

Geraldine Mucha

Composer who with her Czech husband survived persecution by the Prague authorities and carried a flame for her artist father-in-law

There were not many expatriate Britons in communist Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s. But the composer Geraldine Mucha was prominent among them. She had met and married the writer Jiri Mucha while he was in exile in Britain during the war and went back to live with him in Prague in 1945.

There they suffered persecution due to their Western links and were caught up in the paranoid atmosphere of Czechoslovak Stalinism. But she worked as a composer with Czech musicians and the couple also strove to sustain the memory of Jiri's father, the artist Alphonse Mucha, whose work ranged from famous Art Nouveau theatrical posters from *fin de siècle* Paris to epic paintings of Slav history.

After a period living back in Britain Geraldine Mucha returned to Prague after the revolution against communist rule in 1989, and was able to see the establishment of a Mucha trust, foundation and museum there, as well as continuing her composing career.

She was born in 1917 to musical parents. Her mother was a singer as was her father whose voice was damaged by gas while fighting in the First World War. He became a professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London and spotted his daughter's musical talent at an early age. "He noticed," she recalled "that I sat at the piano more or less as soon as I could sit up and... started improvising."

She went on to study at the Royal Academy herself. But her life changed dramatically with a chance meeting while visiting Leamington Spa in 1941. Waiting to enter a party she met a young man in a French uniform, who turned out to be an exile from the Nazi-occupied Czech lands fighting with the Allies against Germany. Jiri Mucha was a writer and son of a famous artist, though Geraldine admitted that, at the time, "I had never heard of Alphonse Mucha."

They were married and went to live in Prague after the war, initially with Alphonse Mucha's widow and sister (he had died in 1939 soon after interrogation by the Nazis). But as the communists took control of Czechoslovakia in 1948, those with links to the West were treated with great suspicion. The Muchas were ejected from the family home but refused to emigrate. Jiri was



A poster by Alphonse Mucha, whose work Geraldine refused to part with

eventually accused of espionage, brutally interrogated for months in Prague and then sent to the notorious forced labour camps at Jáchymov, where the communists used political prisoners to mine uranium for nuclear weapons.

Geraldine responded courageously. When the secret police arrived at their Prague flat to confiscate Jiri's property, including many Alphonse Mucha works, her son John recounted how she "said, very bravely, I'm sorry, all



Geraldine composed to take her mind off her husband in jail

this is mine, and I'm a British subject!" The police, who "hadn't expected that... became uneasy" and left without confiscating the art.

The family refused to sell any of the Mucha collection despite their circumstances. For Geraldine, sustaining life with a young son and very little money was often difficult. She edited for a state publishing house while living in the country where food was cheaper and more plentiful. And she composed in her spare time "to take my mind off Jiri in jail".

Her work was varied, ranging from pieces for solo instruments to ballets and song cycles. She often used motifs prompted by her Scottish and Orcadian ancestry, including a suite based on *Macbeth* first performed in Prague in the mid-1960s. Among those performing her orchestral work was the Czech Philharmonic, which recorded her piano concerto.

After her husband was released in the mid-1950s and the political atmosphere relaxed during the 1960s the Muchas began to stage small-scale Alphonse Mucha exhibitions — though much of his work, such as epic depictions of Slav history, had already fallen out of cultural fashion in Czechoslovakia before the war and the post-war communist authorities always regarded him with suspicion if not outright hostility as a "bourgeois" artist.

A successful exhibition at the

Victoria and Albert Museum in London in the early 1960s helped to revive international interest in Mucha's art. But the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress political reform changed the situation again. And when new restrictions were threatened by the communist authorities on the family's ability to travel Geraldine decided to move back to Britain in the 1970s — their son John had already emigrated there.

She lived mainly in the Scottish Highlands, visiting Prague occasionally. Jiri was in due course able to obtain visas to visit them and organise more international exhibitions, especially when the success of one in Tokyo in 1983 alerted the authorities in Prague to the potential hard-currency earnings of a "Mucha boom".

After the "velvet revolution" against communist rule in Prague in 1989 Geraldine returned to live in a place she still regarded as "home". Jiri died in 1991 but she resumed her musical activities and continued with her son to press for greater recognition of Alphonse Mucha in his homeland. After prolonged, often frustrating, negotiation with various bodies, a Mucha Trust and Foundation were established and, working with a Swiss entrepreneur, a Prague museum. She was especially keen to promote Mucha's wider work, not only the Art Nouveau posters which had achieved such global popularity. "Posters weren't his main interest," she pointed out. "He was far more interested in painting."

There were other testing episodes in the last phase of her life, including a claim to rights over part of the Mucha estate brought by a daughter Jiri Mucha had outside marriage, and speculation — rejected by the family — that contacts Jiri Mucha had had with communist authorities and their secret police ultimately amounted to active collaboration with the regime.

Those who met Geraldine Mucha in her nineties were struck, however, by her continued vivacity and energy; she was still composing music and organising for the Mucha cause.

She is survived by her son John Mucha.

Geraldine Mucha, composer, was born on July 5, 1917. She died on October 12, 2012 aged 95

Daphne Slater

Actress who enjoyed leading roles at Stratford in the postwar years and excelled as Jane Austen characters in early TV adaptations

A petite blonde with blue eyes, Daphne Slater was a Shakespearean leading lady at Stratford on Avon before she was 20 and became one of the stars of early television drama, particularly in adaptations from Jane Austen. She might have achieved even more had she not put family before her career and decided to retire early.

The daughter of a civil servant, Daphne Helen Slater was born in 1928 and grew up in Bedford Park, West London. She was encouraged to try for the stage by her mother, who had herself wanted to be an actress. After attending Haberdashers' Aske's School, Slater went on a state scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where she won the gold medal.

Success came quickly. She was spotted by the actress Anna Neagle, given a screen test by Neagle's producer husband, Herbert Wilcox, and cast in *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* (1947), one of a series of light, escapist films starring Neagle and Michael Wilding. Wilcox offered her a three-year con-



Slater as a lonely spinster in *Love Affair*, an ITV Playhouse production, in 1974

tract worth £8,000 but she did not see her future in films and it was cancelled by mutual consent.

Despite very little stage experience, she had been chosen to join the company for the 1947 season at Stratford. Still only 19, she enjoyed a series of lead-

ing roles including Juliet, described by Kenneth Tynan as "excitable and impetuous" in Peter Brook's *Romeo and Juliet*, Olivia in *Twelfth Night* and Miranda in *The Tempest*. A fellow actor in *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* was John Harrison, and they were married

in 1948. The production of *Twelfth Night* transferred to His Majesty's Theatre and she continued her trawl of the classics at the Arts Theatre under Alec Clunes, with plays including *The Cherry Orchard* and Molière's *Tartuffe*. At the Arts, too, she was in the premiere of Christopher Fry's verse drama *The Lady's Not For Burning*. She returned to Molière in *Le Malade Imaginaire*, translated as *The Gay Invalid*, at the Garrick Theatre and played Cordelia in *King Lear* at the Old Vic.

In 1952 Harrison was appointed director of the Nottingham Playhouse and Slater went with him, happy to give up her West End career for £12 a week in regional rep. She said: "I have an old fashioned idea that the husband has to be the breadwinner." She later took time off to bring up their two sons. Although she lit up the Nottingham stage with excursions into Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekhov, she turned increasingly to television where she was an early star of small screen drama. She became a Jane Austen favourite,

playing Harriet Smith in *Emma* (1948), Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1952) and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1960). She had the title role in *Jane Eyre* (1956), with Stanley Baker as Rochester, and played Prue Sarn with the harelip in *Precious Bane*, Mary Webb's saga of rural life in Shropshire after the Napoleonic Wars.

She continued to appear on television into the 1970s but mostly in supporting roles or taking guest spots in series such as *Callan*. She played Mary Tudor to Glenda Jackson's Elizabeth in the BBC drama *Elizabeth R* (1971). She retired in 1975, when she was in her late forties, and spent her later years in Germany and in Switzerland, where she died.

She and Harrison were divorced in 1964 and she later married Frederick Kolmar, an Austrian businessman. He predeceased her and she is survived by her sons.

Daphne Slater, actress, was born on March 3, 1928. She died on October 4, 2012, aged 84