

Life and Work

Leo Kestenberk, today considered one of the most influential music educators and cultural politicians of the 20th century, was an extremely versatile, far-sighted and impassioned pianist, music educator, political advocate for music, and author. For Kestenberk, who was an independent Social Democrat (USPD), music and socialism always constituted an inseparable whole. As a music educator, he was imbued with the era's emerging spirit of educational reform. He believed in the idea of "education for humankind with and through music", and from the start he valued an approach that was "musical and full of life and humanity, above virtuosity and one-sidedness." Throughout his entire life, he strove "to find in music a medium that can affect a person so immediately that he attains a higher sense of oneness within." Nevertheless, Kestenberk was no utopian, but understood brilliantly how to translate his ideas practically and directly into action.



Leo Kestenberk was born on November 27, 1882, in Ruzomberok (then Roszahegy in Hungary), which was called Rosenberg by the German-speaking inhabitants. Four years later, Kestenberk's father, a Jewish cantor, moved with his family to Prague and then to Reichenberg, where he took the position of head cantor at the Jewish synagogue. Leo Kestenberk was seven years old at the time.



Kestenberk's first career was as a concert pianist. His father gave him his first piano lessons and then sent him to Gustav Albrecht, the music director in Zittau, for lessons when he was in his early teens. After he passed the first secondary school examination (O levels), Kestenberk went to Berlin at the age of only fifteen to continue the study of piano with Prof. Franz Kullak. Two years later he was admitted to the Weimar piano class of Ferruccio Busoni, the renowned pianist, music aesthete and composer. The encounter with Busoni was extremely significant for Kestenberk and had a determining influence on the course of his subsequent thinking and action.

Kestenberk played his first concerts in 1900, while completing his military service as a member of the Josefstadt military band. Four years later, at the age of twenty-two, he debuted as a concert pianist with a Liszt programme in his hometown of Reichenberg. In 1908 Kestenberk accepted his first position as a piano teacher at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin. By this time his reputation as a Liszt interpreter was

secure. He soon took on a second position at the Klindworth Scharwenka Conservatory, where he taught a class of budding young female pianists.



That same year he married Grete Kussel, with whom he would have two daughters, Ruth and Rachel. Grete was Kestenbergs spirited and witty partner until the end of his life, and was esteemed by all as an affectionate and talented hostess.

As a committed Social Democrat, Kestenbergs was always engaged both politically and socially. From 1905 until 1933 he organized the well-attended midday concerts for working people at Berlin's Freie Volksbühne. Built by worker's contributions, the theatre soon became a musical centre for concerts at the highest level featuring internationally known interpreters and conductors. The ambitious programmes included compositions ranging from medieval to contemporary music. Kestenbergs later ventured into yet another experiment stemming from his socialist convictions by establishing the Kroll Opera as a people's opera dedicated to modern music.



During World War I, Kestenbergs was the editor of *The Bildermann*, published by Paul Cassirer, a pacifist art magazine for workers that contained literary texts and original lithographs. His lifelong friendships with the visual artists and authors Ernst Barlach, Oskar Kokoschka, Käthe Kollwitz, Max Liebermann, Max Slevogt and Else Lasker-Schüler date back to this period.



In 1918, when Kestenbergs was in his mid-thirties, he was appointed to the Prussian Ministry of Science, Art and Education as an advisor for music policy. This marked the start of a fourteen-year period in office during which he made history with a comprehensive reform of Prussian music pedagogy, the so-called Kestenbergs Reform. On the basis of his book *Musikerziehung und Musikpflege* [The Teaching and Fostering of Music] published in 1921, a regulated, state-certified programme of music instruction for kindergarten, primary and secondary schools was first introduced.

Kestenbergs expanded the scope of the former Academy of Church Music, which was renamed the Academy for Church and School Music. There, secondary school music teachers now received scientific, artistic and pedagogic training and were groomed to teach the subject of "music" (formerly "singing") and to take the place of the old-school singing teachers. With the accompanying introduction of an examination

requirement for teachers of the arts in secondary schools (1922), Kestenberg finally achieved social and financial status for secondary school music teachers equal to that of their other academically trained colleagues. At the same time, Kestenberg established a Seminar for Music Education as part of his reforms at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik [Academy of Music], which became one of the first reform pedagogical training institutes for private music teachers.



Once Kestenberg established a department of music under his direction at the Central Institute for Education and Instruction, it became possible for his pedagogical reforms to have an effect far beyond Prussia's borders. From 1921-1928, the Institute organized eight School Music Weeks (after 1937 they were called Reich School Music Weeks). Since 1955 the [Verband Deutscher Schulmusiker e.V.](#) has continued to organize the event, now called the Federal School Music Weeks, in Germany. A book series Kestenberg launched in 1929, *Die Musikpädagogische Bibliothek* (The Music Education Library), also has endured.

In the politics of his academic and cultural appointments, Kestenberg showed himself to be a judicious and courageous innovator who contributed greatly on a musical level to the fabled glamour of Berlin's "Golden Twenties". He was able to win such entirely different composers as Schreker, Pfitzner and Busoni, Hindemith and Schönberg, for important posts in Berlin. He was instrumental in having the pianists Artur Schnabel and Leonid Kreutzer, among others, hired as professors at the Academy of Music. The eminent conductors Klemperer and Kleiber also accepted appointments and enriched the cultural life of the city.

But the collapse of the Weimar Republic brought about a drastic rupture in Kestenberg's work of reform. As a Jew, an artist and an intellectual, as a social democrat and promoter of modernity, Kestenberg embodied a number of National Socialist concepts of the enemy. He was only fifty years old in 1932 when that Party pressured him into mandatory retirement.



After being maliciously hounded and subjected to physical attacks, Kestenberg left Berlin with his family in 1933 and went into exile in Prague. There he becomes a founder member of the Gesellschaft für Musikerziehung (Společnost pro hudební výchovu, S.H.V.), the forerunner to today's [International Society for Music Education, ISME](#), and directs its department of international relations. The organization's first three international congresses in Prague, Paris and Switzerland took place under his leadership.

In 1938, when German troops occupied Czechoslovakia, Kestenberg was forced to leave Prague. Via Paris, he immigrated to Palestine, today Israel, which became his new homeland. He assumed the post of general manager of the *Palestine*

Orchestra (today: Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra), which had been founded by the violinist Bronislaw Hubermann.



Only after voluntarily retiring from that position in 1945, when he was already sixty-three years old, did Kestenberg return to his music pedagogical activities. He founded the Midrasha leMenchanchim leMusika, a seminar for music teachers in Tel Aviv that still exists today and which he directed until 1952. At the age of seventy, Kestenberg handed over that post to his successor, Dr. Herzl Shmueli.

After 1953, Kestenberg began to suffer from incurable progressive blindness, which greatly restricted his outside activities. He concentrated on piano teaching. In the end, it was his private pupils who profited from his powerful vision of music education and carried it forward in their own work. Some of those pupils have since attained international prestige as pianists and music educators, including Menachem Pressler, Sigi (Alexis) Weissenberg, Avraham Sternklar and Ricci Horenstein.

On January 13, 1962, Kestenberg, by then completely blind, died from angina pectoris at the age of seventy-nine in Tel Aviv.