'Emperor' shows creative defiance of Hitler's regime

By James Roos

Viktor Ullmann gazed intently at the belongings he was allowed to take to the unknown destination, and began having second thoughts. The Ullmanns, a family of 23, were crammed in a case: 23 scores including two piano sonatas, a string quartet, more than a dozen songs, and The Emperor of Atlantis — the opera FiU Music Festival 2001 will stage for the first time in Florida, Nov. 4 and 6 at the North Miami Beach Performing Arts Theatre.

Ullmann decided logging his precious works with him was too risky. Rumors were rampant about the journey involving a rendezvous with death, though nobody that October of 1944 imagined on arrival at Auschwitz that most people — up to 10,000 a day — were being gassed and cremated. But Ullmann, after two years in which he had miraculously composed some of his best works in the Nazi's Theresienstadt — "show camp" near Prague, was scheduled to transport the next morning and he sensed the end was near.

So, he entrusted his scores to a friend with instructions that in the event of his death, his works were to be given to the musicologist Dr. E.G. Adler, also a Theresienstadt inmate.

Ullmann perished. He and his wife were promptly sent to the gas chambers. But, incredibly, his friend and Adler — as well as his music — greeted the liberation of Theresienstadt (Teresitz in Czech) on May 8, 1945. The result, 56 years later, is that Ullmann the composer — a student of Arnold Schoenberg and chief conductor of the opera in Augsburg (now Užice) and Dalmatia — is being revived in a way that has won the admiration and admiration of many scholars and composers re-evaluating Holocaust art, Austrian television, for example, is to be broadcasting a documentary on the composer next month.

Political overtones

David Weis, who directs the Coral Gables Temple Emanu-El and the Coral Gables Sinai Center for Yiddish Culture, co-presenting The Emperor of Atlantis as part of a symposium, "Creative Defence and the Holocaust," Thursday through Nov. 6, says: "Ullmann's opera is one of the most stunning examples of creative defiance, written in the belly of the beast as an indictment of the Hitler regime."

The work by the 46-year-old Austro-Czech composer and a gifted 24-year-old Czech poet-painter, Pietie Kien, is a bold, allegorical musical drama with obvious political overtones. Emperor Oberzauber (Everywhere), ruler of the evil empire of Atlantis, orders Death to lead his army into war for his personal glorification. But in a fresh view on Death Takes a Holiday, Death goes on strike, allowing no one to die, which precipitates chaos. The Emperor's only way out is to accept a bargain that, in exchange for Death's return, the Emperor must agree to become his first victim.

When The Emperor of Atlantis went into rehearsal at Theresienstadt, the Nazis — either tipped by informants or from merely observing — grasped the anti-Nazi message. Coming at a time when a recent attempt had been made to assassinate Hitler, they immediately scrapped the production and rushed most of the cast and creators to Auschwitz. Still, since its first posthumous staging in 1975, The Emperor has been acclaimed as an effective lyric drama in Kurt Weill-like cabaret style. It's actually one of dozens of intriguing scores produced by Theresienstadt's unique artist colony.

The idea of creating any kind of art, let alone music and performing concerts, in a place as obviously brutal as a death camp seems ghastly. Nevertheless, even at Auschwitz, Mahler's niece, Alma Rose, ended her days grotesquely conducting an "orchestra of inmates" that played marches to spur on the prisoner-laden trains.

But Theresienstadt, set up by the Nazis in an 18th-Century Czech fortress town, about an hour's drive from Prague, was intended to show the world — especially the international Red Cross — that Jews, rather than being persecuted, were thriving and well-treated.

In reality, of course, Theresienstadt was mainly a way station for transport to the killing factories, and itself a death camp. Noted intellectuals with international connections were promptly imprisoned these were sent with middle-class Germans, Czechs and other nationalities, crowded in filthy conditions and murderd by disease, malnutrition and random executions.

To company all this, there had to be music, of course, to help the Nazis perpetuate their charade. So they sedulously encouraged prisoners-musicians to stage operas, operettas, and perform chamber music, even string orchestra concerts led by famed Czech conductor Karel Ancerl, one of the few fortunate survivors. Too many people, among them promising composers, didn't survive. They included Gideon Klein, Pavel Haas, Hans Erk's (whose children's opera Brundibar was staged for the Red Cross), and Ullmann, a chief coordinator of cultural activities.

Despite the horrific atmosphere, performances were usually packed, probably because they helped people forget the awful situation. Indeed, I've sometimes wondered whether my great uncle, Rudolf Stern, a businessman from Mila, Germany, who spent two years in Theresienstadt, attended some of those performances — before he too was healed with Ullmann and thousands of others onto those October '44 transports to Auschwitz.

But of course, to the Nazis, it didn't matter who you were, businessman or artist, as even the great composer Richard Strauss found out. Hoping to win the release of his Jewish daughter-in-law's beloved grandfather, Strauss, frustrated by lack of response to letters he sent to high places, drove up to the camp's gates to try personally to get her out, but was scouringly waved off by SS officers.

Together the number of people who trekked through Theresienstadt reached 139,654 — 33,419 died there and 86,634 were sent for extermination to other camps in the East. Among those exterminated were 30,000 survivors.

Beyond Escapism

How much music thrive in such a place?

"There were so many motivating factors," says Anne Weisbraub. She produced the opera. "The temptation to produce any music is very strong. Being away from the Nazis was a major escape and some hope, as it had for those who played in the Hanukkah group in the Jewish cultural groups allowed to perform in major cities in major in major cities by the Nazis."

"But The Kaiser of Atlantis was more than escapism," Weisbraub asserts. "It was the musical, political, an escapist music, even martial concerto, of a military guerrilla action, an example of creative defiance of the Nazis, which conveyed a feeling of sexism, of a feeling of sex, of a feeling of sex, for those who adhered to the Nazi regime, at some point there were a few thousand survivors."

Ullmann clearly was freed by the challenge of artistry. As Ullmann's last composer, dominated by practical limitations, he wrote intriguing songs for voice accompanied by a string trio when no piano was available. For The Emperor, which has five minutes, Ullmann's operatic orchestration-like exists of what he could muster — about a dozen instruments, including a saxophone, banjo and a harmonica, even drafted onto those, incredibly enough, for a performance of Porgy and Bess' "Love is a Long Journey".

But Ullmann, who earlier in his career wrote abstract, mildly dissonant music inspired by Schoenberg and Berg's, found that his style was Theresienstadt, notably not in Theresienstadt, notably in Theresienstadt.

Under pressure, the bass-baritone who will portray the Joseph Goebbels Propaganda Minister character, The Law, speaker, actually wrote his doctoral dissertation on The Emperor while singing in it for the first time here. We believe that the music clearly mocked the Nazis by mixing jazz with sounds reminiscent of Weill, Mahler, Schoenberg, and all of whom the Nazis condemned for "degenerate" art.

FIU's Robert Dendas, stage director for this production, who learned about the importance of The Emperor some years ago while working in Germany, says the opera will be sung in English and presented as a play within a play, in which most of the cast appear as prisoners about to carry out their operatic roles. It's the best way, he believes, of getting Ullmann's story across ones.

"We'll be pretending we're performing for the Red Cross," he explains, "trying not to get the horror out of the world" — which is precisely what Ullmann intended before their lives were so cruelly snuffed out.