

# Musical Testimonies of Terezín and the Possibilities of Contrapuntal Listening

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## Abstract

Taking my cue from the postcolonial cultural analyses of Edward Said, as well as a recent postcolonial turn in Holocaust studies, I define a practice of *contrapuntal listening* for the copious musical witness that constitutes the extensive Holocaust testimonial archive. Contrapuntal listening recognizes the inherent power dynamics and potential narrative desires present within the capture of testimony, a process that is never ideologically blank and is often driven by the explicit goals of the interviewers (amateurs and experts alike), whose relationship to the traumatized individual before them ranges from the empathetic to the antagonistic. This essay attempts to listen contrapuntally to one documentary source concerned with Viktor Ullmann's musical activities in Terezín: *Goethe och Ghetto* (1996), the award-winning film directed by Peter Berggren and Göran Rosenberg. My analysis places the original witness testimonies collected for the project in contrapuntal conversation with the final documentary to illuminate its intentional "voicing" of three survivors as well as the power dynamics inherent in the testimonial exchange. My aim is not to cast aspersions, but to call for increased attention to these varied counterpoints as we expand our understanding of music's roles in multivocal spaces like Terezín. To do so is to begin to enable a self-critical exchange with musical testimonies that considers their engagement within historical networks of power and authority.

In 1947, Holocaust survivor Paul Celan wrote his celebrated "Todesfuge" (Fugue of Death)—a haunting poem described by translator Karl Weimar as a "mysterious mixture of ineradicable remembrance and of narcotic forgetfulness induced by verbal and musical transmutation of experience."<sup>1</sup> In it, fugal entrances of key phrases punctuate the lines, while seemingly small observations—a guard's blue eyes, the color of a woman's hair—are juxtaposed with graven images of violence: the scraping of strings; the jabbing of spades; the flogging of victims as they dig their own graves. For Celan, the fugue was a metaphor for both his traumatic experience of the Holocaust and the impossibility of returning to the traditional rhythms of everyday life, let alone poetry. The persistent return of the poem's refrain—"Black milk of morning we drink you at night"—simultaneously recalls the grim displacement of time, the deadening routines, and the repeated intrusions of "verbal material from the disrupted world" into the realm of postwar witness.<sup>2</sup> As literary scholar John Felstiner argues, Celan's poem "has become a historical agent, accumulating its own biography" and mythologies.<sup>3</sup> It is multi-voiced, not only in the fugal entrances that interweave themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Weimar, "Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge': Translation and Interpretation," *PMLA* 89, no. 1 (1974): 86–87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/461671>.

<sup>2</sup> John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 26.

into the poetic setting, but also in the myriad contexts that have witnessed and reinterpreted its refrains over the past seventy-five years.

Viktor Ullmann's Terezín poem, "Fellow Passenger Removes His Mask," also employs the fugue as a metaphor for the complex contradictions that victims encountered during the Holocaust:

Here we have man's Doppelgänger  
of fugues, of course, the perfect singer. [. . .]  
The counterpart he sings is perfect  
like a mirror-crab—it's contra subject.  
In line with that well-tried old scheme  
He's the double fugue, the second theme.<sup>4</sup>

Ullmann's imagery seizes upon the fugue as a mode that resists simplistic or singular conceptualizations of self by voicing the many layers of human subjectivity that can exist simultaneously for traumatized subjects. The poetic narrator experiences personal disorientation when he encounters his Doppelgänger, his mirror image and inversion, and the moment raises awareness of his own vocal confusion; he now speaks against himself—contra subject—from the secondary position of the *Nebenstimme* (the second theme). Ullmann's poem seems to suggest that these simultaneous contradictions of voice reflect the traumatic schisms that individuals who experienced the Holocaust often reference in their postwar testimonies.

As I read these poems in conversation, their shared invocation of the fugue made me think about how one might listen in the postwar period to Holocaust testimony via the concept of counterpoint, an approach that struck me as particularly relevant for witness accounts of musical activity in places such as Terezín. What might such a listening practice look like in theory, and what challenges could it pose for postwar audiences? Michael Beckerman's analysis of Gideon Klein's String Trio (Terezín, 1944) offers one model, in which Beckerman questions whether our hearing of musical voice (and, relatedly, artistic intent) retains a measure of historiographical bias; that is, does the "invocation of something as highly charged as the Holocaust" condition us to listen for "heaviness and menace . . . [for] drama and weight over lightness and grace?"<sup>5</sup> As Beckerman argues, existing postwar discourse and narratives—and the expectations that they establish, especially when they become conventionalized—influence how we listen, whether to the survivors themselves or their music. In my own scholarship, I have relatedly examined how dominant cultural historiographies of Terezín have engendered the opposite bias within the realm of witness testimony, where well-intended interviewers often validate redemptive and affirmational stories of Terezín's cultural life and therefore fail to hear more traumatic or dystopian accounts of music-making in the ghetto.<sup>6</sup> Thus I found myself at a place of serious retrospection, for now that most survivors of the genocide have died, leaving us only with musical narratives that invite as many questions as they answer, it is imperative to return to them anew. How might we ask new questions of these extant testimonies and open up our listening to hear beyond their already recognized themes?

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<sup>4</sup> Ullmann, "Fellow Passenger Removes His Mask (Poem Dedicated to Albert Steffen)," trans. Sonja Linden, <https://viktorullmannfoundation.com/poems/>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Beckerman, "Postcard from New York—Trio from Terezín," *Music & Politics* 1, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0001.101>.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Lynn Wlodarski, "Musical Memories of Terezín in Transnational Perspective," in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, ed. Tina Frühoff and Lily Hirsch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199367481.003.0003>.

## Contrapuntal Listening

Taking my cue from the recent postcolonial turn in Holocaust studies, I suggest that a practice of *contrapuntal listening* might be defined and posited for the analysis of the copious amounts of musical witness—captured in myriad forms and media formats—that constitute the extensive testimonial archive for Terezín.<sup>7</sup> Contrapuntal listening recognizes the inherent power dynamics and potential narrative desires present within the capture of testimony, a process that is never ideologically blank and is often driven by the explicit goals of the interviewers (amateurs and experts alike), whose relationship to the traumatized individual before them ranges from the empathetic to the antagonistic.<sup>8</sup> It then intentionally returns to these testimonies with self-awareness, openness, and compassion to listen acutely for alternative, suppressed, or interrupted narratives within these fixed audio-visual sources.

Understood as a radical and revisionist intervention, contrapuntal listening requires the listener to openly identify and use their own subject-position as an external (and belated) audience to reassert and empower these marginalized or silenced voices, not only by sharing what they have (re)heard but also by illuminating the specific circumstances that contributed to the material's initial dismissal. Contrapuntal listening therefore extends beyond the boundaries of the testimonial record itself to consider the ethics and impacts of our own engagements with the recorded source. Without such self-critical reflection on our own disciplinary practices and biases, we risk not being able to listen with an ear to the marginalized or incongruent voices present in the content of witness testimony. Crucially, we also risk ignorance regarding the traumatic impact of our standard cultural narrativizing, including how our inability to *hear* and *record* what a witness is conveying impacts both personal and historiographical well-being.

My work draws direct inspiration from an extensive engagement with the cultural writings of postcolonial theorist Edward Said, most notably *Culture and Imperialism*. In it, Said describes a process of “contrapuntal reading,” by which a reader would return to well-known imperialist literary texts and seek to recognize the peripheral voices present or absent within them. As he explains, this analytical process requires the scholar to “look back at the cultural archive, [and] begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts.”<sup>9</sup> In his mind, contrapuntal approaches to texts take account of “both processes—that of imperialism and that of external resistance to it—which can [only] be done by expanding our scope to include what was once forcibly excluded.”<sup>10</sup> They allow the reader to acknowledge and problematize the surfeit of subjectivities inherent in the listening process, including how our own biases, socialization, training, aims, and desires necessarily construct and

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<sup>7</sup> Among the sources that influenced my thinking, but which are not directly cited in the following analysis, are Brian Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300093186.001.0001>; Willi Goetschel and Ato Quayson, “Introduction: Jewish Studies and Postcolonialism,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.32>; and Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Two groundbreaking analyses that have informed my thinking are Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); and Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Post-War Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 51. Although the subjects of Said's book are works of fiction, his approach understands culture as expressive of historical, social, and political power dynamics. See George M. Wilson, “Edward Said on Contrapuntal Reading,” *Philosophy and Literature* 18, no. 2 (1994): 265–73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1994.0025>.

<sup>10</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 67.

constrict how we hear and make sense of the fixed recordings we encounter. The result is an extension of what Hannah Pollin-Galay has recently described as an ecological approach to Holocaust witness, one which demands that we study “the person in the Holocaust” alongside the “specific notions of subjectivity” inherent in testimonial settings and exchange.<sup>11</sup>

Because the concept of contrapuntal listening derives from a cultural critique of imperialism, the question logically arises as to whether such a model is appropriate or even relevant to Holocaust testimonies about music. Scholars have contentiously debated the causal links between German imperialism and the crimes of the Holocaust ever since Hannah Arendt first argued that “imperialism’s political self-legitimation laid the groundwork for fascism” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).<sup>12</sup> Among the numerous and influential imperialist mentalities, scholars have repeatedly identified the centrality of racial hierarchies and territorial expansion, understood as the racial and spatial ideologies of German imperialism, to Nazi ideology, with specific attention to the imperialist foundations for its weaponized anti-Semitism.<sup>13</sup>

To varying degrees, anti-Semitism was a rhetorical component of European imperialism, including German colonial occupations in Africa and the genocide against the Herero (Namibia).<sup>14</sup> Historian Christian Davis has documented the prominent involvement of vocal anti-Semites in German colonial projects, ranging from financial investment to explicit political and extra-parliamentary actions.<sup>15</sup> One result was a well-honed toolbox of effective techniques for the subjugation and destruction of non-Aryans within German territories that easily transferred to Jewish targets in the twentieth century. Within the context of the Holocaust, imperialist strategies deployed for the removal of Jewish culture from European culture would have included: 1) legal discrimination such as the 1933 “Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service,” under which Jewish intellectuals and musicians were expelled from academic and musical institutions; 2) ghettoization and isolation—both physically and philosophically—of Jewish musicians and so-called “Jewish” repertoires, whether through the application of Nazi ideology to musicological

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<sup>11</sup> Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 7, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300226041.001.0001>.

<sup>12</sup> The most vocal advocates for the continuity thesis acknowledge that “the crimes of the National Socialists cannot be traced back monocausally to the tradition of European colonialism,” but they agree with Arendt that Nazism appears to be an “extremely radicalized variant” of the imperialist mindset. For an excellent account of the debate over the so-called “continuity thesis,” please see Kitty Millet, “Caesura, Continuity, and Myth: The Stakes of Tethering the Holocaust to German Colonial Theory,” in *German Colonialism: Race, the Holocaust, and Postwar Germany*, ed. Volker Langbehn and Mohammad Salama (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 93–120; and Russell A. Berman, “Colonialism, and No End: The Other Continuity Theses,” in *German Colonialism*, 164–90. As Jürgen Zimmerer notes, the “problem of the connection between colonialism and National Socialism is highly political and emotional, for the historical-academic question of the singularity of the Holocaust and the relationship of Nazi crimes to previous or subsequent collective mass murders has long since also taken on a philosophical dimension.” See Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust—Towards an Archeology of Genocide,” *Development Dialogue* 50 (2008), 97.

<sup>13</sup> Shelley Baranowski, “‘Against Human Diversity as Such’: *Lebensraum* and Genocide in the Third Reich,” in *German Colonialism*, 51; and Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust,” 105.

<sup>14</sup> Some historians strongly assert that “anti-Semitism had relatively little significance in the [ideological] structure [of *Lebensraum*] at least until the time of the Nazis,” while others view the imperialist notions of ‘race and space’ as more inherently and complexly intertwined. See Woodruff D. Smith, *The Ideological Origins of Nazi Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 91. The following articles are excellent representations of both sides of the debate: Benjamin Madley, “From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe,” *European History Quarterly* 35 (2005): 429–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691405054218> and Susanne Kuss, *German Colonial Wars and the Context of Military Violence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674977358>. For a detailed account of the Herero genocide, see Jeremy Sarkin, *Germany’s Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Christian Davis, *Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Germans of Jewish Descent in Imperial Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 3, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.3080712>.

scholarship or the creation of separate institutions such as the *jüdische Kulturbund*;<sup>16</sup> or 3) the forced removal of Jewish populations and their musical cultures to ghettos and concentration camps, where mass extermination and genocide ensured the silencing of vital Jewish voices through the physical destruction of human life. In short, Nazi ideologies associated with radicalized notions of space and race produced a dominant (and, arguably, imperialist) discourse predicated on the total silence and elimination of non-Aryan voices.

Against this discourse of dehumanization and silencing, the music of Terezín has been posited in the postwar period as a deliberate retort to the attendant racial ideologies and genocidal acts of National Socialism. Following the model set by Joža Karas's *Music in Terezín, 1941–1945* (1985), scholars have described the musical activities of Terezín's prisoners as marginalized actions of spiritual and cultural resistance against the dominant mechanisms and realities of Nazi cultural policy and genocide. Among the most famous examples is Viktor Ullmann's allegorical opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, written in Terezín with a libretto by fellow inmate Peter Kien.<sup>17</sup> In 1944, the *Kaiser* was being readied for performance when Nazi officials suspended all rehearsals. Shortly thereafter, Ullmann, Kien, and their artistic collaborators boarded transports to Auschwitz, where all but a few were exterminated upon arrival. As Rosa Pérez Zancas notes, Ullmann's deliberate musical citations—to Mahler and Suk, Weill and Bach, jazz and atonality—have since been considered an “intellectual form of resistance formulated as a message of hope for the prisoners.”<sup>18</sup> Martin Modlinger similarly characterizes Kien's libretto as “as writing *against* [death and suffering], as a form of spiritual resistance,” but he admits that such terms must be understood critically, “approached from different angles simultaneously . . . from its different roles for authors and audiences, and from its relationship to itself as writing between resistance and illusion.”<sup>19</sup>

Within the Terezín literature, among the greatest challenges to contrapuntal listening are the powerful narratives of cultural redemption that have come to be attached to its most celebrated musical works and artistic figures. Informing my position here is the work of Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer, who warns that popularized narratives of spiritual resistance can obscure the tragic reality that artworks such as Ullmann's *Kaiser von Atlantis* were not “effectual against the determined German efforts to annihilate” their Jewish creators.<sup>20</sup> More recently, scholars whose work contends specifically with Holocaust music or Terezín's cultural activities have levied similar concerns. In *Music in the Holocaust*, historian Shirli Gilbert specifically worries about the popular prominence of the “music as spiritual resistance” trope, which she believes problematically consolidates and reifies what listeners expect to hear in accounts about “Holocaust

<sup>16</sup> For detailed examples, see Pamela M. Potter, *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); and Lily E. Hirsch, *A Jewish Orchestra in Nazi Germany: Musical Politics and the Berlin Jewish Culture League* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.4757981>.

<sup>17</sup> For recent examples of this “opera-as-resistance” contextualization, see Rachel Bergman, “Creativity in Captivity: Viktor Ullmann's ‘Der Kaiser von Atlantis,’” *Opera Journal* 38, no. 2 (2005): 3–19; and Alessandro Carrieri, “The Voice of Resistance in Concentrationary Music,” *Political Perspectives* 7, no. 2 (2013): 44–60.

<sup>18</sup> Rosa Pérez Zancas, “Viktor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* oder *Die Tod-Verweigerung* (1944) als Form utopischen Widerstands,” *The German Quarterly* 91, no. 4 (2018), 481, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12089>.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Modlinger, “Approaching Death: ‘Last Writing’ from the Terezín Ghetto,” *Oxford German Studies* 44, no. 1 (2015): 59, 61, <https://doi.org/10.1179/0078719114Z.00000000075>. To this final point, Modlinger cites two important models: Zdenek Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt* (New York: Fertig, 1983), esp. 125–6; and Lisa Peschel, “Das Theater in Theresienstadt und das Zweite Tschechische Kabarett ‘Geistiger Widerstand,’” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* 13 (2006), 84–114.

<sup>20</sup> Langer, “Cultural Resistance to Genocide,” in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 57, 61.

music.”<sup>21</sup> Writing a decade later, German historian Wolfgang Benz similarly feared that the uncritical embrace of Terezín as a redemptive symbol had transformed the ghetto and its historical agents into a “legend, detached from [its own] reality”—a phenomenon that makes it harder to hear alternative perspectives when they appear in the testimonial record.<sup>22</sup> Echoing Benz, historian Anna Hájková has stressed the negative impact of postwar memorial trends on Terezín’s cultural historiography. “Terezín produced a canon that defined crucial artists [and] musicians [that] largely continues to this day,” she writes, with certain pieces emphasized for their ability to capture either a desired “essence of imprisonment” or a “positive message [that] endowed [certain] cultural activities with a higher, ennobling meaning.”<sup>23</sup>

To be certain, many witnesses confirm redemptive portraits of musical Terezín, and my work does not question the validity of their memories or meaning-making. They describe their involvement in myriad cultural activities—whether as organizers, amateur performers, or audience members—as a means of sustaining and asserting themselves within a repressive and dehumanizing environment. I believe them, but I am also swayed by the argument that such testimonies are shaped by institutionalized and dominant modes of postwar discourse, and that contrapuntal listening might offer one means by which to ascertain which voices might have been marginalized from Terezín’s broader historiography and why.

Also contributing to the problem is the sheer scope of the testimonial record, which, as Said observed in his path-breaking *Orientalism*, requires one to “cut down a very fat archive to manageable dimensions and outline something in the nature of an intellectual order within that group of texts.”<sup>24</sup> Exclusion is thus recognized as an inevitable part of an analytical process that often consolidates testimonial memory into institutionalized or dominant narratives that make sense to the listener. Contrapuntal listening therefore requires the scholar to return to well-known texts and focus attention on the marginalized perspectives that have been overlooked in canonical readings. Or, as historian Dominick LaCapra has forcefully argued, critical thinking about the Holocaust and its possible meanings (or, in this case, contrapuntal listening to its testimonies) must always be “positioned on thresholds, open to its own historicity, and prone to unforeseen transitions.”<sup>25</sup>

I would argue that by focusing attention on the contrapuntal exchange of testimony—that is, those dynamics that ultimately determine the margins of a given testimonial record—one might acquire a portrait of musical Terezín that moves beyond its usual “stereotypical reception as a place of [redemptive] cultural activities.”<sup>26</sup> Such a listening practice works against narrative compression, for it remains open to possibilities outside of coherent historiographies that now verge on the canonical. I would argue that the stakes become even higher when testimonies (and the delicate process of listening to witnesses) move beyond the realm of the scholarly archive and into the realm of public documentary. In these productions, the witnesses simultaneously exist as traumatized subjects in their own right as well as testimonial objects whose narratives

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<sup>21</sup> Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), viii. James Loeffler adopts this concern about consolidation of the full range of musical meanings into a seemingly unified genre of “Holocaust music.” See Loeffler, “Why the New ‘Holocaust Music’ Is an Insult to Music—and to Victims of the Shoah,” *Tablet Magazine*, July 11, 2013, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/holocaust-music-victims>.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfgang Benz, *Theresienstadt: Eine Geschichte von Täuschung und Vernichtung* (Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2013), 224, <https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406645501>.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 171, 177, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190051778.001.0001>.

<sup>24</sup> Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 2014), 16.

<sup>25</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 38, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Benz, *Theresienstadt*, 224, 231.

can be curated and curtailed, often without the survivor's input, to fit the vision of directorial and production staff. In documentary productions about Terezín, the survivors often become, to varying degrees, both the center and the periphery—their testimony vocally employed as voiced object and subject in the telling of traumatic histories.

In raising these concerns, I claim no moral high ground. My first interview with a musical witness was with Henry, a child survivor of Terezín who had performed in the celebrated performances of the children's opera *Brundibár*.<sup>27</sup> I was a first-year graduate student in musicology, untrained in the nuances of oral history, and involved in a local production that would feature Henry's testimony as part of its dramaturgical rendering of the opera. As we sat in the local JCC, Henry recounted his memories of the 1943 rehearsals, noting that "every child knew it in and out." With obvious delight, he recalled his group of friends from the barracks—the "Fivers," as they called themselves—and how rehearsals provided them with a collective musical experience from which they had constructed memorable childhoods, despite the circumstances of their surroundings.<sup>28</sup> A decade later, I returned to my recording with more contrapuntal ears and, with a degree of shame and regret, recognized the manner in which I had steered Henry to these specific memories. Our interview was punctuated—or, one might argue, punctured—with my interruptions, assumptions, and leading redirections, all in search of a narrative that would confirm my postwar preconceptions about musical Terezín. Humbly, it reminded me of another archival audio testimony given by Karas, whose monograph *Music in Terezín* has shaped English-language musical historiographies for the past forty years. In it, he describes how he had pointedly rejected the incongruent memories of his interview subjects, dismissing them to the margins of his work: "I could show you on the tapes again, [how] I was talking to survivors and I was correcting them, because after the years they forgot and things changed in their minds, and I found documents which prove that I am right and the people who did that particular thing, they were wrong about [it]."<sup>29</sup>

I share all of this at the onset to help my reader situate my thoughts in what the Black feminist scholar bell hooks has called the "politics of location," which "necessarily calls those . . . who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision."<sup>30</sup> Both experiences—mine and Karas's—made me think long and hard about what may have been lost in our testimonial exchanges. What structures—physical, organizational, canonical, intellectual, memorial, political—have constrained previous processes of inquiry and therefore narrowed historical and memorial understanding? How might we listen anew to already established audio sources and well-known testimonial figures? My aim is to understand better the power of past historiographies to limit our contemporary listening and how the dynamics present in extant witness interviews ultimately influence who and what gets heard. My hope is that such work might sensitize future scholars of Terezín to these issues in a manner that encourages them to adopt what hooks describes as a position of "radical openness" attuned to the margins of these testimonies—the places of resistance that have often escaped notice or proved too difficult or troubling to integrate into the central postwar narrative of the ghetto.

<sup>27</sup> See Włodarski, "Listening Contrapuntally; or What Happened When I Went Bach to the Archive," *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies* (2016): 22–23.

<sup>28</sup> Włodarski, "Beyond Authenticity and Remembrance: Navigating the Challenges of a Modern Performance of Hans Krasá's *Brundibár*," in *Legacy of the Holocaust: Children and the Holocaust*, ed. Zygmunt Mazur, Fritz König, Arnold Kramer, Harry Brod, and Władysław Witalisz, (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2002), 452–3.

<sup>29</sup> Włodarski, "Listening Contrapuntally," 23.

<sup>30</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 15.

## *Goethe och Ghetto: A Contrapuntal Listening*

To illustrate how contrapuntal listening might be employed as an analytical tool, I offer an analysis of *Goethe och Ghetto* (1996), an award-winning documentary about Viktor Ullmann, directed by Peter Berggren and Göran Rosenberg.<sup>31</sup> My selection of the Swedish production for this analysis was based on three criteria. First, the documentary relies almost entirely on survivor testimony to drive its narrative; as the directors have acknowledged, they aimed to reduce the intermediary presence of experts (although two appear in the film) by foregrounding the voices of select survivors and weaving them into a testimonial fugue. Second, I had access to the full-length interviews conducted for the project—they had been deposited at the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland—which allowed me to listen critically to the interviews themselves and compare the primary source material with the finished documentary. Third, and perhaps most importantly, I deeply admired the production, which had made a significant impression upon me when I initially saw it during preparations for my first archival trip to Terezín during my graduate work. I wanted to challenge myself to return to a beloved source in a contrapuntal fashion and, for better or worse, to experience the personal and professional challenges that often accompany more critical forms of listening to witness testimony.

The concept for *Goethe och Ghetto*, which premiered on Swedish television, arose from an impactful musical encounter. Göran Rosenberg, himself the son of Holocaust survivors, attended a concert given in 1995 by Janos Solyom that featured Ullmann's seventh piano sonata. As Rosenberg recalled, "it was the first time I [had] heard about the musical life of Theresienstadt . . . and it was a moving experience, not only because of the circumstances in which the music had been created, but because of the music itself . . . its unbending will to life."<sup>32</sup> Surprised by Terezín's cultural activity, Rosenberg began to research Ullmann, only to find what he considered limited archival or material traces: a few photos, select correspondence and essays, and citations of performances that took place in Terezín. Dedicated secondary literature on Ullmann (in English or German) was only beginning to be published—fueled in part by a 1994 conference that took place in Dornach, Switzerland—but Rosenberg was fortunate to have met Elena Makarova and Ingo Schultz, two scholars whose academic work centered on the intellectual and cultural activities of Terezín.<sup>33</sup> As Rosenberg explained, "through Ullmann, we wanted to get beneath this whole puzzling complex of culture in Terezín. . . . I think we had this idea that if we could get close to Ullmann, then we might get closer to the whole phenomenon that was culture in Terezín."<sup>34</sup>

In Sweden, public media engagement with the Holocaust emerged from what cultural historian Karin Kvist Geverts characterizes not as "a total silence, but rather a kind of uneasiness to talk about the

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<sup>31</sup> The documentary won the Czech Crystal at the 1996 International Film Festival in Prague. It can be viewed in its entirety at Göran Rosenberg, "Goethe och Ghetto, Viktor Ullmann i Theresienstadt. En film om kultur och barbari," Vimeo video, 58:56, <https://vimeo.com/215018586>.

<sup>32</sup> Göran Rosenberg, "Music and Morality—The Theresienstadt Experience," paper presented at the Music and Manipulation Conference, Stockholm, September 19, 1999, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Among their major publications around this time were Elena Makarova, Sergei Makarov, and Victor Kuperman, *University Over the Abyss: The Story Behind 489 Lecturers and 2309 Lectures in KZ Theresienstadt, 1942–1944* (Jerusalem: Verba, 2000); Ingo Schultz, ed., *Viktor Ullmann: 26 Kritiken über musikalische Veranstaltungen in Theresienstadt* (Hamburg: Bockel Verlag, 1993); and Schultz, "Wege und Irrwege der Ullmann-Forschung" in *Viktor Ullmann: Die Referate des Symposions anlässlich des 50. Todestag 14.–16. Oktober 1994 in Dornach und ergänzende Studien*, ed. Hans-Günter Klein (Hamburg: Von Bockel, 1996), 13–37.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenberg, interview with the author, May 27, 2021.



Holocaust.”<sup>35</sup> During the war, the Swedish government had regulated the media in order to maintain its status as a “so-called neutral nation” and thereby “avoid Nazi Germany’s disapproval.”<sup>36</sup> Under the watch of the National Bureau of Information (1940) and the Press Committee (1941), the Swedish government produced a series of “Grey Notes” that identified what was appropriate (or inappropriate) for publication and “advocated neutrality in relation to warring nations.”<sup>37</sup> As media scholar Ester Pollack describes, newspapers that resisted these policies of coordination were “denied distribution, and their information . . . effectively censored. . . . The few voices that tried to follow another [path] were suppressed by different types of government sanctions.”<sup>38</sup> The result, she argues, was the “symbolic annihilation” of the most harrowing reports of the genocide from the Swedish media, a calculated absence that contributed to Sweden’s own belated reckoning with the Holocaust.

Ultimately, it was Swedish television—specifically the March 1979 broadcast of the American miniseries *Holocaust* (*Förintelsen*)—that provoked a broader cultural awareness of the Holocaust and, importantly, questions about Sweden’s role in the genocide. After the war, the international television market steadily gained cultural prestige, which film scholar Michael Tapper attributes to television award galas such as the Prix Italia and the migration of celebrated film directors (such as Ingmar Bergman) to the new medium during the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> In the decade that followed, public media figures pursued research centered on Swedish attitudes towards and understandings of the Holocaust. Perhaps the most notable contribution was the 1991 book *Heder och samvete* (Honor and Conscience) by Swedish journalist Maria-Pia Boëthius. In it, Boëthius forcefully critiqued the wartime neutrality narrative, taking aim at the Swedish government, the complicity of the Swedish press, and the fascist sympathies of auteurs like Bergman.<sup>40</sup> Her probing questions—Why had Sweden continue trading with Nazi Germany until 1944? How might such an economic partnership have prolonged the war? What did the Swedes know about the Holocaust, and when?—ushered in a period of increased public discourse and debate about Swedish complicity in the Holocaust.<sup>41</sup> If the media had been part of the problem, Boëthius and other media figures such as Rosenberg now saw themselves as part of the solution.<sup>42</sup>

When he began the Ullmann project, Rosenberg was initially struck by the confusing paradoxes that abounded in Terezín, especially how individuals experienced “cultural freedom under the auspices of barbarism.”<sup>43</sup> As he explained:

<sup>35</sup> Karin Kvist Geverts, “Refugee Policy in Sweden during the Holocaust: A Historiographical Overview,” in *Holocaust Remembrance and Representation: Documentation from a Research Conference* (Stockholm: Elanders Sverige AB, 2020), 147.

<sup>36</sup> Ester Pollack, “As the Holocaust Escalated, the Swedish Press Fell Silent: Media and the Normalisation of Passivity and Non-Engagement in WWII Sweden,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 451, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766195>.

<sup>37</sup> Pollack, “As the Holocaust Escalated,” 454–5.

<sup>38</sup> Pollack, “As the Holocaust Escalated,” 451, 461.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Tapper, *Ingmar Bergman’s Face to Face* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 22, <https://doi.org/10.7312/tapp17652>.

<sup>40</sup> See Christine Agius, “Transformed Beyond Recognition? The Politics of Post-Neutrality,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 46, no. 3 (2011): 379, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836711416960>; and Tapper, *Ingmar Bergman*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Geverts, “Refugee Policy in Sweden,” 148–9; and Agius, “Transformed Beyond Recognition,” 379. As Geverts notes, “a major shift in public awareness in Sweden took place at the end of the 1990s” when Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson launched several government-sponsored initiatives to support research into the Holocaust and Sweden’s complicated role as a bystander. Tapper notes that a similar wave of discourse also followed the 1999 reprinting of Boëthius’s book. See Tapper, *Ingmar Bergman*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> For example, Rosenberg’s publications from the 1990s took specific aim at Swedish xenophobia and the treatment of outsiders, whether historical examples (Jewish deportees) or cases drawn from current events. See Rosenberg, “Sweden and its Immigrants: Policies versus Opinions” *Daedalus* 124, no. 3 (1995): 209–18.

<sup>43</sup> Rosenberg, “Music and Morality,” 5.

Essentially this paradox was . . . illusory. . . . To barbarism, Theresienstadt was no paradox at all, only a method to undisturbedly finish the project of annihilation. To culture, however, Theresienstadt was the [cruellest] of deceits and the biggest of challenges [in that it preserved] to the people who participated in it and were touched by it an invaluable link to meaning and hope.<sup>44</sup>

Over time, Rosenberg came to understand Ullmann's compositions as cultural "investments in a time beyond" that would demonstrate that while barbarism "undoubtedly won out in Theresienstadt, in a non-epical and existential sense, it perhaps didn't."<sup>45</sup> This complex tension between barbarism and hope is one of the primary themes of *Goethe och Ghetto*, which admirably does not shy away from conversations about complicity, confusion, and despair. But as Rosenberg described to me, he intended the documentary to capture Ullmann's "firm belief in the power of culture," which the director understood as "idealist" in nature.<sup>46</sup> "I wanted to bring forth this enormous cultural force that the Nazis [allowed] by just opening up a little bit of space," he explained. "I wanted to show also the amazing phenomenon that Terezín was, [how it] provid[ed] an environment that allowed this to happen. But, [also that] it was the cruelest of experiences and experiments."<sup>47</sup>

Rosenberg's directorial conceit was that the documentary would be "narrationless" with the exception of Ullmann's own voice, drawn from the composer's known corpus of writings (read by a trained actor) and musical works. This autobiographical portrait of Ullmann would then be augmented by on-screen commentaries given by postwar scholars (Schultz among them) and, crucially, by the testimonies of key musical witnesses with direct biographical connections to Ullmann. Aided by Makarova's personal contacts, Rosenberg arranged and conducted interviews with six musical witnesses whose testimonies constitute the core material of the documentary: Karel Berman, Alice Herz-Sommer, Lisa Klein, Paul Kling, Edith Kraus, and Thomas Mandl. Each survivor was initially asked a series of questions about Ullmann—How did he behave? What did he look like? Who was he?—that invited the witness to recall specific moments of interaction with Ullmann. Those contexts established, the interviews then turned to specific discussion of more significant encounters, including Ullmann's career in prewar Prague (Klein), performances of his work for the *Freizeitgestaltungen* (Herz-Sommer, Kraus, Mandl), and the interrupted rehearsals for the *Kaiser von Atlantis* (Berman, Kling). Back in the editing studio, Rosenberg then listened to the hours of testimony he had collected with an ear for "the best parts of the interviews," meaning those moments where what the witness is saying, and *how* they are expressing themselves, fit well into the unfolding narrative.

The result was a survey of Ullmann's life, loosely structured around the five movements of his Seventh Sonata, that moved from his early education and careers to his tragic murder in Auschwitz. For the final assemblage, Rosenberg worked without a preordained script in order to allow the film to "grow out of the materials, and not the other way around." As he clarified, "I didn't want the documentary to impose itself [on the materials]. Sometimes you might have a case you want to prove in your documentary, and so you force everyone into saying what you want to hear, which is not the case here."<sup>48</sup> And yet, as he admitted, he found himself trying to extract from the interviews sentiments that aligned with those he attributed to Ullmann's humanistic view of culture in Terezín: "For example, you can hear Edith Kraus speak of these

<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, "Theresienstadt—Culture and Barbarism," materials for the Kulturhuset exhibition (Stockholm, September 1995), 3–4.

<sup>45</sup> Rosenberg, "Music and Morality," 9.

<sup>46</sup> Rosenberg, interview with the author, May 27, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg, interview with the author, May 27, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenberg, interview with the author, May 27, 2021.

wonderful concerts they are having, and people come, and they listen as if nothing happens around them. And I wanted to get at that. That is what I wanted to bring forth—that they could feel important as human beings by doing these things—because that was very much Ullmann’s stand.”<sup>49</sup>

Such comments remind us that Rosenberg is an auteur whose primary materials derive from an archive of his own making, namely, the interviews he conducted for the production. In this respect, the film recalls a significant work from the previous decade: *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann’s impressive and controversial French documentary film. As film historian Stuart Liebman remarks, *Shoah* emerged from Lanzmann’s own skepticism about media representations of the Holocaust and his desire to place the power of narration back into the hands of eyewitnesses so they might “bear the principal burden of conveying the truth of what happened.”<sup>50</sup> But recent readings of the film against its raw footage—made possible by the opening of Lanzmann’s personal archive, now housed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—make clear Lanzmann’s firm hand as the powerful narrator of the film. As Erin McGlothlin and Brad Prager have asserted, the survivors who appear in *Shoah* are not fictional, but they and their experiences are curated to create a deliberate tone for the film, a fact that “underscores Lanzmann’s role as the active creator of *Shoah*” and raises questions about the hegemony of the finished film.<sup>51</sup> Their work flows from Jennifer Cazenave’s exhaustive analysis of Lanzmann’s unused footage, contrapuntal work that she describes as focusing attention on those words “recorded and relegated to the margins” and positing them as “critical and significant texts in unearthing new meanings and mobilizations of both the finished film and audiovisual testimony” in order to reveal the “historiographical influences informing the selection and performances of the witnesses.”<sup>52</sup>

For me, Cazenave’s critical work on *Shoah* raises similar questions for *Goethe och Ghetto*: what historiographical influences might have influenced Rosenberg’s approach to his raw footage, explicitly or implicitly? The assumption that Ullmann and his music were central works within the musical landscape of Terezín is at the heart of Rosenberg’s narrative; and yet, as I noted earlier, scholars have questioned whether the postwar elevation of specific works—including the *Kaiser von Atlantis*, which was never performed outside of rehearsals in Terezín and yet figures prominently in the documentary—accurately represent the experience of cultural life within the ghetto.<sup>53</sup> For example, Hájková observes that the modern classical music composed by Ullmann or Klein “was never as popular [among the inhabitants] as the performance of established classical music such as Mozart and Smetana.”<sup>54</sup> One consequence of this emphasis on modernist repertoire is that witnesses whose narratives engage outside of its frame of reference face multiple challenges to having their voices heard and integrated into historiographical or documentary work. They can find their voices suppressed or ignored, face pressure to refashion their testimonies to meet the expectations of their interviewers, or feel delegitimized when their memories are challenged or go unbelieved.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Rosenberg, interview with the author, May 27, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Stuart Liebman, “Introduction,” in *Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah: Key Essays*, ed. Stuart Liebman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14–15.

<sup>51</sup> Erin McGlothlin and Brad Prager, “Inventing According to the Truth: The Long Arc of Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” in *The Construction of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and its Outtakes*, ed. McGlothlin, Prager, and Markus Zisselsberger (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 7–11.

<sup>52</sup> Jennifer Cazenave, *An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), xxxi–xxxii.

<sup>53</sup> See Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*; Beckerman, “Postcard from Terezín;” and Benz, *Theresienstadt*.

<sup>54</sup> Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 179.

<sup>55</sup> See Wlodarski, “Musical Memories of Terezín,” 57–74.

Elsewhere, scholars have examined how the power dynamics present within both wartime traumatic communities (like Terezín) and the postwar processes of witnessing have influenced which voices are heard and validated through recounting. Hájková specifically cites the “perceptible gender gap in the *Freizeitgestaltungen*” that allowed privileged male performers (Berman, Mandl) and a few exceptional women performers (Herz-Sommer and Kraus) to “dedicate themselves fully to ‘artistic employment’ in the ghetto” and later rise to the prominent position of the “official chroniclers of musical life” in Terezín in the postwar period.<sup>56</sup> The other musical witnesses who appear in *Goethe och Ghetto* experienced the ghetto from more marginalized positions that differentiate their musical testimonies from those of the celebrated witnesses. Paul Kling, for example, was a teenage violin prodigy whose age initially limited his access to instruments and rehearsal spaces, whereas Lisa Klein, an accomplished piano virtuoso in her own right, had to give up performance altogether as she was “implicitly expected to play a supporting role to her brother, [the composer Gideon Klein], and her widowed mother” by providing for them through her work in the ghetto’s youth homes and bakery.<sup>57</sup>

As Rosenberg admits, his hearing of the survivor testimonies was conditioned by Ullmann’s ideas about culture—at least those preserved in the surviving documents—as well as the experts upon whom he relied and his own aesthetic sensibilities. The documentary therefore privileges those witnesses whose testimonial voices underscore the more soteriological and canonical views of the *Freizeitgestaltungen* that emerged after the war, specifically the testimonies of Alice Herz-Sommer, Edith Kraus, and Thomas Mandl.<sup>58</sup> They appear more frequently in the film than the other three survivors and thus establish themselves as the *Hauptstimmen* of the film’s testimonial fugue. Embracing a more contrapuntal approach, I chose to deliberately focus my archival listening on the more peripheral witnesses within the documentary; my intention was to listen for postwar narratives that may have been obscured by the dominant historiographical discourse. For as Theodor Adorno contends, these *Nebenstimmen* remain an important part of the contrapuntal fabric, where they act as “simultaneous sounding parts [that] do not synthesize seamlessly into a whole, but rather retain their independence” and thus their ability to negate and affirm the dominant voices.<sup>59</sup> As I listened, I heard testimonies that revealed a more complicated postwar legacy of Terezín for those survivors whose memories do not conform with the narrative of “artistic resistance” that has become entrenched in the scholarly, popular, and performance literature surrounding the *Kaiser von Atlantis*. Below, I present three such moments of narrative resistance that were omitted from the film but remain preserved in the archival footage.

The first moment involves Paul Kling, a Czech violin prodigy who arrived at Terezín in 1943 with his violin hidden among his bed sheets. He was fifteen years old and initially assigned to a manual labor detail (*Arbeitsgruppe*) before being transferred to a building that housed younger inmates. There, he met Karel

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<sup>56</sup> Anna Hájková, “The Piano Virtuoso Who Didn’t Play in Terezín, or, Why Gender Matters,” *Orel Foundation Journal*, last modified May 6, 2011,

[http://orelfoundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the\\_piano\\_virtuoso\\_who\\_didn039t\\_play\\_in\\_terez237n\\_or\\_why\\_gender\\_matters](http://orelfoundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the_piano_virtuoso_who_didn039t_play_in_terez237n_or_why_gender_matters).

<sup>57</sup> Hájková, “The Piano Virtuoso Who Didn’t Play in Terezín.”

<sup>58</sup> The literature here is vast and often found in small testimonial fragments within larger studies. I offer the following three as prominent examples related to these three specific witnesses: Makarova, Makarov, and Kuperman, *University Over the Abyss: The Story Behind 520 Lecturers and 2,430 Lectures in KZ Theresienstadt, 1942–1944*, second edition (Jerusalem, Verba Publishers, 2004); Wilhelm Rösing and Marita Barthel-Rösing, dir., *Enjoy the Music—Die Pianistin Edith Kraus vom Wunderkind durch Theresienstadt nach Israel* (Bremen: roesingfilm, 2012), DVD; and Malcolm Clarke, dir., *The Lady in Number 6: Music Saved My Life* (Universal City, CA: Reed Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

<sup>59</sup> Keith Chapin, “Labor and Metaphysics in Hindemith’s and Adorno’s Statements on Counterpoint,” in *Apparitions: New Perspectives on Adorno and Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. Berthold Hoeckner (New York: Routledge, 2006), 25.

Reiner, who learned of his talent and organized his involvement in the *Freizeitgestaltungen*. From this point forward, Kling spent his days practicing, rehearsing, and performing, and as Aleeza Wadler notes, he was “among the few prisoners given the privilege of pursuing their artistic talent full-time with no other work demanded of them.”<sup>60</sup> Kling played with the *Stadtkapelle* and met the composers Gideon Klein and Viktor Ullmann through Terezín’s chamber music offerings. As Kling recalls, he was chosen to play in the *Kaiser*’s ensemble either because he “was in demand” or because the more experienced violinists had declined and decided to “let Kling suffer with [the difficulty of] that piece.”<sup>61</sup> It is this engagement—Kling’s final artistic venture before he was sent to Auschwitz—that brought about his inclusion in *Goethe och Ghetto*.

The source interview begins with an initial question asked by Kling: “Who am I talking to?” Rosenberg responds with details about his artistic vision for the project and practical concerns: “This is a film that will only be moved by its protagonists. . . . I will be there as a representative of the viewer. So [look] not there [the camera], but here [to me].”<sup>62</sup> Soon, they come to the topic of the *Kaiser* and Kling’s impressions of Ullmann from that time. Kling recalls Ullmann’s active participation in rehearsal, “demanding or requesting certain things,” but he continually reiterates that his memories of the opera and its preparations are hazy.<sup>63</sup> At one point, Rosenberg asks whether the performers understood the opera as an act of spiritual resistance or a subtly disguised political critique. The question is unsurprising, especially given Rosenberg’s excellent background preparation for the interviews and his cultural understanding of Terezín (as preserved in his published papers). But Kling declines to offer a moral for the work because all he remembers is his own confusion in the moment:

I remember it being kind of a surrealistic atmosphere, where it was because the subject—maybe I didn’t understand the subject, or I did understand it and therefore found it surrealistic. I don’t like to think too much into my own thoughts of those years, because maybe I didn’t really understand what was going on.<sup>64</sup>

The interview presses on, asking: “Can you describe the last days before the fall transport to Auschwitz, when you were rehearsing the *Kaiser*?” Departing from the well-known, if not canonized, story that the opera was suspended due to its defiant political content, Kling answers with a less linear—and perhaps more traumatized—account:

I don’t remember when the first transport started, whether it was during our rehearsals or after it had already been canceled. Because at one point the story was there won’t be any performance, so no more rehearsal. But it seems to me that it [was] followed very soon by the transport. I cannot remember. There was great confusion and then there was really great anxiety. . . . But this fall, the influence on the rehearsals, I have not the slightest recollection.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Aleeza Wadler, “Paul Kling,” ORT: Music and the Holocaust, <https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/theresienstadt/paul-kling/>.

<sup>61</sup> Wadler, “Paul Kling.” As Kling noted in another interview, prior to the *Kaiser*, Martinů had been the most modern composer he had ever played. “[Ullmann’s music] was modern music. It was also not easy to play, not least of all because of the hand-written score and one had to play everything on the page. I found the music fantastic.” See Ingo Schultz, “Gespräch mit Paul Kling,” *musica reanimata* 5 (1993): 5.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Kling, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, Sammlung Viktor Ullmann (SVU), Paul Sacher Stiftung (PSS), DVD 69–70.

<sup>63</sup> Kling’s comments to Rosenberg are reinforced in a second published interview, in which he describes Ullmann as “sometimes giving clarifications to the instrumentalists” or talking with Schächter at the rehearsals. As he clarifies, “I never had a personal conversation with Ullmann. As a sixteen-year-old, I held him at a respectful distance from myself.” See Schultz, “Gespräch mit Paul Kling,” 6.

<sup>64</sup> Kling, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, SVU-PSS, DVD 69–70.

<sup>65</sup> Kling, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, SVU-PSS, DVD 69–70.

Kling's last statement above appears in *Goethe och Ghetto*, where it helps to illustrate the disorientation experienced by Ullmann and others in Terezín during the fall of 1944.

And yet, the very next exchange—relegated to the cutting room floor—exposes a significant contrapuntal line that surfaces in many of the taped interviews: how the process of bearing witness places further traumatic pressures on the survivors, especially when interviews are conducted with an eye to an already established aesthetic or narrative. Despite Kling's sincere admission that he “cannot remember” the final rehearsals, Rosenberg pursues the line of inquiry given its potential value to the narrative; after all, the documentary is about Ullmann, and Kling is one of only a few living survivors who participated in this final musical production. Kling's response is calm, and he expresses a quiet resolve as he speaks about the external pressures being placed on him:

There are so many things that one seems to remember in life and doesn't really know, but they have been so often told . . . so I don't really know. If you want the truth, I cannot say “yes, I knew why it was stopped.” . . . I am so careful in saying what I say, . . . I think it's too important to say what may be really essential than to improvise [memory]. . . . It's a nice thing to do, but speculation, everything we are talking about in the past, is somebody talking fifty years later having . . . a completely different perspective on things than one had in those days. . . . I'm trying to think back on some of the impressions I had from those days, but it would be very hard to say whether that is in the moment what happened and what I was thinking about.<sup>66</sup>

This strand did not go unheard by Rosenberg; at one point, in a separate interview, he comments to the field team that this refrain (“I cannot remember”) appears as a *Leitmotif* within all the interviews and wonders whether there might be a way to build it into the narrative structure of the documentary.<sup>67</sup> However, the concept remained unrealized, demonstrating the difficulty of articulating contrapuntal lines while simultaneously advancing a cohesive historiography.

The other surviving witness who participated in the *Kaiser* rehearsals was Karel Berman, who also appears in this specific section of *Goethe och Ghetto*. His inclusion is logical given both his involvement (he was cast as the lead role of Death in the opera) and his frequent involvement in earlier memorial projects related to the opera (Hájková has described him as a “professional music witness”). In the documentary, Berman's firm recollection of the rehearsals follows Kling's hazy uncertainty as an internal form of exchange between witnesses. He describes a specific scenario in which an SS commissar arrived to oversee the final dress rehearsal and notes that “when she heard what we were singing, it had to be banned because [the opera] went directly against Hitler.”<sup>68</sup> His confidence in his memory is compelling and solidifies the portrait of the *Kaiser* as an overt political act of resistance by Ullmann and Kien—one with implied tragic consequences for its participants.

Another lost moment in Berman's interview contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the testimonial work of these “professional music witnesses” who must continually present themselves as “survivors,” with all the expectations and vulnerabilities that the label carries. In *Goethe och Ghetto*, one early directorial conceit was the spontaneous reanimation of Ullmann's forgotten works, sometimes by the

<sup>66</sup> Kling, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, SVU-PSS, DVD 69–70.

<sup>67</sup> Rosenberg, in Klein, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, SVU-PSS, DVD 14. In his memoir, Rosenberg describes a similar realization about his own parents, who both survived the Holocaust. “They . . . carry with them an entirely different world . . . since a great deal of what they can't remember, or don't want to remember, they cannot forget.” See Rosenberg, *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*, trans. Sarah Death, ed. John Cullen (New York: Other Press, 2012), 13–14.

<sup>68</sup> Karel Berman, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, SVU-PSS, DVD 17. Special thanks to Christopher Lemelin for assistance with the Czech translations.

survivors themselves. Thomas Mandl, for example, is asked to play a melody from Ullmann's seventh piano sonata, but appears not to have been provided with a score. Up to this point, he has been in firm control of his testimonial presentation: casually smoking a cigarette while steering the conversation to the stories he is comfortable relaying. The request, however, causes him to fumble at the keyboard and plunk out what he can remember. Afterwards, he uncharacteristically apologizes to the crew for his technique and faulty memory. The scene never makes its way into the final cut, but the archival footage made me wonder whether he had felt inadequate or frustrated in the moment, as if he were failing in his role as a witness by not satisfying the interviewer's request.

Berman handles the same request differently, and although his response is also cut from the final montage, it tells us much about his complicated postwar identification as a Holocaust survivor and accomplished professional musician. When he first arrived at Terezín, Berman worked in sanitation with the burial crew; only after his operatic debut in Terezín (Smetana's *Bartered Bride*) was he allowed to dedicate himself exclusively to the *Freizeitgestaltungen*.<sup>69</sup> After the war, during which he had avoided the gas chambers of Auschwitz by declaring himself as a laborer rather than a musician, Berman returned to Prague to study voice at the Conservatory and became a preeminent soloist with the National Theater's opera company. He later joined the faculty of both the Prague Conservatory (1961–1971) and the Academy of Musical Arts, where he taught until his retirement in 1994. Although he built his career with an emphasis on canonical operatic roles (Leporello, Beckmesser) and nineteenth-century German Lieder, in his later years, he became a champion of Czech-language music: Smetana, Dvořák, Martinů, and his favorite composer, Janáček.<sup>70</sup> By the close of his career, he had produced nearly fifty operas and sung over 120 opera roles in close to 3,500 performances, including operas by many well-known and up-and-coming Czech opera composers.<sup>71</sup> His interview with Rosenberg is conducted in his teaching studio at the very end of this illustrious career, and Rosenberg's request is direct: "Can you sing a part of the death aria from memory, that you remember?"

Berman's response is equally direct: "No. Not for you. Not for anyone else. . . . I have entirely forgotten it. I have the notes at home, that I do have, my part." Berman continues to explain that he intends to sell his original vocal score—an invaluable item—to a foundation in Israel because he is strapped for cash, noting that no dealer in Prague will buy it from him.<sup>72</sup> He continues to discuss his reluctance to show the score to anyone, but the film crew implores him to sing perhaps just a few notes of the Ullmann aria. He silences their request with an interjection and an impromptu concert: "I will not sing Ullmann, but I will sing Smetana." As he begins the opening strains, one can hear that Berman is consciously, if not defiantly, aligning himself with his identity as an accomplished Czech musician—not with his traumatic identity as a Holocaust survivor. Such a striking and powerful moment might have appealed to Rosenberg, who has written about the strangeness of the word 'survivor,' a "term that slowly crystalizes out as all others are tested and found inadequate, making the central element of your situation the fact that you're still alive."<sup>73</sup> But as

<sup>69</sup> Martin Fogt, "Erinnerungen an Karel Berman," *musica reanimata* 99 (2019): 5.

<sup>70</sup> Fogt, "Erinnerungen an Karel Berman," 3.

<sup>71</sup> Graham Melville-Mason, "Obituary: Karel Berman," *The Independent* (UK), October 22, 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-karel-berman-1602823.html>; and Fogt, "Erinnerungen an Karel Berman," 1–8.

<sup>72</sup> Berman also approached Fogt about his *Kaiser* score, as Fogt recounts: "Karel Berman showed it to me. At the time he wondered who should get that one day. After our conversation we met the dramaturge Dr. Pavel Eckstein, who advised Berman to bequeath this script to the Terezín Memorial." See Fogt, "Erinnerungen an Karel Berman," 8.

<sup>73</sup> Rosenberg, *Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*, 277.

Rosenberg shared with me, he does not speak Czech; the interview was conducted with the assistance of a secondary party and then translated after the fact, rendering “in the moment” comprehension impossible.<sup>74</sup> As a result, when Berman spreads his arms wide in a gesture designed for the grand stage, the film crew speaks over his performance. Smetana (the repertoire and language of his success and national identity) is not Ullmann (the repertoire and language of his trauma) and is therefore outside the margins of the film’s narrative.<sup>75</sup>

Throughout my viewing of the archival footage, I became increasingly aware of how these production-based interviews risk treating witnesses as aesthetic subjects rather than traumatized individuals for whom the testimonial work might present specific risks and harm. For me, the point was driven home in a final moment featuring Lisa Klein, the sister of composer Gideon Klein. In the documentary, she speaks openly about the lasting trauma that she associates with the ghetto and its cultural “illusions”: “I cannot, even today, return to Terezín. . . . In Auschwitz, it was all clear [what was happening], but in Terezín, there was always the illusion of hope.”<sup>76</sup> In her interview, Klein is not able to answer many of the questions posed—likely because of her peripheral involvement in the *Freizeitgestaltungen*—and so the crew pivots to a more artistic request. In pursuit of a visual motif that the directors plan to use throughout the documentary, the elderly female witness is instructed to stare directly into the camera and not move for a full minute. It is a very strenuous and difficult endeavor for her, and she grows increasingly and visibly anxious during the exercise. Each time she moves too much, she apologizes and explains how hard it is on her. The shot is then reset and attempted again.

While she continues sitting, physically constricted and under the gaze of the camera, Rosenberg shifts from German to English to explain his vision to a colleague, a conversation Klein would not have understood as she does not speak English well. It is likely an unintentional shift, for I know Rosenberg holds deep empathy and care for his interview subjects. Soon, the stress becomes etched on her face as she struggles to remain in place, and ultimately it proves too much. Unable to continue, she releases herself from the camera by standing up and distributing cups and saucers for tea—an invitation that I interpreted as an act of defiance and self-protection.<sup>77</sup>

I could not shake the feeling that Klein’s sense of control—of her own process of witnessing, of the freedom of her body, of her understanding of the interpretive conditions around her—was eliminated in this moment. In the viewing station at the archive, I experienced a visual flashback of my own: to the *Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet* (1944), the only surviving film footage of Terezín, in which Jewish bodies are assembled and ordered by their captors to sit silently and still while listening to a

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<sup>74</sup> Berman often insisted that his interviews about Terezín be conducted in Czech, despite his fluency in German. As Fogt reports, in one interview that Berman did for the Bayerischen Rundfunk, he took the questions in German but responded only in Czech. See Fogt, “Erinnerungen an Karel Berman,” 5.

<sup>75</sup> A more cautious interview approach is taken by Fogt, as he describes in his memorial essay about Berman. “The songs by Ullmann, that I had . . . performed [throughout Germany], I did not bring with me to Prague [for my voice studies with Berman]. I was concerned that this repertoire might have hit a little too close to home for this sensitive artist.” See Fogt, “Erinnerungen an Karel Berman,” 4.

<sup>76</sup> Klein, *Goethe och Ghetto* testimony, <https://vimeo.com/215018586>, 34:00ff.

<sup>77</sup> In the final version, three of these staged “still shots” appear towards the close of the film—Herz-Sommer, Kling, and Kraus—and having witnessed Klein’s demur, I couldn’t help but watch the women’s participation more contrapuntally. One strains to keep an extended smile forced upon her lips, while the other shifts from side to side, her eyes finally casting downward to avoid direct contact with the camera. See *Goethe och Ghetto*, <https://vimeo.com/215018586>, 43:00ff.



performance of the Ghetto orchestra.<sup>78</sup> A year later, in writing this essay, I openly wondered if sharing the comparison to the *Dokumentarfilm* was fair. In my conversation with Rosenberg, his kindness and sincere respect for the witnesses was inherent throughout the interview; he held them in high esteem and genuinely cared about them, even worrying at the end of our conversation about whether he had done them justice with his work. But trauma and violence are not easily contained, even by the gentlest and most conscientious of artists; they find their ways into our expressive cultural materials—consciously, unconsciously, boldly, innocuously—as the ultimate *Nebenstimmen* within the textures of memory that we weave.

This acknowledgement is not mine alone; as historian Wolfgang Benz eerily admits, any redemptive portrait of Terezín seems to him “influenced by the clichés of the ‘model camp’—the result of National Socialist propaganda—and is not free from [those] illusions today.”<sup>79</sup> Benz’s remark returned me to Ullmann’s essay “Goethe und Ghetto,” one of the inspirations for the documentary, and the composer’s description of his artistic process as an attempt to “wrestle content into its unyielding form.”<sup>80</sup> What if we heard that description of composition not as a heroic struggle, as it is often interpreted, but as a statement of the difficult reconciliation between traumatic content and conventional forms? What might *Goethe och Ghetto* have highlighted from the testimonies via that contrapuntal frame?

The challenge is the same for any documentary project (*pace* Rosenberg, with great sincerity and deference) in that editorial and artistic decisions necessarily require the extraction of discrete voices in productions driven by historical witness. My aim is therefore not to cast aspersions—indeed, my own scholarly narratives similarly emphasize aspects of musical trauma to the exclusion of other possible realizations—but to call for increased contrapuntal approaches as we expand our understanding of music’s roles in multivocal spaces like Terezín. To do so is to begin to “enable a self-critical exchange” with musical testimonies that considers their engagement within historical “networks of power and authority.”<sup>81</sup> It is an appeal with very practical challenges, most notably our inability to re-interview survivors who have passed away and potential lack of access to the raw footage for similar documentary projects. We cannot ask them different questions or repeat the testimonial process with greater methodological awareness. But we must return to extant musical testimonies and listen more acutely for the contrapuntal strands that ultimately lend memory and history their complexity and thus their humanity. The result might be what bell hooks imagines when she describes how “fragments of memory might not simply be represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a ‘new take’ on the old”—a move to the testimonial margins as a critical intervention, an act of radical openness, and an utterly “new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.”<sup>82</sup>

## Archives Consulted

Sammlung Viktor Ullmann. Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland.

<sup>78</sup> Widely remembered under the title “Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt,” the film was originally titled “Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet.” See Karel Margry, “Das Konzentrationslager als Idylle: ‘Theresienstadt’ – ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet,” in *Auschwitz. Geschichte, Rezeption und Wirkung Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust* (Frankfurt: Jahrbuch des Fritz Bauer Instituts 1996), 319–49.

<sup>79</sup> Benz, *Theresienstadt*, 231. Translation mine.

<sup>80</sup> Ullmann, “Goethe und Ghetto,” archival document, Prague Jewish Museum, [https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/2322](https://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/2322).

<sup>81</sup> LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, 40.

<sup>82</sup> hooks, “Choosing the Margin,” 17, 23.

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