

Viktor Ullmann's *Kaiser von Atlantis*
 („The Emperor of Atlantis“)

M i c h a ł B r i s t i g e r

To the history of music, the 20th century added a genre previously unknown: the music of the concentration and extermination camps that were created by totalitarian regimes. After World War II, the barrier of oblivion was effective for quite a long time and with quite a strength. When finally it was broken, a body of literature on this topic started to be published and has, in the meantime, grown enormously. There are accounts of witnesses, recording of facts, musical and social interpretation of a broader and broader range, and the expectation of an axiological assessment. Unknown entries began to appear in the most important encyclopaedias, and new results of research are still becoming available. In the contemporary social consciousness conviction is awakened of how significant the memory of what happened is and what a moral validity the imperative of guarding it against its loss has.

Music in Hitler's concentration camps assumed different forms. It fulfilled such strange and appalling goals which previously were incomprehensible and also today are impossible to be understood. The music played until the end and accompanied the End. In one of the concentration camps sounds of music had to cover the shots of firing squads, in another camp, in Auschwitz, permanent orchestras were maintained. And what about some entertainment after an execution? Music served this function too. (For whom? For “music lovers”? Imagine that it could have been Mozart's music.) Pascal Quignard, in his essay *Hatred of Music*, dedicated, as a matter of course, a special place to the music in Hitler's concentration camps. “Music is the only one of the arts that collaborated on the extermination of Jews by Germans from 1933 to 1945” – a sentence that begins a chapter in his book. It comprises one special thought that I'll quote *in extenso*: “Even in the death camps”.

In the universe of Hitler's concentration camps, the camp of Theresienstadt was unique: it allowed musical production and nothing less than a true concert life (although there was no piano in the camp, music paper was unavailable, and so on). This was the result of the combination of two intentions: to create a temporary place before the deportation to camps "in the East", with the goal of an immediate or momentarily postponed extermination, and the second purpose: to create a fictitious exemplary camp for interned Jews with tolerable living conditions and for immediate propaganda purposes. The detainees led an intensive music life on a high performing level. New compositions were written, for example, by Gideon Klein (a highly gifted composer and pianist), Pavel Haas and Hans Krása, just to mention a few of the distinguished artists. And the most important of them all was Viktor Ullmann.

Ullmann was born in Cieszyn (Teschen) on January 1, 1898. He was deported to Theresienstadt on September 8, 1942. Ullmann was a versatile musician: a renowned composer, conductor (an assistant of Alexander von Zemlinsky) and musical critic. His musical education took place under the auspices of Arnold Schönberg, Alois Hába and others. At the time of his deportation, he could look back on a considerable output and had had a remarkable musical career. During his stay in the camp he wrote around twenty compositions, among them three piano sonatas, numerous songs (to Jewish and Hebrew texts, to the lyrics by Hölderlin, C.F. Meyer, Trakl and Rilke, a fact that has a special cultural meaning), choral songs as well as music to *Atlantis*, a land destined to sink.

The one-act-opera *Kaiser von Atlantis*, subtitled a "play" in the score, delivers to its listener quite a peculiar experience: it is one great, increasing musical arch, beginning with a neutral announcement of the spectacle, transmitted through loudspeakers, and ending with an aria, followed by a final chorale in Lutheran style, which crowns the opera. So it reaches from the pure word, mechanically deformed (because it is dispersed through a loudspeaker), to the full *musical* sound – an individual sound, i.e. an aria, to a collective chorale-sound reminiscent of Bach. The narrative line of the opera runs through many styles, genres, textures of music, with different dramatic functions each time. The tempos change occasionally, also the musical character of the given section and its mood changes. Unusually sensitive is its dramatic nerve, cut by different kinds of verbal text: sometimes prose or even prosaic, sometimes expressively lyric. All these facts allow one to state that the opera by Viktor Ullmann and Peter Kien is clearly expressionistic.

Here we have spoken word - spoken immediately and mechanically - a melodrama, a recitativo secco and recitativo accompagnato, an arioso, an aria, a duet, a terzetto, a chorale and an intermezzo. One can also identify a canzona, a passacaglia, a minuet, even a blues and a shimmy. In the score quotations and recognizable influences are inserted, including Bach, Mahler, the German national anthem, Luther's chorale, and motives taken from Jan Suk and Antonin Dvořák. Altogether quite a variety, which in an expressionistic piece of music is completely in place.

Conditions offered by the concentration camp allowed Ullmann to write a score for seven vocalists, all on a high artistic level, as well as thirteen instruments: a selection that gives the instrumental layer of the opera quite a peculiar hue. Let it be specified by the enumeration of instruments of this chamber orchestra: flute, oboe, clarinet, alto saxophone, trumpet, first and second violins, cello, contrabass, tenor-banjo (guitar), percussion and harpsichord (or piano).

The opera was completed on January 13, 1944. It was composed to a libretto by the young 25-year old painter and poet, Peter Kien. Its title points, of course, to Hitler's omnipotence. Many other moments of the opera's contents relate directly or indirectly to the actual war and to the situation of Holocaust-prisoners. The work has a philosophical meaning because it deals with the problems of life and death in an extreme situation (*Grenzsituation*) and because of the message *de profundis* it proclaims.

Let our attention be directed to some general aspects of the opera's text and to some details. The opera opens with a Prologue and continues through its four scenes to an Epilogue, realized as a chorale. The Prologue is a kind of melodrama, with its mechanized voice - the spoken voice, laid upon the music, but a voice broadcast from an invisible loudspeaker. It announces the characters taking part in the opera, and introduces the first scene. In this musical play for seven people the main thematic triangle is made up of three of them: the omnipotent Emperor Overall (the name recalls the German anthem *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*), Harlequin - representing life as a principle, and Death - as a principle. The little Drummer is in the service of the Emperor, a symbol of totalitarian force. The voice coming from the loudspeaker is impersonal, and the pair, a Soldier and a Maiden, are just common people yearning for love. The two are cast in a totalitarian situation but they are also able to oppose it.

Both mentioned principles of human life – life and death - cease to work in the inhuman circumstances. In the operatic symbolism both figures “abdicate” and the concomitant conversation fills the first Picture. Harlequin cannot stand himself, people don’t know how to laugh any more, he declares. And Death, who has been active from the beginning of the world, is now old and fatigued. She admits, she cannot manage as she previously did. People don’t have respect for her any more. Suspension of life will not be the same problem for the Emperor as the refusal of Death to let people die would impede (and how!) his state affairs. In Peter Kien’s poetics Death differs from murder. But now we are dealing with murder in the unconditional service of the Emperor. The Drummer proclaims, in the name of Emperor Overall, a total war: “all against all”, which, during the production of the opera, became prophetic, just think of Hitler’s end. Death feels offended; formerly it was she who was given the power of taking human souls.

Whereas the aria of Death from the first scene took the shape of a blues piece, the dance of Death in the second scene is surprisingly a minuet. The action takes place in a desolate palace where the Emperor carries on a dialogue with a “fantastic loudspeaker” (again prophetically, as Hitler did in the Berlin Reich’s bunker). The Emperor learns that the fortification of one of the towns was in the hands of the enemy, the inhabitants don’t live any more, and their corpses are going to be recycled. Thousands of soldiers struggle with life and cannot die because of Death’s refusal to do the job. The Emperor in vain calls on Death for succour, then he proclaims that he has a secret remedy for eternal life, promising that nothing more will hinder soldiers, forever, from defending the Emperor and Fatherland.

The third Picture represents “common people”: a Soldier and – from the enemy side of the war – a Maiden. Tender words of love are spoken. The Drummer is unable to convince the Soldier with the argument that “a true man follows only the drum roll”. The Soldier throws his rifle away. Now a dance intermezzo starts, titled significantly “The Dead alive”.

In the fourth scene we return to the palace of the Emperor. A loudspeaker communicates to the Emperor (as if it were April 1945!) that insurgents have captured Hospital no. 34 with the living dead, that physicians and instructors are defecting to the other side, and that generals of the XII. Army have ceased to pass reports. Meaningful is the scene in which a confrontation between Harlequin and the Drummer takes place. Harlequin insists on buying sweets, going to the circus, riding on hobby-horses, gliding on satchels, and lowering confused eyes when girls

are passing. He can still announce that “with our pure thoughts we have defeated the injustices of the world”. He can even sing a lullaby (in the circumstances of the concentration camp a lullaby was received rather as a lament, a tragic genre). The Drummer continues to speak in plural “We, Emperor Overall”. And the Emperor himself goes into a crazy babble about millions of cannons (today we think of the “miraculous weapons”, Wunderwaffe, from the end of the war). He tears down the curtain from the mirror – and Death appears. Two subsequent arias are an aria of Death (praise of the liberation brought by Death) and a farewell aria of the Emperor, negating everything that he had done before. Now he will become the first victim of Death who, kidnapping the Emperor, gradually turns into Hermes. Back-stage a chorale is intoned, a request to Death, this welcome guest, to come.

One can easily imagine what this opera meant in Theresienstadt. The rehearsals started in the summer of the year and were held in the basement L 411. However, a performance never took place, either because of the strength of a ban by the SS, or because of the fear of the performers themselves knowing the explosive contents of the piece, or finally because of the eventual deportation of musicians to the gas chambers in Auschwitz, a case that often happened. With our “mind’s eye” we can see a rehearsal of the opera: Emperor Overall played by Walter Windholz, Death by Karel Berman, the voice from loudspeaker was that of Bedřich Borges, David Grinfeld appeared as Harlequin and as the Soldier, the Drummer was played by Hilde Aronson-Lindt, and the Maiden was Marion Podolier. The conductor was Rafael Schachter, the director of the whole production was Karel Reinhardt, the staging and costumes were the work of Peter Kien.

Viktor Ullmann was deported to Auschwitz on October 16. 1944, and within two days killed in the gas-chamber no. 2 of the concentration camp Birkenau. He intended to take the score of the opera with him but in the last moment he was advised not to do so. The score remained in Theresienstadt and was found in London after many years. Peter Kien shared the destiny of Ullmann and was also killed in Auschwitz.

The première of the opera took place thirty years later, in 1975 in Amsterdam. A version closer to the autograph score was performed in 1989 by the Neuköllner Oper in Berlin.

The circumstances in which Viktor Ullmann and Peter Kien created *The Emperor of Atlantis*, the meaning of the opera, the contents appearing against the background of that time and

the contents visible only today, the spiritual message sent by the opera's creators living in the extreme situation of an historical cataclysm, which was like a message in a bottle – to use Paul Celan's metaphor - thrown into the surrounding, dull, forsaken and silent ocean, and finally the artistic rank of a composition written with dignity by people living in peril, but still intending to create high art giving evidence of the noblest moral level of artistic creativity in this exceptional space of culture imprisoned by the Holocaust – all these moments add up to an uncommon piece, without precedent in the history of music.

The above text was originally published in the programme accompanying the Polish première of *The Emperor of Atlantis* by Viktor Ullmann in Warszawska Opera Kameralna (Warsaw Chamber Opera) on March 5, 2005 (cycle of musical events *Oda do Europy. Sezon muzyczny zjednoczonej Europy w WOK; [Ode to Europe. Musical Season of United Europe]*), with Kai Bumann as Music Director and produced by Tomasz Konina; the costumes were by Marlena Skoneczko.

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