

In memoriam Menahem Pressler

The name of Menahem Pressler will ever be associated with the famous *Beaux Arts Trio* which he founded 1955 in collaboration with Daniel Guilet (vl) and Bernhard Greenhouse (vc). This ensemble performed over 50 years around the world and became recognized as a performance standard of classical romantic chamber music. Pressler was pupil of Kestenberg in Palestine. Therefore, I tried to get into contact with him while working on the Kestenberg biography. During Pressler's master course at the Villa Musica in Engers 2014, I called his secretary who first responded reluctantly, but when I mentioned the name Kestenberg she immediately became more friendly saying that in this case the maestro would be happy to talk to me. During our phone conversation Pressler was enthusiastic to talk about his beloved and adored former teacher. He expressed great heartiness and gratitude about his relation to the person to whom he owed so much.

Pressler was born 1923 in Magdeburg as Max Pressler, the son of a Jewish draper family from Galicia. His father was a Polish citizen, and therefore the whole family was treated as Polish. In Magdeburg Pressler attended the local elementary school and until 1935 the *Domgymnasium*. Under the Nazi regime he was excluded from that school because of the Nazi race laws (*Rassegesetze*). Therefore, he attended a Jewish private school for three more years. When the situation after the *Reichsprogromnacht* in November 1938 deteriorated for Jewish citizens dramatically, the family was urged to leave the country. They emigrated to Palestine via Italy, and finally arrived in Haifa in 1939. Then they lived in Tel Aviv until the end of the war. Here the parents contacted Leo Kestenberg (the "German professor" as he was always called) who had arrived in Tel Aviv shortly before the Presslers. They employed Kestenberg as piano teacher for their 15-year-old son Max. Since then, both maintained their mutual respect and devotion to one another throughout their entire lives. In his memoirs Kestenberg mentions Pressler as first among his excellent students whose career as pianist he supported and accompanied. Pressler told me that Kestenberg could not really prepare him in terms of stylistic guidance for his participation in the International Debussy Competition in 1946 (San Francisco, USA) where he won the first Prize, but he optimally guided him into music and the musical performance vocation. And he preserved this close relationship until old age.

After his first international success in San Francisco, Pressler stayed in the United States where he changed his first name Max to Menahem. He studied in California, and since 1955 served as Professor at *Indiana University* in Bloomington. Since his fulminant career in

chamber music with the *Beaux Arts Trio* and numerous concert tours and many awards, he started a new career as soloist at the age of 91 which he proudly mentioned. Despite his great success, he continuously maintained that Kestenberg was his honored teacher from Israel to whom he devoted so much time for this interview.

Menahem Pressler has passed away on May 6, 2023, in London. The *International Leo-Kestenberg-Society* loses one of the last contemporary witnesses of an eventful time period. The many tone documents and recordings remain as a legacy of a fulfilled life as an artist and teacher.

Wilfried Gruhn