

## Reflections on a concert commemorating the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Dachau

On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1945, the US Seventh Army's 45th Infantry Division reached the outskirts of Dachau. Just before the men of I platoon reached the camp gates, it encountered 35 abandoned box-cars which had arrived several days earlier. The barbarity witnessed by these battle-hardened yet wholly unprepared GIs dwarfed anything they had seen in action, and it scarred them for the rest of their lives. It will be many more years before Dachau is associated with anything other than the cruelty and death that was visited on the camp's inmates. Indeed, outside of Germany's borders few realise that Dachau is actually a town as well as the first Nazi camp.

The ARC Ensemble recently commemorated the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dachau's liberation with a concert in the former ballroom of the historic Schloss Dachau, a hilltop castle with an impressive view of the town and Munich's cityscape. The invitation from the town was both an honour and an acknowledgement of the ensemble's commitment to the recovery of works banned under National Socialism and marginalized by the massive societal dislocation that accompanied it.

The events that commemorate anniversaries like these can never be anything other than solemn and deeply disturbing. Of course there is a glimmer of cheer in that liberation meant the end of Nazism and the beginning of reconstruction and recovery, but anniversaries are usually required to mark a specific point in time, rather than the beginning of a process or a new era, and Germany remains singularly determined to acknowledge the crimes perpetrated in its name.

If the commemoration of Dachau's liberation is a reminder of man's inhumanity, music offers the opposite: the evidence of our capacity to create and share beauty. Those who program memorial concerts usually resolve this apparent incompatibility by offering works that were written in Nazi camps, preferably—and no sarcasm is intended here—by composers who were murdered. The core of this repertoire comprises the music of a largely Czech group of composers who were imprisoned in Terezin and killed in Auschwitz. Terezin is the 18th-century fortress town an hour north of Prague which accommodated a substantial number of Europe's cultural elite. It was famously spruced-up to hoodwink Red Cross assessors, who left the camp vouching for Nazi claims of humanity and tolerance. Among its musical inmates were the composers Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein, Pavel Haas and Hans Krása. Their music, some of which is extraordinary, and a grab-bag of other repertoire, has actually acquired the moniker “Holocaust music;” as if these works possess some kind of defining quality (they don't) which qualifies them as such. In fact the label only indicates their acquired purpose: accompaniments to Holocaust-related events. The now almost mandatory choice of murdered composers is not simply reductionist and unimaginative, it also demeans the importance of these composers and allows the nature of their deaths to define the context, and to some extent the frequency, of their performance.

I am always uneasy about programming memorial concerts, but I knew that I wanted to avoid this doggedly morbid approach in favour of repertoire that examined the broader musical consequences of National Socialism. For musicians and researchers who explore the legacy of composers who were plagued by cultural alienation, artistic indifference and protracted anxiety, the repercussions of National Socialism are as strong as ever. The presenter at Schloss Dachau supported my plan and allowed me unfettered freedom. After several months of considering and then rejecting myriad works and combinations, I settled on four compositions by four very different composers: Mieczyslaw Weinberg, Szymon Laks, Hanning Schröder and Paul Ben-Haim, none a household name, but all possessed of extraordinary musical gifts. While National Socialism had not managed to kill them, it did determine the trajectory of both their lives and their music.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg's works have only found their way to the west in the last ten to fifteen years, most notably with David Pountney's extraordinary production of Weinberg's opera *The Passenger*. Houston Grand Opera

brought the work to The Lincoln Center Festival in 2014 and the ARC Ensemble provided three concerts of Weinberg's chamber music as preludes to its performance. Weinberg (1919 – 1996) was born in Warsaw and studied at the city's conservatory. A fine pianist, he was on track to continue the great tradition of Polish virtuosi like Ignacy Paderewski and Ignaz Friedman. But with the invasion of Poland he fled east, first to Minsk (on foot!) where he enrolled at the conservatory, and two years later, when Hitler broke his non-aggression treaty with the Soviet Union, to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. A number of Soviet intellectuals and artists had been evacuated here, among them the country's pre-eminent actor and theatre director Solomon Mikhoels, a Latvian Jew and Chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Weinberg married Mikhoels' daughter Natalia Vovsi and dedicated his first Violin Sonata to him. This was the work I chose to open the Dachau program.

Weinberg's worst fears were realized when the Polish jazz-trumpeter, Eddie Rosner passed through Tashkent and confirmed that indeed his parents and younger sister had been on transports out of Warsaw (their deaths in the Trawniki camp were verified some twenty years later.) However the three movements of this richly melodic and only occasionally unsettled sonata, reveal little that one would associate with either the anguish and privation Weinberg had experienced over the previous few years, or the Nazi savagery he had witnessed and very narrowly avoided. In fact the composition of the Op. 12 Violin Sonata may well have been something of an intellectual escape: the creation of a traditional work that keeps emotionality at arm's-length and uses relatively neutral material which refers to itself, rather than to any external, psychic narrative. By contrast, the works that Weinberg composed afterwards are far more emotionally explicit, the harrowing conclusion of his *Children's Songs* Op. 13 or the searching slow movement of the Piano Quintet, Op. 18 for example.

After the war Weinberg's connection to Mikhoels put his life in danger once again. Mikhoels was murdered by the NKVD in 1948 on the direct orders of Stalin, and for the next five years security police followed his son-in-law everywhere, the details of his life assiduously noted. Weinberg's eventual imprisonment in early 1953 was mercifully short and he was freed shortly after Stalin's death in March. Weinberg's response to the challenges of the war, emigration and surveillance was typically stoical, and despite everything, he remained grateful and loyal to his adoptive country. He went on to enjoy considerable success and collaborated with the Soviet Union's musical elite. Dmitri Shostakovich, who helped to arrange Weinberg's move to Moscow and who remained a close friend, held him in the highest regard. It is a fascinating exercise to imagine how Weinberg's career might have developed had the course of history run a little differently. While studying at the Warsaw Conservatory, he was offered a place at the Curtis School of Music in Philadelphia. Had Weinberg been able to accept would he have exchanged a career as a pianist for one as a composer? And far away from Eastern Europe how would his music have developed?

Like so many Polish musicians in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Szymon Laks (1901–1983) trained in Paris and was living there when the Nazis invaded. In July, 1941 he was taken to the transit camp at Pithiviers, some 50 miles south of the city and then deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In his stark memoir, *Musique d'un autre monde* (published in 1989 as “Music of Another World”) Laks presents a grim and detailed account of his life as a musician in the Auschwitz orchestra.

Music's considerable power is invariably romanticized and augmented, its beauty and its ability to elevate the spirit fused with an inherent “goodness,” and the power to release the human spirit; to show how art survives even when it is besieged by evil. Although this sort of wishful thinking invariably diminishes the Holocaust's significance and expurgates its barbarity, it remains a seductive route for memorialization, and there is all manner of unquestioning Holo-shlock which provides audiences with miles of redemptive silver linings. Laks, on the other hand, describes how irrelevant music is to the quality of prisoners' lives, and indeed its inability to effect *any* positive change.

Paradoxically it was the *making* of music that helped to preserve Laks' life. Initially assigned to a labour unit and worked to near-collapse, the outlook improved when he passed the orchestra audition. He received new clothes,

extra food and moved to the more comfortable music block. Laks' versatility, his fluency in several languages, and his remarkable arranging skills soon made him the obvious candidate to assume the leadership of the orchestra. Laks was particularly skilled in the orchestration technique known as “odeon,” whereby instrumental flexibility is built into musical scores, allowing all sorts of differently constituted ensembles to perform the same piece. This made it possible for him to instantly re-assign instruments to different musical lines as players were taken ill or perished. Of course in tandem with this constant re-orchestration, Laks was obliged to keep track of his players' health.

According to Laks' biography, a number of camp officers were genuine music-lovers and one or two had substantial practical ability. Recalling the orchestra's regular Sunday afternoon concerts of “light music,” Laks writes: “When an SS-man listened to music, especially of the kind he really liked, he somehow became strangely similar to a human being... at such moments the hope stirred in us that maybe everything was not lost after all. Could people who love music to this extent, people who can cry when they hear it, be at the same time capable of committing so many atrocities on the rest of humanity? There are realities in which one cannot believe.”

Doubtless musicians' privileges increased their chances of survival, but it also fostered resentment among the other prisoners. While Laks roundly dismisses the “healing properties” of music, it is clear that the orchestra provided professional musicians with a discipline and a distraction that was both personal and practical, and which connected them to life before the war.

Laks may well have begun composing his third string quartet before liberation, possibly in Auschwitz itself (and prior to his subsequent transfer to Sachsenhausen and finally Kaufering, a Dachau sub-camp.) It was premiered by the Lespine Quartet on November 25, 1945 in the Amphitheatre Richelieu in Paris and won the National Polish composition prize the following year. Laks arranged it for piano quintet in 1967 and the ARC Ensemble has performed this version on many occasions.

I chose Laks, and this piece in particular, for several reasons, not least because it is an engaging work completed within months of the end of the war. As a cheerful *divertissement* with no apparent connection to camp-life or anything associated with it, the work not only fits Laks' ideas about the separation of life and music, it simultaneously questions the shibboleths about them. However, Laks also composed the haunting vocalise *Passacaille* around the time of liberation. Scored for soprano and piano it is as effective in an instrumental version, and it fits the preconceptions of what music of this period and context *should* sound like, but I wanted the concert to ask more complicated questions. Laks returned to Paris soon after liberation and lived there for the remainder of his life gradually moving away from music to pursue a literary career.

Hanning Schröder's *Musik für vier instrumente in Memoriam* (1957) is one of the most quietly powerful of works written in the shadow of Nazi tyranny. The string quartet is based on the *Moorsoldaten Lied* or “Peat-bog soldiers' Song” which was sung by political prisoners in the Emsland labour camps outside Börgemoor in Lower Saxony. Börgemoor originally housed around 1,000 political prisoners. This slow protest-march was composed in 1933 by Rudi Goguel to lyrics by Johann Esser and Wolfgang Langhoff (respectively a miner and an actor.) German exiles later took the *Moorsoldaten Lied* to England and it also became a staple of the Republican repertoire during the Spanish Civil War and, as “Le Chant Des Marais,” a favourite of the French Foreign Legion. It has since been adapted in a number of European countries and remains a popular protest song. There are scores of recorded versions, notably by Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger.

Born in Rostock in 1896, Schröder married Cornelia (Cora) Auerbach, a Jewish music-teacher, and settled in Berlin. Their “racially-mixed” marriage and leftist inclinations made life perilous. Around Easter, 1944 they were introduced to Werner and Ilse Rewald, a Jewish couple who had managed to escape deportation and were desperate for a place to hide. The Schröders immediately took them in and shared their home until the end of the war. Neighbours were told that the Rewalds had lost their house in an air-raid.

The Schröders were pioneers in the early-music movement and Hanning was a violist as well as a composer. After the war he lived in East Berlin and managed to build a career on both sides of the wall. On April 16, 1978, he was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

Bret Werb, the Music Curator at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and a central figure in the research of music of the Holocaust and exile had suggested *In Memoriam*. I knew the tune of the *Moorsoldaten Lied* but nothing of Hanning Schröder. I was immediately impressed by a recording of the piece, but accessing the printed music was an unanticipated challenge. Issued in 1962, the work is now out-of-print and its publisher, Breitkopf and Härtel, did not have a copy in their archive. European libraries were reluctant to send scans of a work that was still under copyright. Bret found North America's solitary library copy—although he later discovered that he had one too—housed, surprisingly, in the library of the University of Montana, Bozeman. We were sent the parts (there is no score) through an inter-library loan.

The language of *In Memoriam* is more astringent than that of the other works on the program but it appealed to both the ensemble and ultimately to the Dachau audience. Schröder's use of the *Moorsoldaten* melody as the basis of his three-movement quartet has a particular poignancy, mainly because its genesis is not explicit. The drama and implication of the piece only reveals itself once the history of its source is known. This discretion and the work's authenticity explains its power and why so many “Holocaust-inspired” works fail so abysmally.

Memorialization projects are usually full of good intentions, but they often sit on an aesthetic knife-edge, teetering precariously between appropriation and exploitation. The essential question asks whether human tragedy, the Holocaust specifically, can provide the foundation for artistic expression. Intricate questions surround its commercialization, the trivializing of suffering and, perhaps most dangerous of all, the reimagining of historical events. The most successful Holocaust-related works, like Schröder's, are both honest and unselfconscious. They place observation ahead of re-enactment, and they adhere to a narrative based on fact, rather than something that has been imposed for effect. Certainly music with lyrics or a text runs a greater risk of failure.

Arnold Schoenberg's *Survivor From Warsaw* op. 46, for narrator, chorus and orchestra is a work I find increasingly dated and uncomfortable. It describes the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto and the rounding-up of its Jewish inhabitants. On the brink of deportation, the prisoners sing the *Shema Yisroel* (“Hear, O Israel”) the central prayer of Jewish liturgy. In the text, assembled by Schoenberg himself, the narrator declares: “I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing, as if pre-arranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the forgotten creed!” However powerful and redemptive the work, and emotionally disturbing the finale (the piece is often paired with Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup>) one's discomfort grows — and the effect of the piece shrinks — with the realization that this choral rendition of the *Shema* is an early manifestation of Holocaust re-imagining. While there is clear evidence that individual prisoners who were about to be put to death took refuge in the *Shema*, certainly any religious Jew would have, the expression of collective moral triumph in the face of extermination, replacing the reality of unalloyed terror and anguish, becomes progressively less convincing with the passage of time.

Given the work of the ensemble, I thought it was critical to include a composer who could represent the German-Jewish musicians who had fled Hitler's Reich. Paul Frankenburger was born in Munich in 1897 where his father Heinrich (or “Haim”) was a prominent lawyer and a central figure in the city's liberal Jewish community. His mother, cosmopolitan and assimilated—there were a number of Christian converts in her family—belonged to a prominent banking family. Frankenburger's studies at the city's Akademie der Tonkunst were interrupted by World War I, and like thousands of other German-Jews he joined the army, serving in an anti-aircraft unit on both the French and Belgian fronts. His professional life began as an assistant at the Munich Opera during the tenures of Bruno Walter and Hans Knappertsbusch and was followed by a

conductorship at the Augsburg Opera. Like many musicians of his day, Frankenburger was an all-rounder: an accomplished pianist, conductor, choral coach and composer. In 1932 the new intendant of the Augsburg Opera, an enthusiastic Nazi, fired all its Jewish staff members. This sealed Frankenburger's decision to leave Germany, and by late 1933 he had emigrated to British-mandated Palestine and changed his name to Ben-Haim. He soon adapted to a new life in Tel Aviv and gradually forged a very personal style that combined the rigor of his European training with the stark power of the Hebrew language and the folk traditions of the Middle-East. Again one wonders how his music would have developed had he emigrated to America or England instead.

Ben-Haim's Piano Quartet Op. 4 was completed in Munich during the summer of 1921, when the idea of forced emigration would have been unthinkable. The manuscript of the quartet is part of the Ben-Haim archive in Jerusalem's National Library and had remained unpublished and unplayed until the ARC Ensemble's performance of the work in late 2012. Its previous performance had been a German broadcast in July, 1932, eighty years earlier. The Dachau performance would be the first in Germany since then. Following the concert it was enormously gratifying to have a reviewer in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* acknowledge the significance of this: “[The Piano Quartet] has belonged for a long time on the Dachau Castle Concert podium. How nice that it was able to make the leap into live performance [...]”

One has to sit through a program to appreciate whether it actually works. The one we had assembled for Dachau seemed to, sort of... Schloss Dachau was filled to capacity with an audience of around 500 and it wasn't the usual grey brigade. In fact many of the attendees were relatively young. It is difficult to imagine a similar-size audience of any age attending a small-town subscription concert of unknown chamber music in North America. And a special memorial concert would need a major publicity and PR initiative to succeed. But this is part of a much larger discussion involving a constellation of issues including arts-funding, music-education and cultural tradition.

But for me the most intriguing aspect of the experience was the audience's response to the concert. One of the newspaper reviews described the program as “emotionally weighty.” But, apart from Schröder's *In Memoriam*, I had purposely avoided works with obvious Holocaust connections. There were no contemplations on cruelty and death, no songs with graphic texts. A standard program of string quartets by Beethoven, Schubert and Bartok would have been far more emotionally weighty. And yet the context of the concert had coated my choices with associations that had transformed their meaning and deepened their seriousness. Or had listeners heard elements of which I was unaware; picked up connections that I had failed to recognize?

The audiences who had heard performances of the Laks Piano Quintet during the ensemble's tour to Poland had whooped and stamped their feet. In Poznan the work received an extraordinary mid-concert ovation. The Quintet's most striking aspect is its folkloric high-spirits, and the occasional melancholic moments are many miles away from expressions of existential trauma. To be honest, I've often thought that with the right sort of visual accompaniment the quintet's rather kitschy third movement could work well as a chocolate commercial. And it was this thought that really unlocked a rather obvious answer.

During concerts, especially those of the ARC Ensemble, my own attention tends to focus on details of performance; on balance, cohesion, intonation and on enjoying music which has become a familiar and an important part of my life. When audiences attend “regular” concerts without any imposed associations they bring their own images, memories and associations. They are free to listen to the music's construction and development; to impose an independent visual narrative, or to simply drift in and out of engagement. A concert such as the one in Dachau, which is framed by a clear purpose and context, means that *anything* one chooses to perform is primed for a pre-determined set of historic associations: a conglomeration of memories, of images, stories, films and documentary footage. This symbiotic relationship between music and picture has been part of Hollywood since the talkies and it is not unusual to have music that is antithetical to image (and vice versa): pastoral music over dystopian wasteland or bleak threatening accompaniments to humdrum domestic scenes;

the conflict sets up all sorts of disjunct expectations.

So perhaps one should resign oneself to the incompatibility of Holocaust commemoration and musical programs. Perhaps there is simply no escaping that whatever is played will end up being “emotionally weighty.” Of course it is always helpful to hear a piece of music with some kind of cultural and biographical context, but of all the arts music has the sponge-like ability to both draw and attach memories and associations to it, and to elicit an emotional response with a handful of notes. It is that power that made it so important to the Third Reich and which continues to invest it with so much meaning seventy years on.

Simon Wynberg, November 2015