



Monday, January 31, 2011

Viktor Ullmann - Der Kaiser von Atlantis

A man of great compositional and philosophical genius, Viktor Ullmann was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau during the Holocaust in 1944. His only crime? As in six million other cases, he was of Jewish heritage. Viktor Josef Ullmann was born on January 1, 1898, the son of an Austrian Imperial Army officer posted in Teschen (Cieszyn). Today, the city is split between the Czech Republic and Poland. He was baptized on January 27, 1898, at the Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Cieszyn. In 1909, his family moved to the Imperial capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Vienna, Austria.

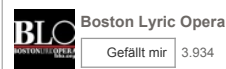
Since 1914, Ullmann had been taking theory lessons with Dr. Josef Polnauer; he also studied piano with Eduard Steuermann, a good friend of the controversial composer Arnold Schönbergs. ^[1] In 1918, Ullmann entered the Vienna University as a law student, as his father before him. That same year, he also enrolled in Schönberg's composition seminar, learning the new compositional techniques that Schönberg had been developing. At Schönberg's suggestion, Ullmann was made a founding member of the committee of the Verein für Musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances). The purpose of this society was the private performance of modern music to listeners who would appreciate the new music of the day, instead of mocking it. It was open only to members of the society; the public was strictly forbidden.

Ullmann did not complete his studies at the Vienna University; he moved to Prague, Czechoslovakia in May 1919, and joined the music staff of the Neues Deutsches Theater (New German Theater) under the teacher and conductor Alexander Zemlinsky. Ullmann was the chorus master and répétiteur (musical coach) in 1920 and became conductor in 1922. Apart from this work, he was composing as well with such pieces as *Sieben Lieder* (1923), *Kreidekreis* (1925), and the *Symphonische Phantasie* (1925). Also in 1925, he composed the first version of his *Variationen und Doppelfuge über ein Klavierstück von Arnold Schönberg* (Variations and Double Fugue on a Piano Piece by Arnold Schönberg), based on Schönberg's op. 19, no. 4. The second version of the *Schönberg-Variationen*, at the 1929 festival of the International Society of Contemporary Music, in Geneva, brought Ullmann to international attention.

Concentrating on conducting and composition, he was engaged by the Zürriich Schauspielhaus as a conductor and composer from 1929-1931. He then fell under the influence of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy movement, which aim was to investigate the spiritual world with the precision and clarity of natural science's investigations of the physical world (Ullmann had left the Catholic Church in 1919). As such, Ullmann left music completely from 1931-1933 in order to run an anthroposophical bookshop in Stuttgart, Germany. An incredibly well-read man, he was both a Latin and Greek scholar.

He left his bookshop in 1933 because of the rise of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi Party) in Germany. He returned to Prague, where he was a freelance musician. He was active in the Internationale Gesellschaft für Musikerziehung (International Society of Music Education) and in Prague's music societies, both German and Czech. He attended Alois Hába's courses in quarter-tone composition from 1935-1937, and orchestrated his version of the *Schönberg-Variationen*, in which he won the Emil Hertzka Prize (from the Emil Hertzka Foundation) in 1934. His opera *Der Sturz des Antichrist* (The Overthrow of the Antichrist) won the Hertzka prize in 1936. For obvious reasons, the opera was never performed

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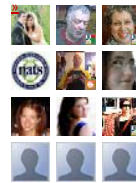


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before World War II.

There were numerous other works performed as well during this time until 1942. He was able to give a set of his compositions to a friend for safe keeping, as he knew he was being targeted by the Nazi Party. Indeed, his music was banned publicly (as had other Jewish musicians and composers) after the German Army entered Czechoslovakia in March 1939, with many of his manuscripts destroyed during this time. His health was also poor, as he suffered from depression. His two youngest children (Jean and Felicia) were sent to the United Kingdom to escape the horrors of the German occupation. He never saw them again. Trying to find some solace, he was re-accepted into the Catholic Church on May 11, 1940.

In September 1942 he was sent, with his wife Elisabeth and remaining children, to the Terezin concentration camp. Terezin (or Teresienstadt) was built in 1780 by Joseph II, just north of Prague, naming it after his mother Maria Teresia. Its original purpose was to protect the city from invaders from the north. Hitler found that he could use the fortress to "protect" people of Jewish descent from the vagaries and stresses of war. Senior citizens and notable musicians, writers, artists, and leaders were sent there for their own protection, they were told. Nearly two hundred thousand people passed through the gates of the city, most of them on their way to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Indeed, the concentration camp had so many musicians, that two *separate* full symphony orchestras could perform at one time, along with various chamber ensembles.

Ullmann was soon one of the leading figures in the musical scene at the camp, the so-called Freizeitgestaltung, in charge of the program to organize the inmates' 'leisure.' He was important as well as the director of the Studio für neue Musik (Studio for New Music), as a critic, and as a performer and composer. His final composition, The Seventh Sonata, was dedicated to his three living children: Jean, Felicia, and Maximilian. His youngest, Pavel Ullmann, died at the age of three in 1943 at the camp; his oldest, Maximilian, born in 1932, died in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944.

Ullmann was able to give his Terezin manuscripts (of which *The Emperor of Atlantis* was one) to the German philosopher, psychologist, and art theorist Professor Emil Utitz, who gave them to the German poet and novelist H.G. Adler after the war. Ullmann was taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau on a 'liquidation transport' on October 16, 1944, where he died in a gas chamber two days later. It is purported that *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* was the reason for the deportation; it was so controversial that Ullmann had to be silenced. Most of the people involved with the production were transported to their deaths with Ullmann.

The opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis, oder Der Tod dankt ab* (*The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Abdicates*) is a one-act opera with a prologue and four scenes, composed in 1943, with a libretto by Petr Kien. The libretto was written, and then typed, on the reverse side of prisoner information forms. The work is scored for seven singers and an orchestra of thirteen musicians available in the camp, including bango, alto saxophone, harmonium, and harpsichord. The cast includes Emperor Überall (baritone), Death (bass-baritone), Pierrot (tenor), a Loudspeaker (bass-baritone), a Drummer (mezzo-soprano), a Soldier (tenor), a Girl (soprano), and two female dancers. It takes place in the city of Atlantis.

In the Prologue (melodrama) the Loudspeaker, after introducing the characters, describes the situation in which the living no longer laugh, the dying no longer die, and life and death have lost their meanings. Death, finding this repulsive, goes on strike: no one is allowed to die. Ullmann's music and Kien's text mirror much of the tension and anxiety which the Terezin inhabitants felt in the camp.

In the first scene, death laments at the ease at which people can be killed in modern warfare. The Drummer announces that the Emperor has decreed that everyone will be armed and fight until there are no survivors. At this, Death denounces the emperor, breaks his saber, and goes on strike.

At the beginning of scene two, the Emperor gives battle orders and monitors the progress of the war. He learns that people cannot die, since death had abdicated. The Emperor decides to reward all of his subjects with eternal life, mocking death.

In the third scene, a soldier and a maiden confront one other as enemies. Since they were unable to kill each other, their thoughts turn to love. They dream of distant places. The Drummer attempts to lure them back to battle, which they ignore and think only of love and each other.

In final scene, the Emperor sees that Atlantis is failing. His subjects protest the suspension of life and death, a living purgatory. The Drummer urges the Emperor to maintain his resolve, but the emperor cannot. He looks into a mirror and sees Death. Death looks at the Emperor and describes why he is so important. The Emperor, seeing Death's point, relents. The Emperor allows Death to reclaim his responsibilities, with the Emperor being the first to die. His subjects rejoice at the fact that their purgatory is finally over, with Death back to its rightful place.

In the work, Ullmann quotes the "Angel of Death" motif from the Czech composer Josef Suk's *Asrael* Symphony and uses a distortion of *Deutschland über Alles* (Song of Germany), the national anthem of Germany since 1922, by Franz Joseph Haydn. The final chorale, sung to the melody of *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A mighty fortress is our God), urges that life's end should be through the dignity of natural death and not through meaningless killing. Rehearsals began in Terezin in September 1944, both censorship and increasing transports to Auschwitz-Birkenau prevented a production. The premiere was not until a production at the Bellevue Theatre in Amsterdam on December 16, 1975, by the Netherlands Opera.

Various recordings exist today, one of the most famous being Lothar Zagrosek's recording with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, using an expanded orchestra. Another recording, using the

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original instrumentation, is the Alexander Drčar recording with the Arbos Gesellschaft für Musik und Theater/Ensemble Kreativ on Studio Matouš.

- Rob Tedesco, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

^[1] Schönberg did not Americanize his name to Schoenberg until he immigrated to the United States in 1934, and here I will use his name as he was known at this time.

Posted by In the Wings at 11:35 AM 


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