

Italian composer Francesco Lotoro rescues music composed in the concentration camps

By Fred Mazelis
21 July 2020

A recent segment (“The Lost Music”) on 60 Minutes, the American television news magazine, featured the 30-year-long campaign by Italian composer and musician Francesco Lotoro (born 1964) to rescue and revive music composed and performed by prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps.

Lotoro’s effort, which has continued throughout his adult life, began in 1988, when he learned of music that was composed by prisoners at Theresienstadt, the Nazi concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. Theresienstadt has achieved a degree of historical notoriety because of its use by the Nazis in an attempt to obscure their campaign of mass murder. This was the place where at least some of the prisoners received less brutal treatment, but only so that they could be featured in musical performances for Nazi propaganda purposes. Theresienstadt itself was not an extermination camp, but tens of thousands were later deported from there to Auschwitz.

There are other important efforts to revive music that was lost or forgotten because of the Nazi genocide, but Lotoro’s is the most unusual for its focus on the concentration camps themselves. Based in the southeastern Italian city of Barletta, he has labored with his wife Grazia, who works in the local post office to support their family, to track down survivors of the camps. Many of them were already in their 80s and 90s when Lotoro found them. He has also spoken to many family members who did not even know the significance of musical scores in their possession.

Over the course of decades, searching in countless attics, archives and libraries, Lotoro has collected and recorded 8,000 pieces of music. According to Lotoro, as quoted in the British *Guardian* in 2018, “some [of the music] was written in notebooks, on coal sacks, food wrappers, tickets.” A five-act opera was written

on sheets of toilet paper. “There are more than 10,000 more waiting to be deciphered that I have not yet touched,” he said in 2018.

Lotoro is building what he calls a “citadel,” whose formal name is *Istituto di Letteratura Musicale Concentrazionaria*. Using a grant from the government in Rome and also seeking to raise additional funds around the world, the composer’s plans include a library, museum and theater, all devoted to “concentrationary music.”

The 60 Minutes broadcast featured the testimony of 94-year-old Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, one of the last surviving members of the women’s orchestra at Auschwitz. The conductor of this orchestra was Alma Rosé, niece of Gustav Mahler, and an accomplished violinist in her own right. The amazing and harrowing story of the orchestra, and how some of its members survived the Holocaust, was told in the 1980 television film, *Playing For Time*, written by Arthur Miller and starring Vanessa Redgrave.

Soon after her own arrival at Auschwitz, Lasker-Wallfisch “was led to a girl, also a prisoner, and a sort of normal conversation took place. And then she asked me what I was doing before the war ... I said, ‘I used to play the cello.’ She said, ‘That’s fantastic. You’ll be saved’ ... I had no idea what she was talking about.”

Salvation was only possible, for some, because the Nazis had need for music. A report in the *New York Times* quotes Guido Fackler, a professor at the University of Würzburg in Germany, explaining that “[music] was a constant and crucial component of the everyday life in the Nazi-run camps.” The orchestra was used to play marches for prisoners, “literally to set the tempo for a day of work.” It also played when new prisoners arrived, during the height of the gassing to

death of tens of thousands of men, women and children every day. “We were based very near the crematoria. We could see everything that was going on,” Lasker-Wallfisch explains.

Fackler contrasts the awful and painful task of playing music to discipline and organize their fellow prisoners with the times “when prisoners played music on their own initiative,” which “generally gave them consolation, support and confidence. It reminded them of their earlier lives.”

Lotoro converted to Judaism nearly two decades ago, and found that he had some Jewish ancestry as well. His work of rescue and revival, however, grew to encompass the contributions and the suffering of other victims—Roma, political prisoners, soldiers in prisoner-of-war camps and more. As the *Times* reports, Lotoro “started interviewing Holocaust survivors ... [but] later expanded it to include political or other religious prisoners in many countries ... by musicians ‘of any national, social or religious background.’”

“In the camps, there was an explosion of creativity,” said Lotoro. “When your life is in danger, you create more as a testament for the future.”

60 Minutes highlights Jozef Kropinski, a young Pole caught working for the resistance and sent to Auschwitz and later to Buchenwald, as “perhaps the most prolific and versatile composer in the entire camp constellation.” Lotoro found Kropinski’s son, Waldemar, who lives in Nuremberg, Germany. Jozef Kropinski wrote hundreds of pieces of music during four years as an inmate, including “tangos, waltzes, love songs, even an opera.” Kropinski smuggled his violin and hundreds of pieces of music out of Buchenwald when the camp was evacuated in April 1945 and the prisoners were forced onto one of the death marches organized by the Nazis in the last weeks of the Third Reich.

As noted above, there are other important efforts to revive music that was either lost, forgotten or suppressed during the Nazi terror. James Conlon, the American-born conductor, has been the most prominent voice from the podium working to revive the performance of works suppressed by the Nazis, increasing awareness of composers like Erwin Schulhoff and Viktor Ullmann, who perished in the Holocaust, and Walter Braunfels, Hanns Eisler, Mieczyslaw Weinberg and many others who were

forced to flee. Foundation’s wealth of information and resources on the subject.

Also noted in the *Times* report is the work of exil.arte, at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, created several years ago to revive and study music that had been banned. Michael Haas, the author of the important book *Forbidden Music: The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (2013), is the co-founder of exil.arte.

The work of Lotoro, Conlon, Haas and others is contributing to a greater understanding of music history, and especially of music in the 20th century. As Lotoro states, some of this music, if it had not been buried for many decades, “could have changed the path of musical language in Europe.” The work of composers who lost their lives or whose careers were diverted or completely derailed could also have had an enormous impact on the fate of music in the post-World War II period and up to the present day. The task of rescuing this music is not only a matter of paying tribute to and commemorating the lives of its creators. It also can assist in orienting composers and musicians in the 21st century. And it is bound up with learning the lessons of the barbarism that descended in the 20th century, in order to prevent its return today.

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