



Michael Beckerman

The distinguished American musicologist, world-class expert on Czech music, Professor Michael Beckerman wrote a short study for the new issue of the Newsletter which focuses on certain aspects of the Terezín composers' music research.

## Why Study the Music of Terezín?

### Introduction

Once we get a hold of a research project we are somewhat like ants, rarely stepping back and asking deep and hard questions about why we are doing it, what our motivations might be, or even whether it is really important. Mostly, it is enough of a chore for us to sustain the momentum necessary for completing research projects. I thought, however, in this case, I would use Lubomir Spurny's kind request for a short bit of writing for the newsletter as a pretext for considering some of the reasons why studying the music of Terezín is important, at least to me.

### 1. Nazis, History and Propaganda

If creating propaganda involves the either the distortion of reality, or the selective use of it for explicit polemical and manipulative purposes, then writing what we call "history," might be considered the attempt to undermine such a process. If propaganda is the poison, history then might be considered the antidote. To this end I might mention the lines that virtually open Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*, when he presents the "live" speech of an SS guard saying: "However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you." So, some of us see our task in direct and forceful opposition to

that statement: they have not won the war; people are available to bear witness; there are certainties and evidence does remain. The act of studying this music refutes and shames the perpetrators, and all others who would try to manipulate history for their own ends. It goes without saying, however, that this presents a daunting, and even frightening task for a researcher. The past is a morass: how can one ever claim to be getting it right? There is no easy answer, except that one must continually generate, test and reject hypotheses, and practice the absolutely highest level of precision, skepticism, self-scrutiny and honesty as one investigates. And we may add that Terezín research presents all kinds of challenging problems in method, with its mix of "lost" and "found" documents and scores, survivor testimony, with new (and sometimes contradictory) information emerging continually, each bit of which may overturn as cherished hypotheses.

### 2. Terezín and the Limits of Musical Expression

One of my own particular fascinations with the music of Terezín involves what I call the search for the "limits of musical expression." We are continually told that music is supposedly good at certain things like "expressing emotions" and bad at such things as communicating concrete aspects of reality. And yet in Terezín, particularly in the summer of 1944, in the atmosphere of the beautification campaign, the Red Cross visit, the shooting of the propaganda film and the impending transports, the atmosphere was ripe for composers to try to do what their counterparts in the fine arts had already done: expose the camp as a sham and a Potemkin Village. So, we may ask, whether Gideon Klein's String Trio, with its use of the song "Ta kněždubská věž," invoking textual images of towers, violence and farewell; its allusion to passages from *Kindertotenlieder* (there are dead children here...), *Asrael*, Schubert's "Gretchen" ("my heart is heavy") Verdi's Requiem and Janáček's 2nd String Quartet; and its "Burlesca" finale, is a creation of extreme circumstances. In other words, are Klein and some of his colleagues actually using music to do things music is not usually called upon to do, indeed, something it is not supposed to be able to do, which is to be a concrete witness to a great crime?

Needless to say, this is also an extremely treacherous question, for if Klein is “just” trying to write a great piece of music, who are we to weigh it down with such a portentous and horrific back story? On the other hand, if Klein, as it sometimes seems, is using his last moments as a gifted creator, to tell us something explicit about his surroundings, we had better listen carefully. But asking such questions is not merely confined to Terezín, but raises what I believe are profound questions about what music is capable of doing, who says so, and why. The fact that we can never come to an absolute conclusion about such matters also makes it worthwhile pondering, because uncertainty is always present in the study of music and history.

### 3. Terezín as Program for the Works

Another reason I study this music is because it moves me in a particular way due to its fraught origins. I realize that “moves” is a highly non-technical term, and possibly reeks of bourgeois aestheticizing (a charge leveled against this music by H.G.Adler and others). But the act of engaging an art that moves us--however open the idea may be to criticism and possibly even caricature--is for many of us, one of the primary reasons to be alive. There is something beyond analysis that happens when we encounter works written in such a time and place; even if our knowledge of that time and place is imperfect. As a small example to explore this point, I once presented Klein’s Trio in a church in Dresden. One side of the audience got program notes, detailing the work’s relationship to the camp and the Holocaust broadly; the other side got nothing. The first group, when interviewed after the performance, agreed that this was “one of the great tragic works of the 20th century”; the second group thought it was “a very nice folksy piece.” Considering the power we often ascribe to the power of “the music itself,” it comes as a surprise that our views of composition can be so much transformed by the information available to us. But there is no doubt, to put it a bit too bluntly, that Terezín functions as a “program” for the music there composed, and that this is powerful and transformative.

### 4. Can’t Music Just Be Music?

All music is composed under circumstances of one kind or another, so an additional reason to study the music of Terezín is because one might come to believe that “Terezín,” is best understood as the home of but another compositional school, like “The Mighty Five” in St. Petersburg, “Les Six” in Paris, or Darmstadt, a place where a talented, impassioned and quite diverse group of composers had close associations of various kinds over several years and composed important works. Just as not all “Czech” music need be understood in terms of its “Czechness”—in fact doing so would be provincial—not all the music of Terezín needs to be understood in the shadow of the gas chambers; it’s part of the broad current of European musical com-

position. An only slightly cynical view of composers as “self-absorbed people with ears,” would further argue that musical thinkers are always in search of anything they can use to create works of richness and power. Thus the conditions in Terezín, possibly as articulated by Ullmann in his infamous “Goethe and Ghetto,” actually provided a great deal of inspiration and novel experience which allowed The Terezín School to create important compositions whose significance is not related necessarily to their place of origin.

### 5. The Challenges and Politics of Representation

A final reason to study the music of Terezín is the challenges it raises in terms of representation. How should we present this music? Although I have illustrated how a “contextual” presentation (with the Klein Trio) can create powerful effects, are we always and forever bound to tell such stories, and are there ethical issues involved in whether we do or not? Another question involves issues of performance practice. Does one play a composition differently if one knows the composer was transported to Auschwitz a week after composing it? Does the designation “Con gran espressione” mean the same thing in a Terezín piece as it does in Chopin or Beethoven? Should one take into account, somehow, the tragedy of the situation in the choices one makes about such things as tempo and accentuation, or is incorporating “the Holocaust” into one’s performance really an invitation to melodramatic tastelessness? Should we simply forget about the back stories for a while, or rather does ignoring them represent a kind of moral cowardice? These, once again, are questions not easily answered, but to me, questions that need to be asked as part of larger inquiries into our relationship with musical sound.

### 6. The Terezín Audience

My enumeration would be incomplete without speaking of the audience. For all the reasons discussed above, the richness, the challenges, the special circumstances which gave rise to this body of work, one almost always encounters spectators who are in a heightened state of concentration. My experience producing concerts and performing the music myself is of people who listen deeply and thoughtfully, who are willing to ask difficult questions themselves, and who seek to penetrate into the spirit of these compositions from many angles. Some may seek emotional catharsis, others may listen intently for snippets of subversive patriotic songs, and still others will focus on theatricality or abstract design. Further, this music is of broad interest to people both inside and outside the “classical music” world, making it both rare and valuable.

### Conclusion

Well, Lubomir asked for a short article, and this has possibly gone on too long. These six overlapping cate-

gories represent a personal view. No doubt other investigators, analysts, scholars and performers have additional reasons for their interest, all of which are valid. To me, investigating the musical life and creations of Terežín, as well as the personalities and activities of the composers, represents one of the most significant areas of study in music, and certainly among the most challenging—and exciting—in our profession.

## FORUM

### • 20th April, 2018

Lubomír Spurný participated at the International Musicological Conference in Ljubljana with his lecture on *Opera in Terežín (1942-1944): Contribution to the history of the Opera*.

### • 14th May, 2018

The Czech Radio Vltava station broadcasted a program with Vojtěch Blodige, Tomáš Kraus and Lubomír Spurný. The guests of the author of the program, Simona Kostrhůnová, talked, among other things, about the activities of the newly established Terežín Composers' Institute. (<https://vltava.rozhlas.cz/institut-terezinskych-skladatelu-7205981> [12 Aug 2018])

### • 21st - 23rd May, 2018

The students of the Musicological Seminars of the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University visited the town of Terežín and the Small Fortress of Terežín. The excursion included a visit to the Terežín Memorial archive and was followed by a discussion of the themes of the diploma theses.

### • June 2018

The signing of a contract with the Bärenreiter Prague publishing house for the first issue of The Works of Terežín Composers editorial series. Urtext edition of Pavel Haas' String Quartet No. 2, „From the Monkey Mountains“, op. 7 (1925) will be prepared by Mr. Ondřej Pivoda, the curator of the 20th-century collections at the Department of History of Music at the Moravian Museum Brno.

### • July - August 2018

The Terežín Composers' Institute participates in the preparations for the first annual music festival *Everlasting Hope* (19 - 26 Aug, 2018)

## SURVEY

We asked the pianist Karel Košárek and the violinist Jan Schulmeister (Wihan Quartett), the two artists who will perform at the *Everlasting Hope* music festival, what are their experiences with the compositions of the Terežín authors. They were well aware of the general fact that the works tend to be associated with the troubled fates of their creators. Such compositions are always especially attractive for visitors of the concert. The biographical peripetia of the authors are transferred to the works that inadvertently becomes sounding biographies of the composers. It is an unusual effect that works well, for example, in Mozart's *Requiem* and Beethoven's and Schubert's compositions. Similarly, it works for the composers connected with the Theresienstadt ghetto. However, we must not be too perplexed by the fact that public opinion very often includes composers who have never been through the Ghetto among the Terežín authors. Explanation is at hand: These authors did not escape the collective fate of the Jews. They are united by the theme of war that tragically concluded their life and work.



**Jan Schulmeister  
(violin):**

„Our first encounter with the chamber music of Erwin Schulhoff and Viktor Ullmann is relatively recent. It happened in October 2016. With regard to our many years of artistic activity, this is really quite a late meeting (Editor's note: Wihan Quartet was founded in 1985.)

We received an offer from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague to record Schulhoff's works. They impressed us already on the first rehearsal. In the case of Schulhoff's *Fünf Stücke für Streichquartett* (Five Pieces for String Quartet) from 1924 which were dedicated to Darius Milhaud, it is no surprise. The world-renowned Schulhoff attracts listeners mainly through the compositional perfection, musical joy associated with dance rhythms, tasteful irony and modern elegance. Ullmann's single movement String Quartet No. 3 composed in Terezín is naturally of different character. The author's only preserved string quartet captivated us due to its depth and expressivity. Schönberg's influence is very audible here. We have also chosen both of these authors for our series of chamber concerts held at London's Wigmore Hall. Both composers ended their lives in the concentration camps. If their fates were any different, their music would have probably been more frequent on the concert stages.“



**Karel Košárek  
(piano):**

„My first encounter with the music of the Terezín authors took place about fifteen years ago thanks to a concert I performed with Mrs. Soňa Červená. The program consisted of Viktor Ullmann's melodrama *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* (The Lay of Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke).

It was a real discovery for me and I'm very glad that I had the opportunity to play this piece since then at concerts a number of times. I remember that in 2014, with Mrs. Červená, we performed the „Song“ in Moravský Krumlov on the date of its completion, which is the 27th of September. Soon after I played Erwin Schulhoff's *Double Concerto for flute, piano and orchestra* with the Prague Philharmonia

under the baton of Mr. Bělohlávek. It was a significant experience. Unfortunately, the piece was given a single performance. Very beautiful and inspiring were the concerts with Mr. Richard Novák in which I accompanied him performing *Four Songs on Chinese Poetry* by Pavel Haas.

It is indisputable that there are many musical jewels among the works of these composers, many of which are still undiscovered and unknown for the wider public. I therefore consider it absolutely essential and amazing that in 2014 the Bärenreiter published a beautifully and professionally executed editions of Schulhoff's *Piano Sonata* and his jazz-inspired compositions. That is exactly what the "Terezín authors" need. One of my students at the Conservatory is studying currently Schulhoff's *Piano Sonata No. 3*.



**Viktor Ullmann's melodrama *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* is recited by the actress Jana Podlipná. She expressed her relationship with Rilke's verses as follows:**

„Since I have been studying in Vienna and have been working for a long time on various theater stages in German-speaking countries, I also enjoy the German language. In my work I regularly encounter German poetry, drama and prose and I am a bit disappointed with the general belief that German is a hard, unattractive and non-modal language. R. M. Rilke and his work is one of the proofs that it is not true. Rilke's literary language is imitative and rhythmic ‚German for connoisseurs‘ and it is a pleasure to work with his texts.“