

The Miami Herald

www.miami.com

99th YEAR, No. 56
Copyright © 2001 The Miami Herald

FINAL EDITION

35 Cents
For home delivery, call 305-350-2900

THE HERALD SUNDAY OCTOBER 28, 2001 SECTION M

10M The Herald SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2001

'Emperor' shows creative defiance of Hitler's regime

BY JAMES ROOS
jroos@herald.com

Viktor Ullmann gazed intently at the belongings he was about to haul east to some unknown destination, and began having second thoughts. Two years of work 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 lugging 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 Nazis' Theresienstadt "show camp" near Prague, was scheduled for 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. H.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 (Terezin 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 Aussig (now Usti nad Labem) — is being revived in a trend that has performers and scholars re-evaluating Holocaust art. Austrian television, for example, will broadcast a documentary on the composer next month.

POLITICAL OVERTONES

David Weintraub, director of Coral Gables' Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, co-presenting *The*



THE VARSITY

FIU will stage 'The Emperor of Atlantis' Nov. 4 and 6 at the North Miami Beach Performing Arts Theatre. Above, The Imperial Oil Theatre performs their version of the opera in Toronto in 1997.

Emperor of Atlantis as part of a symposium, "Creative Defiance 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, Petr Kien, is a bold, allegorical musical drama with obvious political overtones. *Emperor Überall* (Everywhere), ruler of the evil empire of Atlantis, orders Death to lead his army into war for his personal glorification. But in a fresh slant 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 rehearsals at Theresienstadt, the Nazis — either tipped by informants or from merely observing — grasped the anti-Hitler message. Coming at a time when a recent attempt had been made to assassinate the Führer, 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 artists colony.

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

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 prominently imprisoned there along with middle-class Germans, Czechs and other nationalities, crowded in filthy condi-

tions and murdered by disease, malnutrition and random executions.

To accompany all this, there had to be music, of course, to help the Nazis perpetrate their charade. So they sadistically encouraged prisoner-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 Krása (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 Münster, Germany, who spent two years in Theresienstadt, attended some of those performances — before he too was herded 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 grandmother from Theresienstadt, 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 scornfully waved off by SS officers.

Altogether the number of people who trekked through

Theresienstadt reached 139,654 — 33,419 died there and 86,934 were sent for extermination to other camps. When it was liberated, there were fewer than 20,000 survivors.

BEYOND ESCAPISM

How could music thrive in such a place?

"There were so many motivating factors for musicians," Weintraub says. "The compulsion to produce under any circumstances psychologically helped some survive. Playing their instruments, doing what they did in normal times, offered a mental escape and some hope, as it had for those who played in the *kulturbands*," the Jewish cultural groups allowed for a while in major cities by the Nazis.

But *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* — *The Emperor of Atlantis* — was more than escapism, Weintraub asserts. "It was the musicians' version of a military guerrilla action, an example of creative defiance of the Nazis, aimed at arousing the consciousness of fellow prisoners and, if possible, telling the outside world what was happening — that this horror just couldn't go on."

Ullmann clearly was fired by the challenge artistically. As most composers, confronted by practical limitations, he had written intriguing songs for voice accompanied by a string trio when no piano was available. For *The Emperor*, which has five singers, Ullmann's provocative orchestration likewise consists of what he could muster — about a dozen instruments, including a saxophone, banjo and a harpsichord, evidently brought into the camp, incredibly enough, for a performance of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*.

But Ullmann, who earlier in his career wrote abstract, mildly dissonant music inspired by Schoenberg and Berg, gradually modified his style in Theresienstadt, notably in *The Emperor*.

John Thomasson, the bass-baritone who'll portray the Joseph Goebbels Propaganda Minister character, The Loudspeaker, actually wrote his doctoral dissertation on *The Emperor* and coincidentally is singing in it for the first time here. He believes that the music clearly mocked the Nazis by mixing jazz with sounds reminiscent of Weill, Mahler and Schoenberg, all of whom the Nazis condemned for creating "degenerate" art.

FIU's Robert Dundas, stage director for this production, who learned about the importance of *The Emperor* some years ago while working in

IF YOU GO

"The Emperor of Atlantis (*Der Kaiser von Atlantis*)" by Viktor Ullmann, will be performed at 7 p.m. Nov. 4 and 8 p.m. Nov. 6 at North Miami Beach Performing Arts Theatre, 1701 NE 19th Ave., North Miami Beach. Robert Dundas is the stage director and Carlos Piantini conducts members of the FIU Symphony Orchestra. Tickets: \$25-\$50. Information: 305-348-1988, www.flmusicfestival.org.

It's part of "Creative Defiance and the Holocaust," a symposium-celebration of Holocaust art, co-sponsored by the Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture and Florida International University School of Music, that runs Thursday through Nov. 8. Here is a schedule of events:

► Thursday, 7:30 p.m. — Lecture by Yaffa Elach, "The Miracle of European Jewry," Aventura Turnberry Synagogue, 20400 NE 30th Ave., Aventura.

► Saturday, 7:30 p.m. — Art exhibit opening and reception: Resistance Art by local artists; FIU North Campus, Wolfe University Center Art Gallery, second floor, 3000 NE 151st St., North Miami Beach.

► Nov. 4 — Free lectures and discussions: 10:30 a.m., registration; 11 a.m., Judith Doneson lecture, "Brundibar," Then and Now; lunch (\$7.50, reserve by calling 305-774-8244); 12:30 p.m., Milton Katz lecture, "A Desperate Conversation, Art and the Holocaust"; 1:15 p.m., Lisa Bogart tells "A Survivor's Story"; 1:45 p.m., Ruth Barlas lecture, "Yiddish Poets and Poetry of Resistance"; 2:30 p.m., Panel Discussion and Q & A; 3:15 p.m., Susan Epstein and special guests, "Lest We Forget the Children"; 3:45 p.m., Cantor Deborah Staiman lecture, "Music and Poetry of Resistance."

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 assume their operatic roles. It's the best way, he believes, of getting Ullmann's message across now.

"We'll be pretending we're performing for the Red Cross," he explains, "trying to get word of the horror out to the world" — which is precisely what Ullmann and his valiant cohorts intended before their lives were so cruelly snuffed out.

ART IN SOUTH FLORIDA