folder 4.
33 Letter from Carl Günther to Simon Bucharoff, August 5, 1952, Bucharoff Collection, Series 5, Sub-Series 2, Box 1, Folder 4.
34 See Note 18.
35 Exchange of letters between Simon Bucharoff and 20th Century Fox, Bucharoff Collection, Series 5, Sub-Series 3, Box 1, Folder 1.
36 Letter from Elisabeth Buchhalter to Jack Warner, June 21, 1957, Bucharoff Collection, Series 5, Sub-Series 1, Folder 5.