

A musician's cultural resistance in the Theresienstadt camp. Viktor Ullmann

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Abstract: A personality shrouded in mystery for three decades since his tragic death by extermination at Auschwitz in 1944, the composer, conductor and critic Viktor Ullmann, Jewish by origin (born in Teschen, Silesia), disciple of Arnold Schönberg, integrated into a synthetic culture (Polish, Czech, German, Austrian) through his general-musical training, his creative development (influences of composers Gustav Mahler, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Alban Berg), remains little known in the consciousness of posterity. From the discovery in 1975 of the visionary work *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung* to the present day, although exegesis has unearthed full scores or fragments, manuscripts of opus in various genres, nevertheless, there is still enough reluctance to approach it interpretatively. We believe that it would be provocative, especially the approach to the works completed between 1942 and 1944, when the musician was imprisoned in the Theresienstadt camp. Starting from the fact that this year marks the 80th anniversary of his death, the purpose of this study is to evoke the personality of Viktor Ullmann, trying to highlight the idea that his openness to the creative assimilation of philosophical and literary concepts of the time was an impetus for the realization of valuable works, moreover, a form of resistance, of survival, in the terrifying context of the Theresienstadt compositional phase.

Keywords: Viktor Ullmann, opera, Theresienstadt, culture, camp.

1. Introduction

The passion for the Jewish-born musician, pianist, composer, conductor and Theresienstadt critic Viktor Ullmann was triggered by reading the essay *Goethe and the Ghetto*¹, quoted in numerous publications, which surprises with its controversial, metaphorical content, encrypted in a *code of suffering*, challenging the musicologist to decipher the depth of the message: “Theresienstadt was and remains for me a school that teaches structure [...], where one was unable to experience that weight of cruelty[...] I have composed quite a lot of new music here in Theresienstadt, mostly at the request of pianists, singers and conductors for the purpose of the Ghetto’s recreation periods[...] In addition, future generations will care little for the lack of music paper that we

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¹ Viktor Ullmann (1944). *Goethe and Ghetto*, <https://viktorullmannfoundation.com/viktor/>

presently experience. I emphasize only the fact that in my musical work at Theresienstadt, I have bloomed in musical growth and not felt myself at all inhibited: we simply did not sit and lament on the shores of the rivers of Babylon that our will for culture was not sufficient to our will to exist[...]”². Surprisingly, this essay, reflecting the artist's dignity, not without irony, was written in 1944, around the same time as the banned work *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung*.

Paradoxically, at a time when Ullmann considered that the environment did not hinder creativity, that it did not excuse a lack of compositional or interpretative performance, he was deported to *Auschwitz* together with the librettist Peter Kien in the same year, entrusting the manuscripts of the score to the prisoner Emil Utitz, the camp librarian. Utitz survived and passed the document on to another colleague, Dr. Hans Gunther Adler. The first edition was prepared between 1973-1975 by Kerry Woodward, an English musician close to the Adler family, and premiered on December 16, 1975 in Amsterdam. It is precisely the absence of an initially ideologically directed and later demonstrative reaction to the performance staged after three decades that constitutes the premise of this study.

Starting from the brief bibliography systematized a decade ago, the pianist and composer Christophe Sirodeau wondered in his article *Actualité de Viktor Ullmann*³, what was the reason for the delayed reception of the writings about the musician whose particularly complex thought could only be discovered by accessing two biographies written by Verena Naegele⁴ and Ingo Schultz⁵, as well as texts signed by himself. "Surprisingly, no serious monograph had been completed in English or French by 2013"⁶. With the exception of Jean-Jaques van Vlasselaer⁷, who had been researching for several years in order to publish a study on music in the camps in *Musiques: une encyclopédie pour le XXIe siècle* by Jean-Jacques Nattiez⁸, but which never came to be, in French there were a few pages about Ullmann mentioned in the book *Les voix étouffées du 3ème*

² Karen Lin Uslin (2015). *Writings of Musicians: the Documents of Viktor Ullmann and Gideon Klein*, in: *Grasping at Hours of Freedom: Musical Life in the Terezin Concentration Camp*, A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music of The Catholic University of America In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, Washington, D.C., p. 39.

³ Christophe Sirodeau (2013). *Actualité de Viktor Ullmann' par Christophe Sirodeau*, in vol.: *Art, Intellect and Politics*, pp. 483-513, http://www.christophesirodeau.com/Christophe/V_Ullmann.html

⁴ Verena Naegele (2002). *Viktor Ullmann - Komponieren in verlorener Zeit*, Dittrich Verlag, Köln.

⁵ Ingo Schultz (1993). *Viktor Ullmann 26 Kritiken über Musikalische Veranstaltungen in Theresienstadt*, Bockel Verlag, Neumünster.

⁶ Christophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 485

⁷ Jean-Jacques van Vlasselaer (2004). *The Triumph of the Human Spirit: Ullmann in Theresienstadt*, Carleton University, Ottawa.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Nattiez (ed. 2003). *Musiques: une encyclopédie pour le XXIe siècle*, Actes Sud/Cité de la musique, Paris.

*Reich – Entartete Musik*⁹ by Amaury du Closel and a brief note in the volume *Le destin juif et la musique – trois mille ans d'histoire* by Frans Lemaire¹⁰.

Another important piece of research is the dissertation thesis *Musical Life in the Terezin Concentration Camp*¹¹, based on documents provided by the Pamatnik Memorial, the archives of the United States Holocaust Museum, and researchers at the Institute for the Study of War and Genocide in Amsterdam, as well as the testimonies of Theresienstadt survivors who have shared their stories over the years.

The chapter *Musicians' writings: the Documents of Viktor Ullmann and Gideon Klein*¹² analyzes the cultural activities in the camp from the perspective of these artists, both of whom had a rising career before their deportation. The material focuses on Ullmann's twenty-six chronicles, which paint a picture of the imprisoned performers.

2. Theresienstadt – a “model cultural-artistic center”

What was Theresienstadt? Officially a “model camp”¹³ for the Czech resistance. According to historian Wolfgang Benz, Theresienstadt was a town evacuated inhabitants by order from Berlin in February 1942, transformed into a refuge center where Czech artists arrived and were allowed to practice their profession. Rapidly, Theresienstadt's exclusively Jewish population grew under deplorable conditions of survival. However, through clever manipulation of propaganda, the Nazis misled a Red Cross delegation in June 1944 and, two months later, made the movie “The Führer Gives a City to the Jews”¹⁴, a painful testimony to a collapse of humanity. Among the personalities in Theresienstadt in 1942, it is worth mentioning that along with Viktor Ullmann, the musicians Karel Ančerl, Pavel Haas, Hans Krása, and Gideon Klein were part of the disastrous decision signed on October 16, 1944, on the basis of which they were to be deported to Auschwitz. Haas and Krása were gassed the next day, Ullmann the third, Klein was transferred to Füstengrube, where he died in January 1945. Ančerl remains the miracle of this massacre.

⁹ Amaury du Closel (2005). *Les voix étouffées du 3ème Reich - Entartete Musik*, Actes Sud /Cité de la musique, Paris.

¹⁰ Frans C. Lemaire (2001). *Le destin juif et la musique - trois mille ans d'histoire*, Fayard, Paris.

¹¹ Karen Lin Uslin, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-54.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Klass Coulembier (2017). *Présentation musique dans les camps*, translation by Carine Chauran, pp. 52-59, <https://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/5730>

¹⁴ Kurt Geron (1944). *Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt/Terezin*, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1000172>

3. Viktor Ullmann – biographical and creative journey

Turning our attention to the personality of the musician Viktor Ullmann, we will emphasize his relations with artists of the time, his contact with the labyrinthine realm of anthroposophy, the positive and negative consequences of this pseudo-science on his career, his collaborations with anthroposophical librettists – the premises of symbolic performances in the context of a growing tense atmosphere generated by Nazi ideology, the years spent at Theresienstadt, creatively productive but psychologically catastrophic, culminating in the problematization of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder die Tod-Verweigerung*, the assumed testament of Ullmann, the musician who recovered his identity and discovered the path to salvation.

He was born in Teschen (Silesia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) on Czech territory (like Gustav Mahler), on the borders of Poland and Moravia, in 1898. The father, an army officer who converted to Catholicism, was knighted as Baron of Tannfels. In 1909, he moved to Vienna, where he studied law at the University of Vienna, and in 1916 enlisted as a soldier, serving on the Italian front at the Isonzo. Aged 20, he felt lonely and burdened by the drama of war¹⁵.

In regards to music, there is little valid data about his studies. He had lessons with Joseph Polnauer, a disciple of Schoenberg. Before the end of the First World War, he enrolled in Schoenberg's classes at (Moedling). Another musician he had the opportunity to meet was Alban Berg, who became a friend¹⁶. He also took lessons with Eduard Steuermann, a recognized pianist. Through Schoenberg he also met Alexander von Zemlinski, whom he later joined in Prague. At the end of 1919 he became his accompanist, assistant conductor at the New German Theater, which has also influenced his creative style¹⁷. He married Martha Koref, settling in Prague for seven years. Gradually, he began to conduct successful performances (Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Berg's *Wozzeck*), to the extent of the trust placed in him by Alexander von Zemlinski. His first elaborate compositions in the quartet genre date from 1923, although the early lieder were created in 1919, a genre he consistently favored. They are lost melodies, as are most of the works before the Theresienstadt period. International creative recognition came as early as 1926 with *Schoenberg's Variations and double fugue (on a theme) for piano Op. 3*¹⁸.

In 1927 Ullmann left Prague and became the musical director of the Aussig Opera until 1928.

¹⁵ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

¹⁶ Jennifer A. K. Zabelski (2003). *Viktor Ullmanns Terezin Lieder: A Performance Guide to Songs for Soprano or High Voice*, B.M., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, p. 15.

¹⁷ Karen Lin Uslin, *op. cit.*, p.40.

¹⁸ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

3.1. Entering the anthroposophical circle

His contact with the musician Alois Haba, who specialized in microtonics, an aesthetic that seemed far removed from his preoccupations, mediated his entry into the world of anthroposophists. Interestingly, Ullmann's first reactions to this trend were negative. In 1931, however, he gave up his musical activities in favor of managerial ones for some time, as director of the anthroposophical bookshop *Novalis* in Stuttgart, a position he held until 1933. “The decision to resign was not only due to the rise of Hitler, but also to the bankruptcy of the bookstore. He still did not feel threatened as a Jew, and the anthroposophical movement was not banned until 1935.”¹⁹

3.1.1. An introduction to anthroposophy

Originating from theosophy, in Rudolf Steiner's early 20th century vision, anthroposophy entailed an insistence on the “superiority of European esoteric traditions”²⁰. Following his separation from theosophy, Steiner founded the Anthroposophical Society. Shortly before the outbreak of war, he moved the organization's international headquarters to Dornach in Switzerland. While in 1886 Steiner published *The Theory of Knowledge in the Goethean Worldview*²¹, an epistemological inquiry based on reflection on others and the self, but surprisingly in 1910 he gave a lecture in Oslo on “The Mission of the National Spirit in Relation to North German Mythology”²². The “national spirit”²³ of Northern and Central Europe belonged, Steiner explained, to the “North Germanic peoples rooted in the Aryan race”²⁴. But the connection between Steiner's racially stratified pseudo-religion and the rise of the Nazis goes beyond philosophical parallelism. Anthroposophy was structured around a hierarchy of “biological, psychological, spiritual” characteristics²⁵, all correlated with the concept of *race*²⁶. The affinities with Nazi discourse are obvious. We believe that Ullmann was aware of these contradictory theories, and had assimilated Steiner's volumes and, in particular, his 1925 synthesis work, *Anthroposophical Theses*, on the esotericism of this *occult science*, which was suited to a spiritually enlightened elite whose humanist orientation was merely a *facade* masking the factual disaster of Nazi ideology through the premises of racial ideology.

¹⁹ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, pp. 487-488

²⁰ Peter Staudenmaier (2015). [Anthroposophie et écofascisme](https://veritesteiner.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/anthroposophie-et-ecofascisme-parpeter-staudenmaier/), retrieved from <https://veritesteiner.wordpress.com/2015/11/04/anthroposophie-et-ecofascisme-parpeter-staudenmaier/>

²¹ Rudolf Steiner (1996). *Goethe's Theory of Knowledge: An Outline of the Epistemology of His Worldview*, retrieved from https://www.spiritualrs.net/Conferinte/GA002/GA002_index.html.

²² Peter Staudenmaier, *op. cit.*

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ Rudolf Steinerscholen, *Antroposofie en fascisme*, retrieved from <https://www.antroposofia.be/steinerscholen/wordpress/antroposofie-en-fascisme/>

²⁶ Peter Staudenmaier, *op. cit.*

3.2. Stage

Contact with Prague meant a return to a passion for music. “Ullmann was not the only artist to flee Nazi Germany to Prague in 1933, an opportunity to meet Leo Kestenberg”²⁷ (an important figure in German music education and close to F. Busoni). Although Prague in the inter-war period was characterized by an effervescence of cultural offerings, the reality of heightened tensions in the Czech, German and Jewish communities was evident. Against this controversial backdrop, Ullmann won Czech appreciation by completing the orchestral version of *Schoenberg Variations*, which, although unfavorably reviewed by the critic Th. Adorno, was awarded the Emil Hertzka Prize in Vienna.

At the same time, it is the period of crystallization of a performance on the spiritual experience of the anthroposophical movement, which the musician had been thinking about for several years. Based on a libretto by Albert Steffen, Ullmann realized *Der Sturz des Antichrist (The Fall of Antichrist)* in 1935. If the religious symbolism of the plot generates the traditional conflict between the evil force illustrated by the tyranny of the despot and the good one suggested by the nobility of the artist, whose spirituality of character overcomes suffering and defeats the Antichrist, from a musical perspective, the opera is a product of Schoenberg's tonal-post-Romantic school²⁸. Like Alban Berg, it incorporates instrumental structures, such as fugues in dramatic sections or extended passages in march-rhythm with clear reference to characters, to ironic, sarcastic stage moments²⁹. The stylistic influences of Alexander Zemlinsky, with whom Ullmann collaborated as a conductor at the Prague Theater, are unmistakable. It is clear, as the musician pointed out in a letter to the librettist following a meeting with the conductor Felix Weingartner, to whom he was given the score, that the association of the theme with political events in Germany jeopardized the performance. Paradoxically, Ullmann won the Hertzka Prize again in 1936³⁰.

3.3 *Der Sturz des Antichrist*

We note that in the mid-1930s, the style was original, falling between tonal and atonal, far removed from the personal dodecaphonic practice of *Schoenberg Variations*. A detail that contributed to his detachment from Schoenberg's circle, especially after Alban Berg's passing in 1935. “Can we explain the fact that although the Kolisch Chamber Ensemble, to whom Ullmann dedicated the final version of the *Schoenberg Variations* opus, took the score to America in 1939,

²⁷ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

²⁸ Roberto Becker (2021). *Aus dem Inneren einer Diktatur*, retrieved from <https://www.concerti.de/oper/oper-leipzig-der-sturz-des-antichrist/>

²⁹ Roland H. Dippel (2021). *Der Sturz des Homo Deus Viktor Ullmann: Der Sturz des Antichrist*, retrieved from <https://www.die-deutsche-buehne.de/kritiken/der-sturz-des-homo-deus/>

³⁰ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 491.

they have never performed it?”³¹. It is clear that this version had a strategic purpose for Ullmann, for recognition abroad and, above all, to save himself from the Prague trap, realizing that danger was closing in. The simple question is: why didn't the Anthroposophical Society have the power to support him to get a Swiss visa? Or perhaps there was an ideological, moral conflict between its members and Ullmann? “In March 1939, it was too late. Czechoslovakia had been invaded by Hitler. The reality was that he became the victim of a ruthless bureaucracy of the Nazi authorities that prevented him from obtaining German citizenship. It was a time of deep grief, especially as he had also lost his father in 1938”³². Unfortunately, he was unable to take part in any public activities and his only concerts were private. On September 8, 1942, he was arrested and deported with his family to Theresienstadt. At the time, he regarded deportation “as an act of resignation, after a period of painful turmoil. Once in the camp, he had the chance to be released from forced labor, proving more creative than in previous years”³³. In charge of organizing concerts, he was interested in performing old music or giving lectures on various topics such as the relationship between sound and color.

3.4. *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder die Tod-Verweigerung*: emblematic opus in the creative context of Theresienstadt

Ullmann composed 3 piano sonatas, Jewish songs for voice and piano, choirs, a quartet and other manuscript works, where the musician seems to rediscover his Jewish identity, moreover, through the quotations (Zionist songs, Slovak national anthem, Hussite song, Lutheran chorale), he shows an openness to multiculturalism and different confessions.

In the following, we will focus on *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder die Tod-Verweigerung* (The Emperor of Atlantis or The Disobedience of Death) composed between 1943-1944. From the symbolic libretto we learn that “Harlequin and Death complain of the misery in which they no longer find their place. Men no longer know how to smile and don't even respect death anymore. The Emperor has issued a decree of war among his subjects. Death takes revenge by breaking his sword: men will no longer be able to die. The Emperor discovers that public executions are useless: the prisoners remain alive. He grants his subjects the blessing of eternal life. Anarchy spreads. Harlequin revives the childhood memories of the Emperor, who goes mad. Death promises to free people from all suffering if the Emperor is ready to die first...”³⁴.

³¹ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 495-496.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 497

³⁴ John Vandevent (2023). *Opera Profile: The story of Viktor Ullmanns Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, retrieved from <https://operawire.com/opera-profile-the-story-of-viktor-ullmans-der-kaiser-von-atlantis/>

The integrated subject of the aesthetics of the absurd, following the expressionist model of the hallucinatory dramaturgy of Kafka's novels, is proposed by the artist Petr Kien, a 25-year-old poet and writer, who personifies death in an age of absolute darkness. But death refuses to *die*... Depending on his decision ...the world can be saved...³⁵. Contact with the symbolic title cannot be neglected. For it was the very legend of Atlantis, of an advanced, utopian society possessing the wisdom of world peace, that stimulated the dreamers. Ullmann responded to the challenge by going beyond the simple idea of discovering the material remains of the vanished continent, and was in fact searching not for the body, but for the soul of Atlantis.

Anchored in an anthroposophical theme, based on the idea that humans can develop the intellectual capacity to connect to the spiritual dimension by transposing into imaginary spaces with symbolic valences, Ullmann conceived the work more as an allegory, “a satirical demonstration of Hitler's phantasmagoria for the Third Reich, of the ignorance of death and the seemingly endless war of Europe. However, since the Emperor's *game* ultimately fails in the end, the faith in the dignity of the human being becomes evident”³⁶. Thus understood, the message of the libretto goes beyond criticizing the Nazi regime, being a reaction against any totalitarian system, a call for tolerance and respect for humanity.

The chamber opera score was created for 7 soloists and 12 instrumentalists (strings, one flute, one oboe, one clarinet, one trumpet, percussion), available at Theresienstadt at the time. The one-act work contains a prologue and 4 scenes. In the prologue, it is announced that a performance is to take place, where the other characters are revealed: a soldier, a bridegroom with his hair cut, a drummer, Harlequin and Death. The music unfolds in the manner of a collage, with changes of style and character causing different numbers to follow one another: melodrama, recitative, duet, trio, “in a sonority mixed with various influences in the styles of Schoenberg, jazz, dance music of the 1920s (a la Kurt Weill), but also with quotations, allusions to early music or to pages from the opus *Das Lied von der Erde* by G. Mahler or the symphonic works of Josef Suk”³⁷. The sonorous expression covers a wide range of antinomic aesthetic categories (lyrical-dramatic-ironic-sarcastic), in the manner of the heterogeneous sonority of Vienna in the first decades of the 20th century.

³⁵ Jean Lacroix (2022). *Viktor Ullmann: la Mort, porteuse de salut?*, retrieved from <https://www.crescendo-magazine.be/viktor-ullmann-la-mort-porteuse-de-salut/>

³⁶ Mindy Elicia Buckton (2013). *Re-Contextualizing Viktor Ullmann's Der Kaiser von Atlantis Within Twentieth-Century German Opera*, A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters in Arts in the School of Music, University of Victoria, p. 121, retrieved from <https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/377fb1d1-22c2-42a4-9b8f-66ae6f5ffa6d/content>

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

Of particular note is the meditative final moment, inspired by the Lutheran chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* [Our God is a fortress], whose emotionality comes from the transformation of the sacred text into the dramatic vision of librettist Petr Kien, a young prison inmate: “Come, O Death, dearest guest, into the room of our heart. Take away the suffering and burden of life, Give us respite from pain and misery, Teach us the desire and necessity to live, In honor of our brothers”³⁸.

Returning to one of Viktor Ullmann's aphorisms from his diary *Fremde Passagiere* [*The Foreign Passenger*], himself feeling alienated in the dictatorship of the Nazi regime, we read: “The deepest pain cannot be turned into music, no words can give it form, it does not create form out of earthly stone, it is silent, covered by the incredible intellectual dignity with which Ullmann resists hell”³⁹.

4. Conclusions

The composer, conductor and critic Viktor Ullmann, a tireless seeker of the spirituality of the imaginary sound, remains in the consciousness of posterity a model of the artist's resistance through culture in tragic conditions. The contact with philosophy and anthroposophy, fields that interfered with music, either in the conception of librettos or in the process of abstraction of technically evolved works, was a landmark in the struggle against Nazi ideology from a general-cultural perspective and, unfortunately, an impediment related to the distorted reception of symbols by the powers that be. However, the ability of the visionary musician with the realization of *The Fall of the Antichrist*, which anticipated the artificiality of the free-entry mask theater called Theresienstadt, led him to continue his survival in the search for identity by concentrating on compositions with inserted quotations and melograms, preparing the great maskless performance entitled *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, which would ensure his salvation in a universe of veiled confessional or racial discrimination.

For the past ten years, Viktor Ullmann has been a programmed, interpreted and commented artist, and the scientific and artistic actions aimed at rehabilitating his personality are well known, whether in association with the other Theresienstadt creators or on an individual level. Yet, it is impossible not to wonder. Had he survived the Theresienstadt moment, would he have had a different fate? We cannot draw a verdict, but the reality is that he would have had difficulty facing the prejudices of the years that followed, because, regardless of the general socio-political and cultural context, but all the more so when the mentality of a society is marked by ideology and, implicitly, by its consequences in the different segments of propaganda, the artist is received in relation to the era to which he belongs, to his favorite genres, to the fashionable

³⁸ Mindy Elicia Buckton, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

³⁹ Cristophe Sirodeau, *op. cit.*, pp. 497-498.

music. However, what was, unfortunately, the result of the valorization of Theresienstadt's creation in the following decades? That the predominant works were marches, cabaret performances, entertainment, propaganda creations, requiring a long period of time to bring to light that valuable opuses were also composed, whose authors were stuck in the trap of the time given to them. Therefore, the era once over, any recuperative act although welcome, does not benefit from immediate impact in the current reception. It remains to convince ourselves by revisiting Viktor Ullmann's music as a cultural act and beyond!

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