

## Music in Theresienstadt

At the end of 1941 the small eighteenth-century garrison town of Terezín, also known as Theresienstadt, was transformed into a re-settlement camp to sequester Czechoslovakia's Jews. By 1942 the town's original population had been forced out to make room for a further influx of Jews from Austria, Germany, Holland, and Denmark. Living conditions were dire, with as many as 60,000 crowded into town whose prewar population had been 7,000. Privacy was non-existent, food was in short supply, and, disease – inmates were forbidden any medication – was rampant. Over the course of three-and-a-half years over 30,000 died there and for those who survived there was the ever-present threat of deportation to the “East” because Theresienstadt was in fact a holding pen for the work and death camps in Poland, the Baltic States and Belarus. Of the roughly 140,000 who entered Theresienstadt nearly 90,000 left on transports.

Theresienstadt was unique among the camp environments during the Holocaust. As a ghetto, the inmates did not wear uniforms, did not have shaved heads or tattoos, and there was a mixture of old and young, male and female, even entire families, although husbands and wives and the teenaged boys and girls were housed in separate facilities. Its Jewish population was diverse and included both orthodox and reform Jews, as well as Protestant or Catholic converts, atheists, socialists, communists, Zionists, and committed assimilationists. Among its inmates were prominent academics, scientists, artists, writers, actors, and musicians, a calculated propaganda ploy to present Theresienstadt as a “model camp,” a self-governing “city for the Jews” with all the embellishments of an effervescent cultural life. This was the image presented to the world in the infamous inspection by a committee of the International Red Cross in June 1944. What these inspectors saw was a carefully choreographed Potemkin village, a façade for the Nazi's brutal system of extermination.

The bitter irony remains that in Theresienstadt there was indeed a remarkable flowering of cultural life between 1942 and 1944, involving concerts, opera performances, theater and cabaret, lectures, and literary soirees – in short, a range of events that reflected the enormous diversity and creativity of the camp's population. Moreover, the record of this activity is astonishingly detailed with a rich body of works that document how internees responded to an environment of existential dread.

Music played a central role in the ghetto's cultural life, thanks in part to the extraordinary number of gifted composers and performers, but also to a sophisticated and appreciative audience that included many gifted amateurs. As result, music in Theresienstadt largely mirrored pre-war musical tastes and styles, albeit adapted to new circumstances and contexts. For some, music served as diversion or escape; for others a means of reinforcing religious, ethnic, national, or class identities, or simply forging group solidarity through collective music-making. Preserving a sense time and memory became precious tools of survival – to connect with the past or imagine a future provided a means of coping with the present. Any or all of these responses were acts of resistance, whether passive or overt to the dehumanization of an inhuman environment. Music, then, was a means of holding on – to one's own identity, to family, community, to humanity, and to life.

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Children were the lifeblood of Theresienstadt. They represented the future and their well-being and survival were of paramount importance. Although education was prohibited, there were creative activities in art, poetry, creative writing, music, and theater, most memorably in the fifty-five performances of Hans Krása's opera for children, *Brundibár*. Among those who devoted themselves to the camp's children was **Ilse Weber**, who worked in the children's infirmary. Weber, a well-known author of children's books before the war, penned numerous poems in Theresienstadt – many set to her own melodies – that are some of the affecting evocations of life in the camp. Of the 15,000 children sent to Theresienstadt, only around 10% survived the war.

**Carlo Siegmund Taube's** “Ein jüdisches Kind” on a text by his wife **Erika Taube**, is the only composition by Taube that survives. Like Weber's “Wiegala” this is a lullaby, though with a distinctly Hebraic inflection. Here Weber's gentle melancholy gives way to tragedy with the unmistakable implication that any Jewish child in Europe, “a stranger in every town,” is doubly homeless. There was tension in Theresienstadt between Zionists and assimilationists over the notion of “homeland” and Jewish identity. **Gideon Klein**, an enormously gifted pianist and composer, was thoroughly assimilated but also fluent in Hebrew, as we see from his sensitive arrangement of a popular lullaby by Shalom Charitonov and Emanuel Harussi. **Viktor Ullmann**, on the other hand, had been raised a Catholic and later embraced the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. Nonetheless, in Theresienstadt he set both Hebrew and Yiddish texts, including “A Mejdle in die Jöhren”.

Ullmann was a well-established composer before the war. He had studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna in 1918 and 1919, but his own warmly expressive musical language is closer to that of Mahler and Berg. After being interned in Theresienstadt in 1942 he quickly assumed a leading role in the camp's musical life as a conductor, performer, organizer, critic, and director of the Studio for New Music. During his two years in Theresienstadt, Ullmann was surprisingly productive, completing over two dozen works, including the opera *The Emperor of Atlantis*. He viewed the camp's musical culture as a form of spiritual resistance, writing that “our will to create culture was as strong as our will to live.” “Säerspruch” is the second of three songs on texts by Conrad Ferdinand Meyer completed shortly before his deportation to Theresienstadt.

**Hans Krása**, born in Prague, studied composition there with Alexander Zemlinsky and with Albert Roussel in Paris. Back in Czechoslovakia he attained distinction as a composer and during the first years of the German occupation, was active in the anti-fascist activities of the Hagibor Jewish orphanage, for which he wrote the children's opera *Brundibár*. After he was transported to Theresienstadt in August 1942, Krása became the head of the music section of what H. G. Adler called, “the amorphous little world forced on the Jews” with the “painful misnomer ‘recreational activities’ (*Freizeitgestaltung*).” In addition to revising *Brundibár*, Krása wrote a handful of instrumental and vocal works in Theresienstadt, but his op. 4 cycle of songs, which center on themes of love and nature, were written in 1925. In this music one can hear traces of Krása's study in Paris, as well as the lingering influence of the more chromatic style of

his teacher Zemlinsky.

If the music of Ullmann and Krása betray international influences, the music of **Pavel Haas**, who studied composition with Leoš Janáček, is distinctly Czech in character. He was among the first to be sent to Theresienstadt in December 1941, where he suffered from severe depression. With the encouragement of his fellow musicians, among them Gideon Klein, he gradually returned to composition. Among his finest works are his four songs on Chinese texts drawn from the Czech-language collection *New Songs from Ancient China* by Bohumil Mathesius. These songs, written between February and April, 1944, represent a well-integrated cycle whose over-arching theme is a longing for a distant home. In the first song, “My home is there,” Haas incorporates a motive from the St. Wenceslas chorale, an unambiguous marker of Czech nationalism. The somber mood of the cycle is lightened by the more sanguine tone of the second song.

By far the most popular songs in Theresienstadt were the coffee house and cabaret tunes that combine nostalgia with wishful thinking, though not without heavy doses of irony and cynicism. **Felix Porges**, a lawyer by training, contributed to the enormously popular cabaret, *Let You Laugh with Us* performed during the summer of 1944. “Ich weiss bestimmt, ich werd dich wiedersehn!” by the Czech composer **Adolf Strauss**, veils the actual circumstances of Theresienstadt with a sentimental longing to recapture past happiness in an undetermined future. Without a doubt the star of the Theresienstadt cabaret scene – both as a composer and a performer – was **Karel Švenk**, whose wickedly satirical cabaret, *The Last Cyclist* was banned after its dress rehearsal. Švenk contributed numerous sketches and songs, the most popular being “Všechno jde!” (Everything Goes), also known as the Terezín March. Its message urges aggressive good cheer and solidarity to power through “cruel times.”

A related category are those original songs which fit new texts to much-loved tunes, thus juxtaposing nostalgic memories with present indignities. Thus “Komm mit nach Varaždin” (Come with me to Varazdin) from Emmerich Kálmán’s operetta *Gräfin Mariza*, becomes “Ja, wir in Terezín” (Yes, we in Terezín) with its sardonic descriptions of life in the camp. Much the same holds for **Walter Lindenbaum**’s reworking of the 1932 Hermann Leopoldi-Peter Herz hit “In einem kleinen Café in Hernals” and **Leo Strauss**’ interpolated texts into the song, “Drunt im Prater ist ein Plazerl.” The most explicit example of political resistance is the bitter re-working of Schumann’s “Die alten bösen Lieder,” the final song from his *Dichterliebe* cycle, by a certain **Kopper** (otherwise unidentified) in which a shuttered church (a mere stone’s throw across the town’s central square from the SS headquarters where prisoners were interrogated and tortured) serves as a symbol of this now godless town.

All of the Theresienstadt composers on this program were murdered soon after their deportation to the “East,” but it would be doing their lives an injustice to relegate their music to a victims’ ghetto. These works are a surviving testimony to once vibrantly creative human lives that are best honored by hearing, enjoying, and being moved by what they wrote in response to horrors we can scarcely imagine.

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