

## **Music during the Nazi persecution of Jewish people**

The prominent role that music –as well as other forms of art and culture, and maybe even more- played during the process of persecution and extermination of Jewish people during World War II is often unknown.

Music allowed people to conserve and protect their identity also in almost impossible conditions of life and in the mean time, as we will explain, it represented the worst aspect of violence and torture that the persecutors could exert on their victims.

At the beginning of the persecution, the Nazi immediately started suppressing all the aspects of Jewish culture, including music. Jews were not allowed to own musical instruments: all musicians and amateur were forced to give all their instruments up to the Nazi invaders and all radio sets were seized. In some countries like Czechoslovakia, where Jewish culture was strongly mixed with the Austro-Hungarian tradition and the disposition to anti-Semitism was less spread, music by Jewish composers, like Offenbach and Mendelssohn, was forbidden only in September 1941: the news bans were on the contrary against all composers who could represent patriotic spirit, like Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček.

At least in the beginning of the war, when Germany still tried to preserve some appearance in order to avoid causing alarm, many Jewish musicians were somehow protected from the worst persecution, considering them, as well as scientists and all famous intellectuals, important people whose disappearing could arouse troublesome interest from other European countries; they were then included in a particular “category” of people, the so-called *Prominenten*, who could benefit from a slightly less brutal treatment and discrimination.

With the intensification of war, discrimination among different “categories” of Jews (and their importance) disappeared, and musicians, as well as all artists and intellectuals, were deported to work and death camps as many as other prisoners.

Those who survived the first selections, though, were to continue their important role of educating and entertain other prisoners. In some case they managed to save some musical instruments during the detention for playing solos and giving life to all kinds of music ensembles, like chamber music ensembles, choirs, classical and jazz orchestras.

As there weren't partitions, in most cases the prisoners played all their repertoire by heart, but this

wasn't a limit in obtaining performances of high level. There are accounts that tell of very complex productions, as for instance operas and cantatas, that could easily stand at the same level of professional productions of European drama. For instance, in the camp of Terezin, the world famous pianist Alice Herz-Sommer, thanks to the finding of an old abandoned grand-piano without legs, after long rehearsals was able to play by heart all the 24 Chopin studies during one single performance, as well as her colleague Edith Steiner-Kraus specialized in Bach repertoire.

In some other cases, as in the camps of Auschwitz with its reputed female orchestra conducted by Alma Rosé, Mahler's nephew, the Nazi allowed these forms of culture and association and let the prisoners buy instruments and also uniforms to establish real orchestras of the camps.

This was indeed a privilege for many prisoners who could save their life and in some way improve their everyday existence, and could give some relief to other detainees, but music could also lead to a particular form of torture and persecution: the ensembles were often forced to play during prisoners' walks, work and even murders, and composers were asked to write special pieces for these horrifying events. This torture could assume even more subtle forms, giving the appearance of some degree of tolerance and humanity by allowing cultural expression like music, and so avoiding the risk of hopeless and desperate riots by the prisoners.

One camp in particular has to be mentioned: the fortress of Terezin (Theresienstadt), a military town sited about 45 miles north of Prague, was intended to host a "ghetto" for the category of Prominenten. Infact it was nothing less than a temporary camp for the prisoners awaiting for transports to death camps, but the Nazi pretended it was a real Jewish model town and used it as a showcase for the International Red Cross inspections, producing in 1944 also a documentary (movie) entitled "Hitler donates a town to the Jews" to be shown to the international community. The camp happened to host most part of the greatest Jewish Bohemian and German composers and musicians of the time, as Pavel Haas, composer, Fritz Weiss, composer, Karel Ančerl, conductor, Karel Bergman, singer and composer, Bedřich Borges, singer, František Domažlický, instrumentalist and composer, Karel Frölich, violinist, founder of the Terezin String Quartet, René Gärtner-Geiringer, pianist, Machiel Gobets, tenor, David Grünfeld, singer, Alice Herz-Sommer, pianist, Bernhard Kaff, pianist and solo in the first recital organized in Terezin, Rudolf Karel, composer, Franz Eugen Klein, conductor, Gideon Klein, pianist and composer, Paul Kling, prodigy violinist, Hans Krása, violinist and composer, author of the opera for children *Brundibar*, Ludvik Kundera, pianist, Egon Ledec, violinist and composer, Wolfgang Lederer, pianist and conductor, Thomas Mandl, pianist and writer, Marion Podolier, singer, Karel

Reiner, composer, Eduard Rosé, cellist, Rafael Schächter, conductor, Edith Steiner-Kraus, pianist, Romuald Süßmann, viola player and member of the Quartet, Karel Svenk, composer, actor and movie director, Carlo Sigmund Taube, pianist, conductor and composer, Heinrich Taussig, violinist and member of the Quartet, Viktor Ullmann, composer and critic, Erich Vogel, Bedřich Weiss, Martin Roman and Heinz Schumann, founders of the jazz ensemble The Ghetto Swingers, Otto Zucker, violinist and engineer.

These are only some of the names of the artists imprisoned in Terezin, without mentioning all the children and the staff involved in the production of the opera *Brundibar*. The piece had been written by Hans Krása on lyrics by Adolf Hoffmeister in 1939 for a government competition which never took place due to the Nazi invasion, and it had been prepared with children of the Prague Orphanage in 1941, but never performed because of Zelenka's (the set designer) and Krása's transport to Terezin. In 1943 most of the children involved in the opera were deported to the fortress too and the composer decided to adapt the piece to the new situation and finally perform it. The plot is centered around two kids, brother and sister, who decide to sing for people passing by in the street to earn some money and buy milk for their ill mother. However, they have to fight against Brundibar, the wicked concertina player, who wants no competitors and can rely on the conniving policeman. Eventually the kids, helped by a dog, a cat, a sparrow and other children, succeed in chasing away Brundibar and earning the money they need. The plot reminds the atmosphere of the ghettos where it was usual to find abandoned or poor children trying to make a living by singing in the street. The opera was performed more than 55 times in Terezin and ended with the deportation of the children and all the musicians involved in the production to the death camp of Auschwitz, where they were nearly all slain. Hans Krása died in Auschwitz too in 1944. Today the opera is often performed introduced by Krása's Overture for a small orchestra, composed during the detention.

Beside *Brundibar*, in Terezin took place many important productions, coordinated by the *Freizeitgestaltung* –a sort of spare time committee- in which took part intellectuals and artists imprisoned. To name some of the productions, from 1942 to 1945 were performed Dvořák's *Biblische Lieder*, Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elias*, Mozart's *Zauberflöte* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, Strauss' *Fledermaus*, Smetana's *Prodaná Nevesta* (about 30-35 times) and *Hubička*, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Puccini's *Tosca*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Haydn's *Schöpfung*, solo compositions of Mozart, Frank, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Paganini, Schubert, Saint-Saëns and many others, and even Verdi's *Requiem*, the most demanding piece in the repertoire. Also new compositions by musicians imprisoned in Terezin frequently took place, but in spite of their common detention experience and cooperation in

shows productions, they never established a new, shared style in composing, but they continued following their previous background.

Most of those artists also shared the way their lives ended, being murdered in Auschwitz after the long detention in Terezin. Only a few of these musician survived and could return to their artistic careers after the war, but a significant part of their composition and production was saved and everyone of them played a fundamental role in promoting the sense of life in the middle of inhumanity and in transmitting this memory to the future.

## References

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