

Music without Borders

Kerry Woodward

Never could I have foreseen that the tattered papers I was now holding one evening in London in 1972, would lead me towards such extraordinary, life-changing experiences. A former inmate of Auschwitz, Dr. H.G. Adler, had just then handed me a bundle of manuscripts. It contained the music of an opera called *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (The Emperor of Atlantis). This opera had been virtually completed in the Czechoslovakian concentration camp, Terezín (Theresienstadt), in the 1944 by Viktor Ullmann, who was soon after to be gassed in Auschwitz. At the end of the war, the director of the Terezín ghetto library, Dr. Emil Utitz, collected all the surviving paintings, poems, literature and music of Terezín and gave some of this material to Dr. Adler in 1947. This collection also contained a number of other compositions by Ullmann and some outstanding drawings of ghetto-life and poems by Peter Kien, who wrote the libretto for the opera. Before and during the war, Ullmann and Adler had been friends. Ullmann set some of Adler's poems to music and, after the war, Adler wrote the definitive study of Theresienstadt¹. He tried to stimulate interest in this collection but it languished in his cupboard for many years because the public was clearly not yet interested in its contents.

Another survivor of Terezín, a well-known Czech singer, Karel Berman, had copied out some of the music of the opera for his own use, because he was to sing the role of Death (*Der Tod*) in a performance planned for the camp. The performance never took place, perhaps because its message was too politically provocative or more probably because Viktor Ullmann and librettist, Peter Kien, were deported to Auschwitz in October 1944, where they were both exterminated. Berman thought that Ullmann had taken the opera manuscript with him to Auschwitz and believed that these

scraps of music he had copied out were all that remained of the work. After the war, he donated these fragments to the National Museum in Prague.

When in his early thirties, Viktor Ullmann became an anthroposophist. In a letter, written in 1931, he explained to his friend, Alban Berg, the



composer, that he was reading 'everything that Steiner had said about music, and was working at the Novalis Bookstore in Stuttgart to fulfill an old desire to serve the anthroposophical movement directly'. This study radically changed his worldview and, in

1936, he composed a large-scale opera on a text of anthroposophist, Albert Steffen, *Der Sturz des Antichrist* (The Fall of the Anti-Christ). It describes the final defeat of a dictator through the power of art. This theme, though altered by the circumstances, comes back in his Terezin opera, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*. The opera is a thinly-veiled portrait of Adolf Hitler and tells how the Emperor of Atlantis proclaims universal war and announces that his old ally, Death, will lead his campaign. Death, contemptuous of the Emperor's plans, breaks his sword – henceforth men cannot die. A boy and a girl, soldiers on opposite sides, begin fighting, but instead fall in love. Meanwhile the sick and suffering can find no release. Death offers to return to mankind on one condition, that the Emperor becomes his first victim. The Emperor eventually has to accept, and the people welcome Death as their compassionate and valued friend.

Having seen the few fragments in the Prague museum, a group of people started investigating and, hearing about Adler's London manuscript of the opera, they approached him with a view to

performing it in Prague. At that time, I was working as a conductor in London and, through Dr. Adler's son, was asked to make a performing edition of the work for the Prague group. Poring over the manuscript that evening, I soon realised that something remarkable lay in my hands, and accepted the invitation. Plans for the Czech performance did not materialize but, fired now with enthusiasm, I worked on the manuscript for the next eighteen months, preparing material for its possible first performance. This necessitated deciphering an orchestral score that began quite neatly in music-book format but which soon deteriorated into many loose sheets of paper of all shapes and sizes.² The handwriting became increasingly difficult to read, probably because the year-and-a-half span of its composition was taking its toll on Ullmann. There were also signs of hasty revisions, due probably to the urgency of the planned performance in Terezin.

You may be wondering how such a performance could have been possible. Despite the terrible congestion in Terezin (50,000 people being crammed into a space intended for only 7,000), the high death rate, unhygienic conditions, lack of food, separation of families and the constant fear of transportation, the Jewish leaders there were determined not to focus on survival alone. They wanted to educate and prepare the younger generation for a meaningful life after the war. Thousands of children were given lessons, illegally, with cultural activities available for all. Lectures on many subjects were offered at both popular and high academic levels. Hebrew lessons were given and theatrical performances for children and adults took place in cellars and on rooftops. Furthermore, artistic endeavours were not discouraged by the German authorities, so musicians of high quality were able to stage operas by Mozart and Smetana, for example. Some highlights in Terezin featured performances of the Verdi *Requiem* with full orchestra, soloists and a chorus of hundreds, and of a popular Czech children's opera, *Brundibár*. Despite the constant deportations and performers having to be replaced, artists continued to paint, singers to sing, instrumentalists to play and composers to write – all in the face of the Nazi cruelty. The roles for *The Emperor of Atlantis* were to be sung by some outstanding Jewish singers from all over Europe who were intentionally placed in this particular camp.

The apparent leniency towards artistic creativity by the authorities in Terezin had a hidden reason. Of all the ghettos and concentration camps set up by the Nazis, Terezin was, in 1944, pronounced a model ghetto, a shop-window for promoting the idea of Nazi decency. On special occasions, the Red Cross was invited to witness a totally phony set-up, using fake money, false shop-fronts and cafés, with football matches and concerts taking place. Gardens were also created and tilled, and all normal urban activities were shown and filmed with which the Nazi propaganda machine attempted to manipulate the eyes of the world.³

After contacting some opera houses that consequently expressed interest in the work though without commitment, I met Rhoda Levine in Amsterdam who was directing there at the Netherlands Opera. I played the score through to her at the piano and she immediately reacted with, 'I've got to do this piece'. In December 1975, the actual world premiere took place in Amsterdam, thirty-one years after its completion. Rhoda Levine directed, décor and costumes were by Robert Israel and I conducted. It made a huge impression on the public and soon invitations came from Brussels and the Spoleto Festival in Italy, where it was pronounced 'a hit' by the press. The following year we took it to San Francisco and a week later, a newly created production in New York took place. By now the opera had come to the attention of the international press with articles in *Newsweek* and *Time*. In 1978, I conducted a BBC-Metronom film with an all-star cast, including Teresa Stratas and Richard Lewis. The film won the prestigious Italia (RAI) Prize for Special Merit. But, of all the fifty or more performances that soon followed, the most memorable for me was at a kibbutz in Israel, where some members of the audience had been internees of Terezin and had known Ullmann and Kien there. In their tears of joy and gratitude, we understood that this opera had been created for an entertainment and as a consolation for its intended audience. From that small bundle of papers, the opera has now, phoenix-like, become part of the standard repertoire, with well over a hundred different productions so far having been given all over the world.⁴ As a result of the opera becoming public, all the other compositions in the larger bundle have also now been edited, performed and many recorded.

While in Theresienstadt, Ullmann had written:

it must be emphasized that Theresienstadt has served to enhance, not impede, my musical activities, that by no means did we sit weeping on the banks of the waters of Babylon, and that our endeavour with respect to Art was commensurate with our will to live.

But the story does not end there. Some months after the Amsterdam premiere of the opera, the pianist Howard Shelley asked me to produce a record of piano music by Rosemary Brown. I had heard that she was a kind of mediumistic amanuensis for deceased composers and was interested to meet her. During the recording, I had doubts about a passage in a piece 'by' Brahms: 'Just a moment', said Rosemary, looking as though to someone standing next to her: 'he (Brahms) says that the pianist should change the disposition of the notes in the left hand chords there.' Howard did as instructed, which resulted in a typically Brahmsian sound! Now, really intrigued, I mentioned the 'The Emperor of Atlantis' opera to her, and we arranged a meeting for the following week.

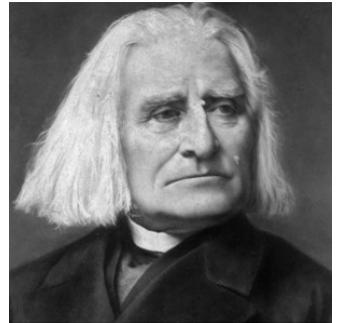


In her first book⁵, Rosemary Brown tells us how, from an early age, she was accustomed to seeing discarnate beings, so, as a young child, it was no surprise to her when an old man with long white hair, wearing 'a long black dress' appeared. He told he

had been a composer and then said, 'when you grow up, I will come back and give you music'. (This is strongly reminiscent of Alice Bailey's experience that she describes in her *Unfinished Biography*, where Koot Hoomi suddenly appeared to her when she was still young saying that something was planned for her, namely: 'doing your Master's work all the time.'⁶) Rosemary realized later that it had been Franz Liszt who had appeared to her. He was eventually to become the organizing leader of a group of some twenty well-known composers that included Chopin, Schubert,

Beethoven, Bach and Brahms; they would come to her and dictate new compositions.⁷ Liszt had taken holy orders at 54, becoming the Abbé Liszt (hence the cassock) and, despite his own busy life as a composer and pianist extraordinaire, always championed the works of other composers. Rosemary's task, Liszt later told her, would be to take down new compositions, stylistically recognizable as being by these particular composers in order to prove to a skeptical world that there is life – and work – after death.⁸

I concur with those who say the quality of this channeled music is generally not up to the level we would expect from these composers.⁹ Rosemary has explained, however, that her 'reception' was like that of a short-wave radio – often intermittent and difficult to follow. I would add that the music's apparent lack of a 'shadow-side' might well be due to the possibility that a non-earthly being is no longer subject to the pain and passions of the physical and emotional planes. 'Their' music, given to her, chiefly expresses joy, positivity and benevolence – qualities that Spinoza and the Stoics believed to be characteristic of 'the wise man', one guided by his rational and intuitive mind. Furthermore, the composers themselves have told her that the music they make now, for their own purposes there, is utterly different from their compositions when they were on earth.



The distinguished writer on music, Donald Francis Tovey, told her thirty years after his death:

We are not transmitting music to Rosemary Brown simply for the sake of offering possible pleasure in listening thereto; it is the implications relevant to this phenomenon which we hope will stimulate sensible and sensitive interest ?and stir many who are intelligent and impartial to consider and explore the unknown regions of man's mind and psyche. . . . When man has plumbed the

mysterious depths of his veiled consciousness he will then be able to soar to correspondingly greater heights.¹⁰

In our first meeting, something totally unexpected happened, which Rosemary describes as follows:¹¹

As Kerry and I were talking, I became aware of the spirit of a man, standing in one corner of the room, with Liszt beside him. I described this spirit to Kerry – he had very close-cropped hair and deep-set eyes – and then I asked the spirit’s name. He answered that he was Viktor Ullmann. I thought it was a German-sounding name but Liszt intervened to announce that my visitor was ‘of Slav descent’. Viktor was speaking German, which was not a language I was familiar with at the time, so Liszt acted as translator. Viktor began to talk about an opera he had written while in a concentration camp, Theresienstadt, in Czechoslovakia . . . Viktor said that some of the guards had been kindly disposed to him and had smuggled in bits of paper for him to write his opera on . . . On the very day he visited me for the first time, also quite unknown to me, Kerry had the original – and only copy – with him in his briefcase.

Viktor began to talk in great detail about the score, naming exact page and bar numbers, and quoting what was written in each instance. He asked for a number of amendments and additions to be inserted in the score. Kerry noted what Viktor said and made the alterations where indicated. All this was done without my even seeing the score for myself! Viktor thanked Kerry for his interest in the opera and all he had done to try to get it performed. Then he asked him to turn to page 11. Here was a recitative with harpsichord accompaniment. Viktor wanted this adapted for flute, violin and cello. He then asked Kerry to make a section on page 21 the same as on page 11. Then Viktor said, ‘Turn to page 46, to the viola part.’ The rhythm here was a

half-note followed by a quarter-note. He wanted this reversed. Kerry had already felt it was incorrect as written, and the amendment sounded correct.

Of our second meeting Rosemary reported that:

There were two other sections, which Viktor wanted fully orchestrated. The aria of ‘Death’ in the middle section had been scored for harpsichord only. Viktor wanted it written out for the flute, muted trumpet, muted strings and a bell played rather freely. I could not even see the score from where I was sitting, and it was the only copy in the world, yet Kerry had no difficulty at all in following my detailed comments, which all checked out exactly with the manuscript before him. What struck me about all this was that the composer of the opera obviously had complete recall of every note on every page of the opera. Perhaps, written in such terrible conditions, it was engraved on his mind to the last detail. Or had he perhaps a means of referring to or reading the score, or an etheric double of it?

I was very busy at the time and only remembered my ‘homework’ on the morning of our arranged meeting. Hastily sitting at my desk, everything suddenly came to me, and I scribbled down the required orchestration with little thought. Rosemary picks up the story:

After these two weeks, Kerry came to see me again¹². Viktor then appeared in spirit and told Kerry that he had done very well [he also told Rosemary at the time that he had given me a helping hand that morning but because, I had written such small notes, it had been difficult for him to read] but . . . Kerry had put the funeral bell on the wrong note. . . . Viktor asked him to alter it to half a tone lower. This simple alteration, Kerry said, completely transformed the sound and effect, making it much more mournful and dramatic. I had not known what he had written for the bell, and of course I had not heard the opera. By now, Kerry was utterly

convinced that I was communicating with the mind of Viktor Ullmann.

The incorrect bell-note was indeed conclusive proof for me that Ullmann's communications did not originate in my own mind.

It is interesting to read what the Tibetan has to say about mediumship:

That between the lowest type of negative mediumship and the highest type of inspired teacher and seer are found a vast diversity of grades, and that the centres are not uniformly developed in humanity.¹³

He goes on to say that:

there are mediums of a very much higher order whose lives are offered in service to advanced souls on the other side of the veil and who give themselves so that their fellowmen may learn of them; thus, on both sides of the veil of separation, are souls aided and given opportunity to hear or serve. . . . This type of psychic can communicate with both groups and their value and their usefulness as mediums is beyond computation when they are single-minded, unselfish, pure and dedicated to service.¹⁴

Despite a life of struggle and hardship, Rosemary remained unwaveringly devoted to the composers throughout her life.

That she was also psychometric and clair-sensitive becomes apparent in the following passage:

Viktor also spoke to me about the conditions in the camp where he died, and referred to the dreadful and unmistakable stench there. In fact he somehow conveyed the idea of the pervading stench to me so strongly that I could actually smell it. It was something I shall never forget; I can only describe it as a sickening, rotting smell. Once Kerry made as if to hand the opera score to me, and I put out my hand to take it, but something made me recoil in horror. Suddenly, the thought

of handling that score brought back the stench so vividly that I just couldn't touch it.

Then comes the startling revelation of the way he died:

Viktor also related how he died, together with many others, in a windowless shed, sealed up from the outside, into which a poisonous gas was infiltrated through an inlet in the roof. Viktor said the prisoners had been stripped of their clothes, and told they were to go into the shed for delousing treatment. In the midst of the terrible darkness, the victims gradually realized that they were being exterminated. First, said Viktor, a strange violent chill swept over them, and then they began to shake and cough and stifle. . . they could have shot us instead. It would've been quicker, but perhaps they didn't want all that mess.¹⁵

I would like to mention that in her second book, *Immortals at my Elbow*, she received many more well-known visitors. The book contains very special statements from Bertrand Russell, Carl Jung, Donald Francis Tovey (*Ten Commandments for Musicians*), as well as a three-act play from Bernard Shaw (*Brutus' Revenge*), much poetry and, from Einstein, this beautiful metaphor:

The sun itself does not visit the earth, but its beams reach, touch, and merge with the world. So also does the soul beam down into earthly existence, like a ray from its own centre becoming clothed in matter.

In the foreword to her *Unfinished Symphonies*, the then Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood, wrote:

At a time when men's minds are imprisoned by the materialism of their environment and when the Church finds it difficult to point them to a nobler existence, Rosemary Brown's experiences stand out as a challenge and as a sign-post for the discerning. There is a world beyond this one and, if we did but know it, we live out our lives in the shadow of eternity.

One could say that, in their ‘lives of willing service, rendered with utter selflessness and without any reservations’¹⁶ and through their ongoing telepathic interplay, Rosemary Brown and Viktor Ullmann both demonstrated how all apparent borders can be crossed and how time can be annihilated.

REFERENCES

¹ H.G.Adler: *Theresienstadt 1941-1945* – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._G._Adler

² Photocopies of the manuscript score of *The Emperor of Atlantis* can be seen at – <http://collections.jewishmuseum.cz/index.php/Search/Index?search=kaiser+von+atlantis>

³ The film: “The Gift of a Town” can be seen at – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEQPjvDXeZY>

⁴ There are many performances of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* on You Tube. There is a CD recording at – http://www.arkivmusic.com/classical/album.jsp?album_id=142601

⁵ Rosemary Brown: *Unfinished Symphonies*, London 1971.

⁶ Alice A. Bailey: *The Unfinished Autobiography*, p.35-6.

⁷ Some of this music can be heard at – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPQWPac9heA>

⁸ There is an excellent film of Rosemary Brown’s life and of her receiving music from Liszt at – <http://britishmusiccollection.org.uk/article/neil-luck-occult-world-rosemary-brown>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosemary_Brown_%28spiritualist%29

¹⁰ Rosemary Brown: *Unfinished Symphonies*, p. 17.

¹¹ Rosemary Brown: *Look Beyond Today*, p.113-116. London 1986.

¹² Except for those first two meeting, which were not recorded, transcripts and tapes of all the recorded conversations between Rosemary Brown and myself can be seen and heard at – <https://sites.google.com/site/afternotes1/intro-to-the-tapes>

¹³ Alice A. Bailey: *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy*, p. 9.

¹⁴ Alice A. Bailey: *Ibid.*, p. 11

¹⁵ Rosemary Brown: *Look Beyond Today*, p.115-6. London 1986.

¹⁶ Alice A. Bailey: *A Treatise on White Magic*, p. 414.