

# Can there be music in Auschwitz?

Philip Lee

Music is often described as a 'universal language', one that everyone can understand. Can it, then, communicate anything significant in the context of barbarism, in places where humanity's basic precepts have been trampled in the mud?

In 2000 the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

under conductor Sir Simon Rattle performed Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Mauthausen concentration camp. The music was chosen by former inmates to celebrate the anniversary of the liberation of the camp in 1945. As a sign of respect for the many who perished there, when the performance came to an end the audience was asked to rise to their feet, a lighted candle in their hands, and remain silent (The Times, 8 May 2000).

In early 2005 the BBC televised a programme of music recorded at Auschwitz-Birkenau to commemorate the liberation of this most notorious of concentration camps. Here, between 1940 and 1945, at least 1.1 million people, the majority Jewish, were murdered. In the words of executive producer Peter Maniura, the programme was intended to form 'a layered narrative, through music' of the barbarism that shook Western civilisation to its core (FT Weekend Magazine, 15 January 2005).

In 2007 opera companies from Israel and Germany are hoping to stage Beethoven's opera Fidelio at Buchenwald, near the site of the Nazi concentration camp (The Guardian, 20 January 2005).

These are not ordinary performances in the tradition of Western music-making. They rub salt into what might be described as an open wound in the recent history of Europe. Sixty years after the Holocaust,<sup>1</sup> many European countries have still not come to terms with the legacy of the 1939-45 War and their own complicity through action or inaction. Such performances aim to perpetuate the memory of the horrors that took place and to renew hope of reconciliation in a common future.

Giving concerts in the concentration camps raises many questions. What purpose does it serve?

Whom does it benefit? What kind of music is appropriate? What exactly is being communicated?

The concert in Mauthausen was suggested by Leon Zelman, a survivor whose idea was fiercely opposed. Some felt that performing a concert where atrocities took place was unbelievably tasteless. Others pointed to the extravagance of building a stage and laying on power for a one-off event in a remote quarry. The choice of the Vienna Philharmonic was also questioned. Between the years 1938 and 1945 the orchestra effectively supported the Nazi regime, even though that collaboration has recently been acknowledged and regretted.

Why did Zelman campaign so strongly for the concert to take place in Mauthausen? 'I wanted to bring music here precisely because it is a provocation. It will make people, especially young people, think freshly about this place and what happened here' (The Times, 8 May 2000).

The concert in Mauthausen could be seen as part of a national effort by Austrians to face up to their involvement in Nazi aggression through arts, music, and more overtly political action. One example is the play *Die Kinder von der Spiegelgrund* (The Children of the Spiegelgrund Hospital) based on the book *Totenwagen* (Death-wagon) by Alois Kaufman. The Spiegelgrund was a clinic for abandoned or 'problem' children in Vienna where some 770 children aged six months to 14 years were declared 'unfit to live' and put to death. One of its doctors was Dr Heinrich Gross, who continued to work professionally until 1998 despite two court cases against him (Gray Matter, 2004).

In the light of Nazism's contempt for humanity, and faced with the macabre drama of the concentration camps, is it 'right' to give concerts there? Music may well have 'charms to soothe a savage breast' (William Congreve), but we know from bitter experience that when the music stops, the savagery recommences. And is it certain that the performance of music conveys anything at all? According to George Steiner:

'Music is meaningful to the utmost; it signifies totally. But neither its meanings nor its significations can be verbalised, adequately paraphrased or translated conceptually into any domain except repeated performance. Logic has no purchase on musical sense' (Steiner, 1997: 164).

If that is the case and in such circumstances, would not performances of 'Antigone' (Sophocles) or 'Death and the Maiden' (Ariel Dorfman) or readings of poems by Nelly Sachs or Paul Celan be both more appropriate and more telling?

## Music in the camps

Music was a cog in the apparatus of terror in Nazi concentration camps. A band situated near the main gates 'accompanied' inmate work-gangs leaving and returning to the camps. It played marches and popular tunes. As Primo Levi (an inmate of Auschwitz from 1943) later wrote:

'The tunes are few, a dozen, the same ones every day, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German. They lie engraven on our minds and will be the last thing in Lager that we shall forget: they are the voice of the Lager, the perceptible expression of its geometrical madness, of the resolution of others to annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards' (Levi, 1961: 45).

Nazi patriotic and military songs were compulsory while marching, exercising, reporting for duty, labouring and on punishment detail. Singing them required tremendous physical effort and was psychologically humiliating, although other songs might momentarily turn into gestures of defiance. Inmates were compelled to organise bands that played popular music, operetta melodies, dances and classical music and the camp authorities determined the programmes and the function of each orchestra.

A particularly obscene demonstration of SS power was the use of music during public punishments and executions. In Birkenau, Czech violinist Ota Sattler was forced to watch his wife and three sons file past him to the gas chambers as the band played the popular ditty 'A Jew Had A Wife' (Fackler, 1999). The same band regularly played next to the railway platforms during the infamous selection process for life or death and in front of the gas chambers in order to deceive newly arrived prisoners.

In the precarious life of the concentration camps, music was made banal and repressive, although to the extent that it offered the chance of obtaining extra food in return for performing during Red Cross visits, it could still offer a momentary reprieve from the depravity and horror:

'Despite exhaustion, privations, language barriers, and risks, performances by inmate musicians were a symbol of solidarity and humanity in the midst of dehumanising surroundings. Unconstrained by artistic or aesthetic issues, musical offerings became a form of resistance that also provided survival assistance by encouraging solidarity' (Fackler, 1999).

## Empathetic understanding

In the social sciences empathetic understanding refers to the deliberate attempt to identify with another person. It accounts for another person's actions using our own immediate experience of motivation and attitude in similar circumstances – either as we remember or imagine them. In popular usage the idea refers to the immediacy of communication between two people that avoids the need for conceptualisation through abstract ideas conveyed by language. Empathetic understanding differs from 'ordinary' understanding in that it recognises the other person's state of reasoning and feelings and how they interrelate.

Can one argue that performing music in a concentration camp today creates or leads to empathetic understanding of past events? Can it create empathetic understanding with any survivors present? Knowing the evil that was perpetrated, knowing that one is in the same location, perhaps sensing the communion of souls present, can music provide a means of transcendence, an empathy that is both healing and cleansing? And if it can, does that moment of catharsis depend on the kind of music being played – its providence and associations?

Theodor Adorno said that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. This is commonly interpreted as a call to cease writing poetry. In fact Adorno may simply have been underlining the unbridgeable gulf between language before and after Auschwitz. Since language colluded in the crimes committed, how could that fatal taint be removed? But at least one eminent writer advocates poetry precisely because it is consistent with the psychological and moral fragmentation caused by the Holocaust:

'Like symptoms in the aftermath of trauma, lyrical utterance often announces itself as an involuntary return to intense feelings about an incomprehensible moment. But recollected in relative safety, if not tranquillity, such a moment rendered in writing allows authors and readers to grapple with the consequences of traumatic pain without being silenced by it' (Gubar, 2003: 8).

By analogy, since music was similarly debased in the camps, can it be meaningfully played there again? The idea of performing *Fidelio*, an opera about love and liberation from prison seems particularly apt. If Beethoven can be said to have had any kind of political project, it was one of universal human solidarity: 'Alle Menschen wurden Brüder'. But even here there may be insurmountable problems. Beethoven's music was appropriated by the Third Reich. In itself, that does not contaminate his music, but it does leave unanswered questions as at least two authors demonstrate (see Dennis, 1996; Buch, 2003).

It could be argued that giving concerts in the camps has an educational purpose. It increases awareness. It brings people into contact with a place and a happening they might not otherwise choose to know. 'If you manage to touch perhaps three people out of a hundred, you achieve more like that than many other ways. I am a great realist, you know!' (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 2005). Performance also helps to break the silence: both the hushed silence of a site consecrated to the memory of those who died there and the metaphorical silence of all that remains unspoken. In this way, art becomes transformative because what follows cannot be the same as what went

before:

'The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most "ingressive", transformative summons available to human experiencing. Again, the shorthand image is that of the Annunciation, of "a terrible beauty" or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before' (Steiner, 1989: 143).

What is 'appropriate'?

Unfortunately there is a grave risk of desecration or trivialisation. One can imagine that a performance in Auschwitz of Arnold Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) would be 'appropriate' – if utterly unbearable. The first part, for speaker and chorus, consists of a survivor's account of his ordeal. The second part depicts a chorus of panic-stricken Jews en route to the gas chambers, where – to the survivor's amazement – they begin to intone the traditional confession of their faith, the *Sh'ma Yisrael*.

Eyewitnesses affirm that such chanting did occur in Treblinka, Auschwitz, and other killing centres. *Sh'ma Yisrael* was by custom the final utterance of Jewish martyrs, sages, and others – a last profession of trust in divine will. In the face of an annihilation that promised to wipe out both the individual and the culture whose essence the prayer embodied, the act of reciting the ancient creed was more than a demonstration of faith or submission. As Schönberg recognised, and as the music of *A Survivor from Warsaw* powerfully asserts, to pray *Sh'ma Yisrael* under such circumstances was also an act of defiance.

We can imagine that screening Alain Resnais' film *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955) or Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) or *Sobibor* (2001) might be 'appropriate'. It might equally be obscene. Would it be anything more than a gimmick to show Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* (1994) or to perform Nicholas Maw's opera *Sophie's Choice* (2002) or Anthony Sher's play *Primo* (2005) in Auschwitz? By analogy, if there were a rock opera that dealt with the barbarism of the concentration camps, would that be, in any sense, meaningful?

Unfortunately, music cannot stand in the place of words. As human beings, if we want to be articulate, we must speak even when what we have to say is unspeakable. Music just will not do:

'Music resembles language in the sense that it is a temporal sequence of articulated sounds which are more than just sounds. They say something, often something human. The better the music, the more forcefully they say it. The succession of sounds is like logic: it can be right or wrong. But what has been said cannot be detached from the music. Music creates no semiotic system' (Adorno, 1956).

In other words, music undoubtedly signifies and produces enormous emotional response in individuals. But it cannot speak.

Perhaps this means that the most appropriate form of recalling the iniquity of the concentration camps – in addition to the educational projects and numerous Holocaust museums and memorials around the world – is not to perform music but to speak the words of poets such as Paul Celan, Charlotte Delbo, Irena Klepfisz, Eva Lang, Andras Mezei, Miklos Radnoti, Nelly Sachs, and Abraham Sutzkever – to mention just a few. As Susan Gubar perceptively points out, there is a precedent:

'To legitimise my portrait of poetry as a survivor of Auschwitz... I would trace its license back to an ancient mandate in the prophetic book of Joel (1:2-3): "Has such a thing happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation"' (Gubar, 2003: 263).

Another way – perhaps more appropriate – would simply be to recite the names of those killed in the concentration camps: 'A name: that very often is all that remains for us of a human being, not only when he is dead, but sometimes even in his lifetime' (Proust, 1992: 345). It is estimated that nearly six million Jews were killed in Europe between September 1939 and May 1945, although the exact number can never be known:

'Thousands of babies and infants were murdered by Nazi killing squads before their birth could be recorded... thousands more individuals, especially in the remoter villages of Poland, were "added" to the deportation trains which left larger localities, without any numerical register being made of their existence or fate' (Gilbert, 1982: 245).

Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority based in Jerusalem, has collected and recorded the names of over half the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. To these must be added thousands of non-Jewish victims. If the names of four million people were to be recited, one every four seconds, it would only take 185 days. This ludicrous proposal, unrealistic as it is, would not alter history. But as an alternative to silence, and in place of the music of Bach or Beethoven, the names of men, women and children would be recalled from oblivion and once again heard in public.

## Note

1 'Holocaust' is the commonly used term for the mass murder of Jews and other persecuted groups such as gypsies and homosexuals under the Nazi regime in Germany. The word comes from the Greek and means a sacrifice consumed by fire. Biblically it has connotations of a burnt but miraculously unconsumed sacrifice offered to God, implying that the event might be consecrated. For that reason Jewish writers often use the term 'Shoah', the Hebrew for 'calamity' or 'desolation'. 'Shoah' carries connotations of a link between Zionist claims to a homeland in Israel and the need for a secure refuge from anti-Semitism in Europe. Yiddish speakers, therefore, often use the word 'khurbn', meaning 'the destruction'.

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