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## When Death Goes On Strike

### When Death Goes On Strike

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By Flatow, Gaby

What criteria should be used when speaking about artistic works that have been written at the edge of life? In a place of horror and atrocities, where normal things such as programs, posters or entry tickets just underlined the abnormal situation? Where 30,000 people died in less than four years due to lack of food and medicine? What does one think going to hear an opera having been composed in just such a world?

The modern-day Prague audience has the rare opportunity to find out, when Viktor Ullmann's *The Emperor of Atlantis* receives a performance in Prague this week. Ullmann's opera was written between 1942-44, during his time in Terezin - the town 60 km north of Prague that was transformed into a concentration camp by the Nazis, and from where 87,000 people were transported to the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.



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When Death Abdicates is the subtitle of Viktor Ullmann's opera, *The Emperor of Atlantis*. It refers to the satirical idea that struck Ullmann, seeing the heaps of corpses in Terezin. What, Ullmann thought, would the Nazis have done, if Death had gone on strike? If he had stopped serving them? What would they do with all those living corpses? In the opera (with an exquisitely well-shaped libretto by Petr Kien) Death refuses to cooperate with tyranny, when he feels insulted by the grandeur of the emperor's machinery. Without Death's help, the emperor feels stripped of his authority and he finds himself in an embarrassing situation - despotism without the aid of Death.

"The plot of this performance is universal," says Michal Caban, choreographer of the opera, "aiming at all despotism and bloodshed which takes place, even today very close to us. Just look at the former Yugoslavia."

Before the performance there will a symbolic procession. "The cast will undergo its own transportation," says Caban, "It will be a silent procession from the Rudolfinum to the stage on Vitkov Hill. This is to commemorate all the long walks of the Jews leading to the concentration camps and ghettos."

The opera is also a reminder of the many-faceted cultural life in Terezin - lectures, theater, cabarets, as well as operas were performed, frequently and of high artistic standard. Surviving not only physically but mentally is as crucial for any artist or intellectual as for anyone having any idea of humanity. In Terezin, art became the last possibility of communication - something that was well understood by those on stage as well as those in the audience. "If we were unable to say something anymore, at the last farewell for instance, we could sing ... only by singing, could we say the last words, and there were many times when we could not speak anymore," says Eva Herrmanova, director of the National Theater Opera. She was 14 when she arrived in Terezin, and she took part in every performance of the choir.

The majority of those transported to Terezin between 1941 and 1945 came from Czechoslovakia (more than 76,000), many of them from Prague and, as Jews who often belonged among the intellectuals and artists, many of them met old friends and colleagues again in the ghetto and thus ensured the high quality of the art they were permitted to create.

Composers were well represented among the inmates, names such as Rudolf Karel, professor at the Prague conservatory and the last student of Dvorak; Hans Krasa, whose childrens' opera *Brundibar* was performed more than 50 times in Terezin; Gideon Klein (the youngest, just 22 when he arrived), and Viktor Ullmann. And they all composed, in spite of the scarcity of paper, and adjusted their instrumentation to what was available (at first all instruments were forbidden, later they were tolerated, even encouraged as a demonstration of the quality of life). Indeed, in 1943 an

orchestra of 43 strings performed Handel, Bach, Mozart, Brahms, conducted by Karel Ancerl, perhaps the only one of these conductors whose life continued afterwards, as the chief conductor of the Czech Philharmonic.

Composers saw chances for their work to be performed immediately, an audience in need of artistic spirit, and - as strange as it may sound - no competition, no intrigue, but dedication as never before. Their work was in demand, mobilizing creative forces that might hardly have been set free under normal conditions of life. Perfection was impossible, but as Eliska Kleinova, sister of pianist and composer Gideon Klein, says, "In front of death one does not write a false note."

In *The Emperor of Atlantis* we see a satire that emerged like the phoenix from the ashes of Terezin. It proves a victory for Kien and Ullmann, a defense and an accusation of the time, comparing the situation of those prisoners and the might of their suppressors. Ullmann's poems, still relatively unknown, describe his unbreakable will to survive and his deeply-rooted conviction not to surrender to pure physical force.


Before the premiere could take place in Terezin, the Nazis realized the explosive message of the play and instead of the performance, a final transportation to Auschwitz took place. The entire cast and composer were forced to make the fatal trip but one player survived -the actor who portrayed Death.

The opera only received its premiere in 1975, after many years of neglect. This particular production was first performed in Klagenfurt, Austria in June. The venue for this, the first Prague performance, has been chosen carefully. It will be presented in the hall of the Zizkov Monument on Vitkov Hill, Prague 3. Built between 1929-32, the monument later served as the final resting place for political leaders of the former regime, including President Klement Gottwald. It only helps to enhance the opera's significance and the relationship between power and culture.

It's a relationship that is perhaps closer to the heart of production dramaturgist Dzevad Karahasan than to many. Karahasan was Professor at the Academy of Performing Arts in Sarajevo until the troubles forced him out in February of this year. With this opera he hopes to show the virtues of culture. "The center of power offers space for only one, the center of culture for many," he says.


*The Emperor of Atlantis* will be performed on Fri., Sept. 24 at the Zizkov Monument at 7 p.m. Tickets at 250 Kc are available from TTI-Opera Mozart, Celetna 13, Prague 1. The performance will be preceded by a procession which begins at the Rudolfinum at 6 p.m.

By Flatow, Gaby

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