



Recovered Voice: Viktor Ullmann's Theresienstadt Vocal Music

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Abstract. The project looks through the special historical period during World War II to discover how the talented composer Viktor Ullmann could continue his working on lieder of the poignantly contrasting style and the highly artistic standard under inhuman conditions. It comprises of the background of Theresienstadt and brief status of the musical life in this concentration camp, and the composer's concise biography and musical style. Included is an analysis of various aspects of two sets of songs - *Chinesische Lieder* (1943) and *Immer inmitten* (1943), which are less often performed compared with Ullmann's other vocal works composed in Theresienstadt, referring to their melody, harmony, texts, accompaniment and so on. The article hopes to help singers to perform these songs in a more accessible approach through the understanding of the significance of the Holocaust and comprehensive interpretation of the music.

Keywords: Victor Ullmann; Art songs; Genocide

1 Introduction

"The Third Reich silenced two generations of composers, the greatest single rupture in what had been a centuries-long stream of German classical music," said James Conlon, Music Director of Los Angeles Opera, "The creativity of the first half of the twentieth century is far richer and varied than we commonly assume."¹ The great body of the works, written by the composers, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were banned under Third Reich, are still insufficiently known and deserve to be known by the public. We, as musicians, cannot change the history to save the people who were murdered in concentration camps, and others, whose freedom and productivity were curtailed, but shouldn't let them be forgotten after the war, as with their music which seemed to have passed with them, lost in an endless silence. Viktor Ullmann is one of the less known or forgotten composers, from the aspects of morality, history, and artistry, his "lost spirits" should be known and heard more.

2 Overview of Theresienstadt and its musical life

Theresienstadt (Terezín), 30 miles north of Prague in the Czech Republic, constructed to be a fortified town, established by Austrian Emperor Joseph II in 1780 and named in honor of his mother, Empress Maria Theresa. But it was never operated for military purpose and the general public began living in the houses and barracks in the Big Fortress after 1882. During World War I, the Small Fortress was used for imprisoning the political inmates. By 1940, Nazi Germany had occupied Bohemia and Moravia, and turned Theresienstadt into a Jewish ghetto and transit concentration camp. It was presented a “model camp” to the outside world embellished the place with foreign dignities residents, medical assistance of Red Cross workers, and enrichment of cultural activities. But the fact was the inmates were struggling to live here with the appalling congestion, compulsory labor, severe food shortages, and horrible sanitary conditions. The spreading of disease, brutal treatment, declining physical conditions led to a huge decrease in the population of the ghetto. Of the more than 154,000 Jews deported to Theresienstadt during the war, about 33,000 people died in the ghetto, and 88,000 were deported to extermination camps. Only 17,247 people were survived in Theresienstadt after the end of World War II.²

Cultural moments were in stark contrast to everyday survival efforts. Since the camp was portrayed as a “model” in 1941, for the propaganda purpose, cultural life in Theresienstadt was tolerated, and an organization Freizeitgestaltung (Administration for Leisure Activities), instituted by the SS and managed by the Judenrat was specialized in organizing performance and producing programs. It was more accessible here than in any other camps to sheet music, instruments, rehearsals, and performances. There were numerous choirs, cabaret groups, classical orchestra, and jazz bands. Diversity of classical music was performed, such as symphonic and chamber works of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Janáček or Suk; oratorios, religious and national songs, and operas like *Carmen*, *Tosca*, or *The Bartered Bride*.³ Besides, the Nazis compelled the leading songwriters and performers to write and perform Satirical, political songs, jazz and swing to dehumanize the inmates and entertain the officers themselves. Nevertheless, varied styles of new music, including art songs, folk songs, chamber music, and operas, were composed and premiered here, like Gideon Klein’s *Sonata for Piano*, and *Trio for Violin, Viola and Cello*, Hans Krása’s *Tanec*, *Brundibár* (Children’s Opera in Two Acts), Viktor Ullmann’s *String Quartet No.3*, *Piano Sonata No.6*, and a bunch of vocal works. Through music, musicians and audience retained their identities of their earlier life under the shadow of death.

The Composer: Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944)

Composer, conductor, music critic and pianist Viktor Ullmann was born in a Jewish family in Teschen (today Cieszyn in Poland). Before his birth, his parents had converted to Roman Catholicism for higher social and military status. “Viktor’s education and religious practice was Catholic, turning later to Protestantism, and at some point he became an ardent follower of the anthropomorphism of Rudolf Steiner.”⁴ He moved to Vienna with his mother in 1909 and went to the military service during World War I right after graduating from a grammar school, in the meanwhile he studied piano with Eduard Steuermann, theory and composition with Dr. Josef Polnauer from 1914. After

the war in 1918, he began studying at Vienna University for law studies, and attended the Arnold Schoenberg's advanced composition seminar the same year. Before he was trapped in Prague and deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, he had worked as the theatre's chorus director and vocal coach, mentored by Alexander von Zemlinsky; he had already enjoyed a reputation as an excellent conductor in some opera houses and theaters; he had composed a large number of lieder, and some other dramatic production, but failed to find a commercial music publisher; he had even sold books for two years because of the influence of the anthroposophy in Stuttgart, and finally come back to Prague as a music teacher and journalist.⁵

In the camp, Ullmann continued his musical work, by the command of Freizeitgestaltung, to serve as a piano accompanist, give lectures, write music reviews, organize concerts (the Studio for Modern Music, and the Collegium Musicum), and compose extraordinarily prolific production in comparison to the other Theresienstadt composers. As he wrote that "it must be emphasized that Theresienstadt has served to enhance, not to impede, my musical activities... and that our endeavor with respect to Arts was commensurate with our will to live. And I am convinced that all those who, in life and in art, were fighting to force form upon resisting matter, will agree with me."⁶ On October 16th, 1944, Ullmann was deported to Auschwitz in one of the last transports, where he was murdered by gas chamber.

In his short life, lieder forms an important part of Ullmann's oeuvre, which can be used to comprehend his entire spectrum of compositional development. Although he was strongly influenced by the circle of the Second Viennese School, he didn't completely follow Schoenberg's atonality and twelve-tone composition style. Ullmann admired Gustav Mahler's compositions greatly and we can see his music is the synthesis of traditional forms and atonality which is brought close to the works of Alban Berg and Alexander Scriabin. Under the influence of anthroposophy and spirituality, his compositions favor regularity and "he developed his own harmonic system which was derived from the harmonic series between 8 to 14 of the natural harmonic series."⁷ He employs this extended tonality, prefers large intervals, and applies altered seventh chords while keeping to a definable tonal base in order to increase the gradation and diversity of tones and to satisfy different levels of emotional expression. As for the structure of some of his cycles and separate songs, it is reminiscent of the sonata and rondo. Ullmann also respects the form of the poems and attached importance to the content of the text. He often makes use of imitations between the vocal part and the piano, so that to achieve the unification of the motives.⁸ Many of his compositions, prior to the period in Theresienstadt, had been lost. On the contrary, the songs composed in Theresienstadt have been preserved in greater quantity, which can be seen to summarize and conclude Ullmann's vocal oeuvre.

3 Two sets of songs

Ullmann's compositions of vocal music during the time in Theresienstadt, can be arranged into three groups: arrangements of existing songs, original songs, and original

text set to an existing melody.⁹ *Chinesische Lieder* and *Immer inmitten* are under the group of original songs.

3.1 Chinesische Lieder

This cycle originally had three songs, but only two – “*Wanderer erwacht in der Herberge*” (A Traveler Awakes in a Hostel) and “*Der müde Soldat*” (The Tired Soldier) are extant. The first original poem was written by the Tang Dynasty famous poet Li-Tai-Po (701-762), and the second one was anonymous, chosen from Shi Jing-Book of Odes, and both were translated into German by Alfred Henschke (1890-1928) (under the pen name of Klabund). These two songs both are highly chromatic and have the thin texture and a loose form with the composer’s characteristically unique dissonances in the piano and large leaps in broad registers. The lyrics of the two songs reflect the composer’s situation of desperation and cravings in different ways. “*Wanderer erwacht in der Herberge*” is talking about a lonely traveler wakes up in the midnight looking up the moon and feels nostalgic for a distant homeland. “*Der müde Soldat*” describes the cruel scenes of the war from a tired soldier’s point of view, who is in hopelessness for a rest.

In the first song, Ullmann writes in a through-composed form, uses text painting the whole piece, couples with long and gently flowing phrases to present the cool moon night, indicates the specific tempo- *Sehr ruhig* (very calm) and *Sehr zart* (very sweet) at places to match the mood, and adopts a mixture of simple-triple, simple-quadruple, duple-compound, and irregular meters to correspond with the prosody. A ‘sigh motive’ recurring in both vocal and accompaniment parts in variation is employed by consisting of an ascending minor-third followed immediately by a descending major-seventh to unify the piece. Vocal lines and the accompaniment sometimes have the antagonistic rhythmic patterns (triplets vs. duple meter) to create the unsettled feeling, but frequently the piano part doubles the voice to assist singers with those challenging intervals to strengthen a kind of harmonic atmosphere.

The second song is an ABA’ form, accompanying a quite angular melody with irregular length phrases that overlap. Ullmann again tactfully uses text painting by employing a motive (C#4-D5-B#5-C#5-D4 and its variation, first appeared at mm.1-2 in the vocal line, the second time at mm. 22-23 in piano line, then at ms.23-24 in the vocal line, last time at mm.32-33 in piano line) in both vocal and piano lines echo through the piece to support the overall theme, alternating the relative dense and light piano texture to display the soldier’s tense and relaxed emotions, constraining the overall piece in pensive tempos (beginning with *Ruhig beginnen* (begin calmly) and then at m. 20 with a *poco ritardando.*, and at ms. 23 back to *Ruhiger* (more tranquil) again) to reflect a deep feeling of the frustration and exhaustion of the soldier.

3.2 Immer inmitten

It is a partially surviving cycle, categorized as cantata, which contains the reserved two songs “*Immer Inmitten*” (Ever in the Midst) and “*Vor der Ewigkeit*” (In the Face of Eternity), based on texts by Hans Günther Adler (1910-1988), who was imprisoned

with Ullmann in Theresienstadt. There were two additional poems, "*Abschied*" (Farewell) and "*Es ist Zeit*" (It is Time), while they were either not set by Ullmann or whose scores have been lost.

The first song give people a depressed and dark feeling, which acts in cooperation with the content of the poem. It depicts the tremendous suffering and struggling being kept in the midst that cannot reach either side, as with the fates of all the inmates in the hands of others. Thus, the composer overall increases dissonance, intensity, and dynamics, thickens textures in the accompaniment part, frequently uses accidentals and enharmonics to further enhance the color of chromatic, together with the angular and agitated long melodic phrases rise and fall to match the prosody. According to the three-stanza poem with repeating "Immer inmitten" twice at the beginning and end of each of the three stanzas, Ullmann uses the modified strophic form to differentiate the substance in each verse but also to keep the uniformity of the poem's structure, and finishes each stanza's last phrase with poco rit. or rit. then back to a tempo to continue interlude or postlude, which is a cue of an ending of each verse and gives people a sense of falling energy to react with the hopeless reality, but at the same time builds up the tension between verses.

The last song is also a three-stanza poem, which is similar in the theme to "Immer Inmitten" and is more an emotional progression from the last one. It consists of many questioning sentences to express the desperation indignation of the helpless situation and the miserable life, but the final answer that left for us is only death is the ultima liberation. Ullmann chooses the ABA' form, continues on the highly chromatic style with the lack of a key signature and the prolific use of accidentals, gives sweeping lines within the phrase structure, and starts with a thick chordal texture to convey the heavy subject and thins it when the accompaniment or the melodic line contains arpeggiated chords. He especially made important emotional words bare the rising high pitches, such as zerfällt (decay) in mm. 9-10, Lust (desire) in ms. 15, and Gefahr (danger) in mm. 34-35, and varies the tempo throughout the piece, including Ruhig schreitende Bewegung (quiet-paced movement), agitato (agitated), tranquillo (tranquil), and agitato, ma non accelerando (agitated, without acceleration), for matching the rising and falling intensity of the emotion. Besides, this song has an extrardentary wide range from G#3 through to A5, which is very demanding for singers to acquire both a broad range and the raw emotion.

4 Conclusion: The significance of promoting the "Recovered Voice"

Though Ullmann's two Theresienstadt-period works are less known and performed, this period of works represent Ullmann's mature contrasting style and are highly artistic standard. It is the historical integrity that requires us to re-exam our understanding of twentieth-century classical music. The continuous and seamless transmission of German classical music, which could be dated back before Johann Sebastian Bach, was passed on from generation to the next. When it was going to flourish under the circumstances of the exchange and collision of the conservative traditional artistic expression

and innovative iconoclastic currents, it was ruptured by the Third Reich. Many composers were persecuted in the concentration camps. Many were forced to scatter all over the world for survival. The destroyed thriving environment not only caused the reduction in production but also interfered the transmission of the works. A further effect is that our perspectives on the history of classical music in the twentieth century are incomplete, because an enormous amount of works have not been performed and the composers' lives have been largely ignored. Ullmann and his music are the representatives among them. However, this is just a drop in the ocean of the missing part of the music history. More lost music works need to be recovered and promoted. Only when we have significantly acquainted with the voluminous music that impeded by Nazi suppression, can the reappraisal be done fairly and the musical map of history be completed.

It is the artistic value that is embodied in the missing and forgotten music works. If it were not for the artistic value, only moral or historical considerations would not be sufficient grounds for revival. But the value of art takes time to be judged. This cannot be done by a single hearing on symbolic or uncommitted performance. So I wouldn't limit the performance of these works to a special memorial occasion. I would like all of these missing and forgotten masterpieces to be heard often and enter into their rightful place as one of our repertoire. Judgments should only be made after those performing and listening over the course of years have given these varied voices and their attendant spirits sufficient time to be fully digested. People will know and digest them and can decide if they like them or not. They are loved or hated just as every other bit of music that are for musicians and also for the public.

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