

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

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I. Introduction

(SLIDE 1) One of the many things I enjoy about my line of work is that Google can't tell me what's in the box, and the only way to discover that is to start exploring. When I started as Music Special Collections Librarian at the University of North Texas earlier this year, the Simon Bucharoff Collection sat awaiting processing in a few unassuming stacks and boxes in the George Bragg Room. But the famous last words of an archivist or special collections librarian are: "Oh, this looks fairly straightforward." Upon further inspection, the Bucharoff Collection hid an unexpected drama that quickly became as absorbing as a good novel one can't put down, only I was also piecing the story together as I went. This presentation will discuss the contents, provenance, and arrangement of the Simon Bucharoff Collection, as well as the central drama of his career, which lives on in his papers. (SLIDE 2)

II. Provenance

Bucharoff's papers document that he willed his possessions to his brother, Isadore Buchhalter, and his sister-in-law, Elisabeth. Through Tammy Ravas of the University of Montana, formerly of the University of Houston, I learned that his papers had been passed to a nephew or great nephew who had come to reside in Houston, but was leaving the area. The collection went to the University of Houston around 2006. After an initial inventory, it apparently awaited further processing until Katie Buehner arranged its transfer to University of North Texas' Music Library in 2010.

III. Collection overview

The Simon Bucharoff Collection is organized into eight series according to material type: manuscript scores, oversized scores (also manuscripts), published copies, libretti and other

writings, correspondence and papers, photographs, clippings, and publicity, and materials related to the musical career of Bucharoff's brother Isadore, as well as a small, but prominent piece of patriotic realia (possibly some kind of sash). Scores comprise the majority of the collection, followed by correspondence and papers, libretti, published copies, ephemera, and Isadore's materials. For the most part, the scores as well as the papers came to us in no particular order, and often had to be re-assembled from disconnected pieces, a task made far easier in the scores by the frequent presence of lyrics, distinctive instrumentation, and page numbers.

Therefore, most of the scores are arranged in alphabetical order, with two notable exceptions. In exploring Bucharoff's work, one quickly notices how diligently he revised and reworked existing compositions, with alternate pages, or new sections pasted or taped over old ones in scores. Other items were marked for planned revision, with the existing items marked to be destroyed afterward. Bucharoff was evidently demanding and uncompromising when it came to his music, as his sister-in-law later observed in a letter that he managed to antagonize every one he came into contact with. Two sets of compositions were apparently in need of such urgent and thorough revision that their files were marked: "*In case of sudden death, burn this.*" (SLIDE 3, SLIDE 4) Thankfully, Bucharoff did not go suddenly, *and* his heirs did not destroy those items. Whether they honored his requests on any other sets of documents, we may never know, but in the case of these two files, their original order has been left undisturbed.

Bucharoff's papers, the other major section of the collection, are arranged in chronological order by category so that major events, extended or significant correspondence with one person or party, as well as general correspondence over the decades are organized to reconstruct as much of the exchanges in the order in which they occurred as is possible.

IV. Biography

(SLIDE 5) Bucharoff is already a figure significant enough to merit an entry in Grove, as well as a page at the Internet Movie Database (though I have yet to trace the provenance of the information provided by a user named “Hup234!”), where he has a brief biography and is listed as an un-credited orchestrator on a number of films, many of which were scored by Erich Korngold.

Bucharoff was born Simon Buchhalter in Kiev in 1881, and is quoted in one news article as saying his family came to the United States when he was 11. A photostatic copy of his marriage record found among the many personal records in his collection says he was a Jewish cantor’s son (SLIDE 6, 7). Clearly, between being a cantor’s son, and the career of brother Isadore which the collection also chronicles, music was of tremendous importance in the Buchhalter household, and Bucharoff had studied the piano in New York with Paolo Gallico and Leopold Kramer. He then studied composition with Stephen Stocker and Robert Fuchs, and piano with Emil Sauer and Julius Epstein at the Vienna Conservatory.

Bucharoff married in 1902, and was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1904. It is not clear what happened to carry him deep into the central United States after study in New York City and travel abroad. In 1907, according to a résumé supplied in his papers, he joined the faculty of the Wichita College of Music (which appears ultimately to have been absorbed into Wichita State University), and quickly became a popular artist and a rising star in the area. (SLIDE 8). Here, having just discussed personal records and news clippings, it is worth noting the utility of several online tools in finding out more about research subjects in the early 20th century: FamilySearch.org, EllisIsland.org, and Google News Archive. (SLIDES 9, 10).

Between 1910 and 1912, he relocated to Chicago, and continued to find success as a pianist and composer, even landing a deal to promote Knabe pianos; this picture (SLIDE 11) was taken from a Knabe brochure. Indeed, his opera *A Lover's Knot* from this decade helped him win the prestigious David Bispham Award in 1925. Still, Bucharoff, whom court documents in his collection indicate had legally changed his last name from Buchhalter to Bucharoff in May of 1919 (though without a stated reason), was convinced he had to go back to Europe to realize his full potential (SLIDE 12).

The outlook appeared very favorable for Bucharoff. His opera *Sakahra* (SLIDE 13), a love story fraught with conflict and startling revelations, was premiered by the Frankfurt Opera in 1924; 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 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. At some point in the 1920s, he also began work on an opera about the Jewish legend of the Golem. (SLIDE 14 – Rabbi Yehuda statue, grave, Altneusynagogue in Prague, other scenery).

For a fleeting moment, Bucharoff seemed poised to take his place as an heir to the great tradition of Western European art music and opera (SLIDE 15), but there began the tale of thwarted destiny that cast a pall over the remainder of Bucharoff's career. Gathering ethnocentric nationalist sentiment and anti-Semitism in a bitter, struggling Germany between the wars conspired to make the country an increasingly inhospitable place. Bucharoff engaged in a

protracted dispute with Steingräber-Verlag over finances related to *Sakahra*; in that vein, a 1923 letter from the librettist, Isabel Buckingham, indirectly refers to an incident in which Bucharoff may have been expected to help pay for the performance or publication of the work.

Some years later, while reminiscing on cross-country trip, Bucharoff penned a summary of the turn of events. He said:

“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.

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 taken on.

Der Golem was another casualty of this affair, and there is no trace of it in the collection, though Bucharoff mentions having finished the vocal score. 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 says 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*.

After returning to the U.S., Bucharoff continued to succeed. 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 (whose collection we also have). (SLIDE 16.) Scene de Ballet was also performed at the Hollywood Bowl under Eugene Goossens. In the early 1930s, he relocated to the Los Angeles area. A general gap in ephemera indicating compositions and performances coincides with the onset of the Great Depression, as Bucharoff turned again to teaching through various organizations. Correspondence with German publishers continued up to an eight-year gap between 1935 and 1943 for obvious reasons; not surprisingly, 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 began working as a music editor and orchestrator for Warner Brothers. IMDB lists Bucharoff as an un-credited orchestrator on such films as *The Big Sleep* and *The Sea Hawk*, along with a number of other films scored by Erich Korngold, who also penned an endorsement of Bucharoff's piano method. Bucharoff himself also mentions having worked on *Of Human Bondage* (1934). 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, there exists an interesting parallel between the story of Bucharoff and that of his better-known colleague Korngold, both of whom 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 several 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, and many of his musical works, such as *Jewel: The Everlasting Man* put forth a vision of a free,

enlightened, and united world overcoming a tyrant. 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 NBC declined to perform one of the works of this nature.

But 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 sit and wait while a formal structure for claiming lost property was established, which finally came with the War Claims Act of 1948. Bucharoff also took up correspondence with Carl Günther, the man at the helm of Hofmeister at the time, even sending aid packages of canned fruit as a gesture of goodwill. After the Second World War, however, it was time for a different mustachioed dictator to stand between Bucharoff and his plans: this time, Stalin. Bucharoff was told his works were in the sector of Germany under Soviet control, and what happened in *die Sowjetzone* stayed in *die Sowjetzone*. Günther explained to Bucharoff that 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 *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.”

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 *Sakhara* premiered. His own writings conveyed a sense of incredulous bitterness, as he explained:

“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!

Perhaps it seemed that after all of the twists and turns of the battles over *Sakahra* and *Der Golem* that any kind of malfeasance was possible, and Bucharoff even accused 20th Century Fox of stealing his ideas for *Jewel* for the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. 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, Warner Brothers had told Bucharoff that they could get *Sakahra* to the screen if he could first get it produced on stage – a tall order.

Finally, in 1966, the government denied the claim. 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." Indeed, all these years later, after so much anguish and effort, one may visit the Steingraber website and find a sadly ironic price for the rental score. (SLIDE 17)

V. Great story, but why is it important?

Another of my favorite aspects of special collections work is that one really gets to know the subject of the collection at hand, and to feel a personal responsibility for the stewardship of their materials and memory. I'm not going to pretend for a minute that I wouldn't like for one of the outcomes of organizing the Bucharoff collection and constructing a publicly available finding

aid to be getting some of Bucharoff's works performed. But there are other benefits beyond a great story and the value of doing right by a forgotten composer.

The organization of the Simon Bucharoff collection greatly expands and updates the information available about him in Grove, including a far more substantial list of works. The primary source documents in the form of scores alongside the correspondence are a treasure trove for original research in history, criticism, composition, and analysis, especially given Bucharoff's propensity for re-working and revising existing compositions, which, thankfully, were not burned or destroyed. In this way and with many other collections, the Music Library's special collections support the educational mission of the University of North Texas by facilitating academic excellence, innovation, and scholarly research in music.

Moreover, Bucharoff did not exist in a vacuum, but is a link, both personally and stylistically, with an impressive lineage of instructors, with American film music in general, and in particular, with Erich Korngold. He is therefore of interest for the context of his career and as a product of his times as well as for his own story. Organizing Bucharoff's collection restores one virtually forgotten piece to a larger puzzle, and paves the way for further inquiry.

VI. What's Next

In the past year, the UNT Libraries have implemented Archon as a new platform for constructing finding aids, coinciding with a general overhaul of the Libraries' website (SLIDE 18).

Internally, Archon provide us with a vehicle for consistency and adherence to best practices in developing finding aids, in accordance with DACS – Describing Archives: a Content Standard, which could be loosely described as being to archives what AACR2r is to cataloging (see also:

Chapter 4 of AACR2r), and which can be found in Cataloger's Desktop. DACS replaces the older APPM standard, Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts.

Also, where each finding aid used to be an island unto itself, they are now all in one place, linked from their respective collections' web pages to a central location, with a consistent and clear hierarchical construction. In addition to Archon's ability to consolidate information, it boasts a remarkable interoperability and ability to integrate with other systems. It can import old finding aids as Comma-Separated Variable files constructed in Excel, and can export MARC records and importantly, XML files according to the standard of Encoded Archival Description (EAD).

The export of MARC records enables us to provide a link from the online public access catalog to the finding aid for users who might not otherwise seek it out, and the export of XML vastly streamlines the process of integrating our holdings with those of Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO) (SLIDE 19), enhancing access to and visibility for the Music Library's special collections.

At the recent Digital Frontiers conference at UNT, keynote speaker Michael Millner, director for the Jack and Stella Kerouac Center for Public Humanities, noted that creating new digital spaces creates new publics who occupy them. Indeed, "if you build it, they will come," but one never knows exactly who will come out of the woodwork upon becoming aware that something exists, as the library pursues a natural extension of its efforts to fulfill those second and third laws of library science: every book its reader, and every reader, his or her book. Hence, every researcher, music lover, and curious member of the public (under appropriate supervision) his or her special collection, and vice versa. The Bucharoff Collection is but one example of the

valuable historical materials and opportunities for original research that the UNT Music Library has to offer (SLIDE 20).