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The sounds of Theresienstadt live on

• By BARRY DAVIS

Anyone with even a modicum of maturity or hard-earned street smarts knows there is little point in letting their thoughts stray too deeply into “if only” or “what if” scenarios. But pondering what might have been if, for example, the life of someone in particular had not been cut short by some tragic event, is only natural.

That is certainly relevant when it comes to some figure of proven talent who managed to chalk up notable achievements, brevity of life span notwithstanding. Viktor Ullmann is a prime example of that.

Ullmann was a piano and composer who hailed from Silesia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in a region which is now divided between Poland and the Czech Republic. He was born in 1898 and perished just 46 years later in Auschwitz after two years at the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The fact that his father converted to Christianity shortly before Ullmann's birth, of course, did not sway the Nazis, nor did the fact that Ullmann Sr. had been a high-ranking army officer in World War I and was even awarded the title of baron.

This year marks the 120th anniversary of Ullmann's birth, and next week (December 10-13) the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance (JAMD) will host the School of Form project. The four-day event, which is sponsored by the Governor of the southern Austrian state of Carinthia, Peter Kaiser, former Austrian president Heinz Fischer and by head of the Carinthia parliament Reinhart Rohr, is devoted to the life and life work of Ullmann. It will take in lectures in English and Hebrew, master classes and concerts about, and featuring items, taken from Ullmann's broad swathe of compositions across a range of styles and formats.

The tribute is the brainchild of Herbert Gantschacher and Zvi Semel.

GANTSCHACHER IS an author, and theater and opera director and producer from Carinthia, who has devoted many years to researching Ullmann's oeuvre, published a book about him called *Viktor Ullmann – Witness and Victim of The Apocalypse*, and helped to present some of his works to the public worldwide. The latter include the anti-war opera *The Emperor of Atlantis* or *The Disobedience of Death*, which Ullmann worked on from 1917 to 1944, taking him from the heart of World War I to the depths of Theresienstadt. Gantschacher pro-



ZVI SEMEL (left) and Herbert Gantschacher devised the tribute to pianist Viktor Ullmann. (Yonatan Dror, Hans Hochstoeger)



duced performances of the opera at Theresin (aka Theresienstadt) in 1995, and at the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC three years later, with several European dates in between. Semel, who serves as head of the JAMD Vocal Department, also has a long academic association with Ullmann's work and part of his PhD thesis addresses songs penned by Ullmann.

The connection with the southernmost state of Austria is a little tenuous, but the official support is no less appreciated, with three professors from the Mozarteum University in Salzburg – Thérèse Lindquist, a pianist who specializes in lieder, Wolfgang Pillinger who teaches composition, and violin and chamber music professor Annelie Gahl – also in the JAMD lineup.

As said, Ullmann served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War II, largely as a musician and composer, but also as an artillery observer, and he was stationed in Carinthia. As luck would have it, 62-year-old Gantschacher is a keen road cyclist, which brought him close to the late composer's old military stomping ground.

“I live near the trenches of World War I in the south of Austria,” he explains. “It is an area with mountains, and I know the area very well because I have been cycling there for more than 30 years. I found all the places where Ullmann was in World War I.”

GANTSCHACHER'S INTEREST in the late composer began many years ago, when he was still at high school.

“There was a television series about the Holocaust,” he recalls. “It was the first time the Austrian people heard about Terezin. I didn't know about it before that.”

Terezin was a concentration camp in then-Czechoslovakia. It was used as a propaganda ploy by the Nazis to show the rest of the world how well they treated the Jews. Despite the terrible physical conditions, the camp prisoners enjoyed a rich cultural life, with concerts and lectures and classes for children. In fact, it served as a sort of transit camp, with the inmates generally spending up to two years there, before being sent to various extermination sites, including Auschwitz. Ullmann arrived there in 1942, and during his two years there he produced a rich body of musical work, including at least 23 compositions – there may have been more which were lost – taking in opera, chamber works and cantatas.

Gantschacher was fascinated by the fact that Jewish artists were able to maintain their creative lives, albeit for only a limited period, under the Nazi regime.

“That was interesting for me,” he notes. “That meant they worked in the situation of a concentration camp, as an artist.” Years later, Gantschacher was in a position to spread the word of Ullmann's genius to the world, and present the general public with some

of his creations.

“I was interested to put this opera [The Emperor of Atlantis] on the stage.”

The original ensemble, in Theresienstadt comprised 15 musicians, and Gantschacher used the same size of group, with almost identical instruments, for his own productions.

The name of the JAMD program references Ullmann's observation about his enforced conditions in the concentration camp and how that, in fact, helped to focus him on his creative efforts. In one of the last texts Ullmann wrote before being sent to his death at Auschwitz, he mused about Goethe's “live the moment, live in eternity” ethos, referencing “the enigmatic meaning of art.” The composer observes, “Theresienstadt was and is for me a school of form,” resonating Goethe's belief that “form” replaces “substance” in certain circumstances.

As there was little in the way of material in the concentration camp – often Ullmann struggled even to find scraps of paper to jot down his sheet music – he was forced to focus on the essence of his art.

“Here is the true master school,” Ullmann writes, “If one sees, like [Goethe contemporary poet and philosopher Johann] Schiller, the secret of the work of art in it: the substance through the form – which is probably the mission of the mankind in general, not only of the aesthetic, but also of the ethical mankind.”

Gantschacher also delved into Ullmann's life before his incarceration.

“I discovered that Ullmann used his personal experience during World War I in writing his opera *The Emperor of Atlantis*. He used it in the text of the libretto, and he used military music from the war. He wrote music for the entertainment of the soldiers.” Some of the military jargon also found its way into the opera. “Ullmann was a soldier. He was a military observer and wrote music in his spare time,” Gantschacher explains. “The opera starts with the words, ‘Hello hello,’ and every observer, when they talk on the telephone, has to start his conversation with ‘Hello hello.’”

SEMEL'S OWN path to Ullmann's work began quite a few years ago, and was fueled by both artistic and personal interest.

“I wrote a paper for my bagrut [high school matriculation] on the vocal music produced at Theresin,” he notes. “My mother was a Holocaust survivor from Budapest and she told us children lots of stories of her experiences. I read lots of books about the Holocaust.”

The teenager took the topic very seriously, even contacting survivors of the concentration camp to ask them about life, and music, there. Fast forward 30 years, and Semel returns to some of the survivors who were still alive, to consult them about his doctoral thesis, which references the large body of work that Ullmann

produced at Theresienstadt.

“He was the most active musician at the camp,” says Semel. “In his two years there he wrote more music than he did in his whole life prior to that. You wonder how, in such circumstances, someone could be so creative.”

Semel believes that part of that is down to Ullmann's own philosophical take on life.

“He followed anthroposophy, and I think that helped him a lot.”

Anthroposophy is a formal educational, therapeutic, and creative system established by late 19th- and early 20th-century Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, which sought to use mainly natural means to optimize physical and mental health and well-being.

“The school of thought believed in the eternity of the soul,” Semel continues. “That, I'm sure, helped Ullmann in such terrible circumstances.”

Semel has no doubt that, had Ullmann survived, he would have been recognized as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century.

“He embodies a fascinating fusion of the influences of [Austrian-American composer Arnold] Schoenberg and Czech composer and music theorist Alois] Haba but, on the other hand, he did not follow in their path. He was also keenly aware of tonal Western music. He created a new, unique, musical language that melded tonal and atonal music. That produces a rich musical language, which is very precise with clear structures and forms.”

Ullmann was also very much a man of his times, and was open to “extraneous” influences, such as jazz and Jewish music.

Semel feels it is high time we gave Ullmann his due, and hopes the JAMD will help to right that.

“I have thought, many times, that the Nazi intent to not only murder the Jews but also to erase any trace of the culture, almost succeeded in Ullmann's case. Most of his papers and works he wrote before Theresin no longer exist. Also some of his music is difficult to digest and it is only in the last few decades that people have begun to research and perform his work. People have said that all sorts of composers, had they not died in the Holocaust, would have become famous and universally appreciated. In Ullmann's case I have no doubt about that.”

All events are free. For more information: (02) 675-9911 and <https://www.jamd.ac.il/>