

Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus

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Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to Herman Littman. Thank you for sharing your stories with me.

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INTRODUCTION

Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus, is a work of musique concrète—a multi-layered collage of live and recorded elements—about my grandfather, Herman Littman, his experiences as a prisoner of war during World War II in Szubin, Poland, and his personal philosophies about his dual identification with Judaism and Catholicism. The piece in its final form includes an original five-movement requiem mass, interview recordings, art song settings of poetry written by prisoners of war, an original string trio, and the application of time-stretching and electronic filters to recordings made within the prison camp. This shadowbox of materials, including film footage and personal still photographs belonging to my grandfather, is combined to create impressions of Herman Littman's memories. The title of the piece comes from the Oflag Item, a prison camp newsletter written by several of the men imprisoned with my grandfather. The irony of the phrase, “for you the war is over,” resonated with me and seemed a fitting title for this conflicted piece.

“ART” AS MANIPULATION

Artwork which deals in some way with war is inherently problematic. In some cases, artists use this particular subject to manipulate the public by putting audience members into a position that makes them feel unable to criticize the work without seeming insensitive to the subject. In his criticism of Luigi Nono, Heinz-Klaus Metzger

states that,

Partisans in the struggle against reactionary oppression can no longer write one last line to their mother before being executed without becoming the subject of masterpiece by one of the composers who specialize in these matters. The war in Algeria had not even ended by the time Nono had prepared himself to process in music the screams of those who were tortured there, with the usual 12 notes, in order to present them at the next important festival to the applause of a delighted bourgeoisie. Of all the well-known composers of his generation, however, the author of *Intolleranza 1960* resists progress with the greatest intolerance--a serial Pfitzner.¹

Still, artists who have first-hand experience with war should be given the very important opportunity to express their feelings and experiences through art. Some artists (such as Nono) who protest the injustices of their own time and generation seem to me similarly capable of dealing with these loaded subjects with a sort of artistic integrity. I have never been in combat and have had no direct experience with World War II; however, it is my hope that this piece, rather than being seen as a capitalization on the pain of others, will be seen as a response to my relationship with my grandfather and his stories. Nevertheless, my reasons for approaching this piece were both personal and more general. While I wanted to process personal feelings about my complicated family history, recognize the importance of my new relationship with my grandfather, and create an opportunity to preserve his story, I also wanted to express some more general feelings about the psychological impact of military service, combat, and imprisonment and what I see as the increasingly-common modern reality that many people deal with feelings of conflict with regard to spirituality.

¹ Hans Pfitzner is sometimes characterized as a “post-Romantic” composer. Metzger argues that Nono holds onto serialism.

BACKGROUND

My relationship with my maternal grandfather has changed dramatically over time. My birth mother died when I was young and my father remarried not long after. Because of the highly contentious nature of the relationship between my grandparents and my new step-mother, my younger brother and I were only rarely permitted to spend time with my grandparents at that time. When they threatened my parents with a lawsuit, my parents gradually allowed us to see my grandparents for short periods of time on a slightly more regular basis. Despite limited contact, I developed a very close relationship with my devoutly-Catholic grandmother, who taught me to cook, shop for groceries, and run a household. In many practical ways, my grandmother was much more like a mother to me than my stepmother. Because I so closely resemble my birth mother (both physically and with regard to idiosyncratic mannerisms), my grandparents called me “the surrogate.” They even called me “Theresa” (my birth mother’s name) from time to time.

By contrast, throughout my childhood and early adulthood, I rarely spoke at length with my grandfather. As a child, I knew that he was Jewish and highly educated. He wore (and still wears) a star of David around his neck, displayed a menorah and a carved sculpture of the Last Supper, and had a Mezuzah on the doorframe at the entrance to his house. I never remember seeing or hearing of him attending temple. I assumed that he did not practice any religion. I knew he had been in the military and that he had been a prisoner of war, but no specific details save one--he refused to eat mashed potatoes

because they reminded him of the rotten mashed potatoes he ate as a prisoner.

When my grandmother died in 2009, I began to visit my grandfather each week. For the first time in our relationship, he began to tell me stories about his childhood and the war. Over the course of many months, I discovered that my grandmother had grown up as a Baptist from Alabama. After my grandparents married, they lived with my grandfather's parents, who were observant Jews and expected my grandmother to help them keep a Kosher household. When my grandfather was captured during the war, he began to attend Catholic services in the prison camp and, at that time, converted to Catholicism. When he finally came home nearly two years later, he announced to my grandmother that the family would now be Catholic. Eventually, I asked my grandfather's permission to record several of these stories and began a process of learning not only about his experiences and feelings about the military, war, and religion, but about a family and a heritage from which I have, at times, felt very alienated.

RESEARCH

Herman Littman was a paratrooper in the American Air Force during World War II. He was wounded, captured, and imprisoned in Offizierslager 64. During our interview, he told many stories about his childhood, life in the camp, and the ways in which he believes soldiers are fundamentally changed by the trauma of war. My questions were very personal and his responses were, at various times, sentimental, very graphic, or highly political. For example, he described, in great detail, witnessing the extreme cruelty

exhibited by a fellow American soldier in the killing of a German soldier. He described what it felt like to engage in combat and the difficulties inherent in returning to civilian life. He also described his potentially conflicting identification as both Jewish and Catholic after his conversion to Catholicism in the prison camp.

During the course of my research for this project, I discovered that the men of Oflag 64 wrote and published a newspaper, attended Protestant and Catholic religious services, and organized sporting events, theater productions, and musical groups, including an orchestra, swing band, and glee club using resources donated by the American Red Cross. I was delighted to find that copies of these newspapers and recordings of the prison camp musical groups and religious services were still in existence and had been archived. I also discovered that Robert Galloway had directed a public television documentary about these men and their lives, entitled “Oflag 64: A POW Odyssey.”

After reading all of the newspapers, watching the documentary, and listening to all of the recordings, I contacted Robert Galloway and the surviving prisoners of war who participated in these activities and requested permission to use the prison camp recordings, texts, and filmed footage from Galloway’s documentary in the creation of a large-scale musical composition.

COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS

In 2010, I received a commission from Rimon: the Minnesota Jewish Arts Council

and the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, in collaboration with Art pArtners to write the first version of this piece. I knew at the time that I wanted to create a semi-theatrical piece with electronic and live elements using the recordings I had made with my grandfather. With that in mind, I composed and orchestrated a children's art song for my daughter entitled *This is the House that the Kriegies Lived in*, an art song for solo baritone entitled *Retrospect*, and a choral piece entitled *Fourth of July Memoriam*. All three of these pieces were settings of texts written by contributors to the prison camp newspaper.

At this time, I also began to create the first version of the film and an electronic audio track using recordings of the Oflag 64 glee club, orchestra, and swing band, as well as a sermon delivered by the camp's Catholic chaplain. I also recorded myself humming and singing the Hebrew song, *Hine Ma Tov*. I subjected these recordings to time-stretching or -shortening procedures. Many elements were cut into tiny pieces--approximately one-tenth of a second in length--and then these pieces were reordered according to a mathematical system I created for this purpose. I applied a similar procedure to a recording of the prison camp glee club singing the Latin hymn, *Ecce Quam Bonum*. This particular manipulation rendered the text incomprehensible, but resulted in a percussive heart-beat sort of sound. I later discovered that both *Ecce Quam Bonum* and *Hine Ma Tov* share the same translation: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psalm 133).

The first version of *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus* was a thirty-minute piece that began with a live performance by my daughter of the children's song, *This is the House that the*

Kriegies Lived in, followed by a narrative film that focused on my grandfather's war experiences. As this film ended, a baritone soloist performed an orchestrated version of *Retrospect* with piano and electronics. This was followed by a second film that focused on my grandfather's spiritual ideas. The piece then ended with a performance of the choral piece, *Fourth of July Memoriam*, by the solo baritone, once again accompanied by piano and electronics.

There are moments in this version of the piece that I feel were successful, but many more that I feel were not. Many of my decisions to use electronics with the solo vocalist were the result of an inability to create what I really wanted to create due to budgetary constraints. My initial conception of the piece involved the use of a full men's chorus, piano, bells, and several other live instruments, with the film as a backdrop. The compromise I chose to make involved recording the solo vocalist singing multiple lines, which I combined to create a chorus. The vocalist then initiated the playback of these recordings during his live performance. Piano took the place of the bells and several of the other instruments and I hired solo instrumentalists to record each additional instrumental part for use in the electronic elements of the final performance.

I realize now that performance problems as a result of my compromises were inevitable. One of these problems was the fact the pianist was grossly underprepared despite multiple rehearsals and mutual discussions. It became clear that the electronic chorus did not (and never could) adequately take the place of the live men's chorus I was attempting to create. In my opinion, the biggest artistic problem with the work, however, was the narrative structure of the two films and my choice to separate the two subjects of

war and faith.

Dissatisfied with the first performance and with certain aspects of the piece, I ultimately realized that, for this particular project, I wanted to have more control over the presentation of the piece and that the only way I could ensure a high-level performance was through the creation of a wholly electronic composition. With this in mind, I began to restructure the work as *musique concrète* in 2011. I determined to write and record a requiem mass that would serve as the foundation of the work. The text for each movement of the mass was distorted in various ways, either through extended melisma, the fracturing of words into single syllables, obfuscation by means of orchestration, or the disordering of texts. I wrote thirteen movements which were condensed into just five by the time the mass was performed (poorly) in April of 2013. I then wrote and recorded a string trio and recorded *Retrospect* with new performers.

For this electronic reincarnation of *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus*, I came to several important realizations. In this context, I no longer needed (or even wanted) perfect performances. I felt free to use mistakes to artistic advantage. In trying to convey the psychological affects of my grandfather's experiences, I also realized that it was very important that I obliterate the narrative flow that ran through the original films. Rather than telling specific stories, I attempted to present visual and aural memories as manifestations from inside my grandfather's head. I also determined that it was important that most of my grandfather's words be incomprehensible. This was accomplished through subjecting many of the interview recordings to the randomization procedures described above. I also often kept my grandfather's voice lower in the mix

than other elements. Finally, in the climactic moments of the piece, I layered forty-two simultaneous recordings to remove nearly all comprehensibility, while hopefully giving the sound both density (due to the number of simultaneous events) and depth (due the content of those events). Once the correct placement of each audio element was determined, I created a surround-sound version of the piece that was intended to intensify the experience of a “psychological storm,” as my grandfather’s memories became increasingly unstable and his inner turmoil increased. Unfortunately, I felt that this surround sound element was ultimately only effective when the piece was heard from the center of the performance space.

In approaching the creation of a new version of the film, I attempted to choose generally more objective images that would avoid creating a specific narrative (rather than including pictures of my grandfather in his uniform, for example). The most personal images I chose were of paratroopers falling through the air in slow motion and still photographs of the prison camp. In all but one case, I avoided the use of still photographs that depicted people. The one exception contains a solitary figure walking away from the camera.

After choosing and manipulating the speed of each visual element, I placed them in order such that the initial images would remain visible the longest, with the speed of each successive image increasing until the “climactic moment.” I inserted very long, black frames between the initial events, as though my grandfather is blinking very slowly--almost waking from sleep or perhaps continuing to dream each time a new image comes into view. Eventually, he no longer closes his eyes and the images stream until

everything stops except for a single soprano. This moment in the piece feels to me like a bright, redemptive moment of relief. For this reason, I chose to represent it with a very bright, white frame, in stark contrast to everything that comes before it. From this moment, all the remaining images are still and the eyes begin to close to black once again.

INFLUENCES

Many composers and specific works have undoubtedly influenced *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus*, but those most clearly identifiable are *Il Canto Sospeso* by Luigi Nono, the *Altenberg Lieder* by Alban Berg, and *Laborintus II* by Luciano Berio. The music of Anton Webern and Igor Stravinsky have also been important in more general philosophical terms.

Il Canto Sospeso, by Luigi Nono, is a mass using texts written by European resistance fighters facing imminent execution during World War II. Despite its dark subject, the piece has aspirational and sacrificial qualities that I believe influenced my use of two sopranos in *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus*. Another similarity between the two pieces lies in Nono's approach to text setting in the *Canto*, which very often involved the use of obfuscation techniques.

In the *Altenberg Lieder*, Berg's orchestra creates a sort of psychological storm. His mezzo-soprano, initially lacking agency, emerges in the aftermath of the storm singing-- first with closed lips, then with open lips, and then, finally, with intelligible text. I

believe that Berg's use of the voice in this way may have been another influence on the way that I treated the solo sopranos in my piece. Throughout the entirety of *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus*, the principal soprano voice is completely unintelligible and is consistently distorted either through time stretching or shortening. The secondary soprano voice finally emerges alone and completely unmanipulated for a few seconds after the "climax" of my own storm.

Luciano Berio's *Laborintus II* strikes me as a sort of stream-of-consciousness utterance. Despite the general unintelligibility of the texts he chooses, in my opinion, the piece successfully creates impressions of spirituality and madness. Berio creates these impressions, in part, through his use of a trio of sopranos and a chorus of speakers, as well as through his use of montage. I have been interested in the use of montage and ironic musical juxtaposition since my study of Igor Stravinsky as an undergraduate student. I see Berio's piece as one logical extension of Stravinsky's ideas. Stravinsky wrote music which could have been received by the public as relatively unremarkable examples of structured classicism, but for his highly chromatic language and use of montage. These elements undermine and recontextualize "classical" structures. Similarly, Berio uses musical and textual associations with classical literature, the Bible, contemporary poetry, and jazz in much the same way. Similarly, in my own piece, I have attempted to create impressions of memories (fusions and confusions) through my use of materials informed by personal connections, archival recordings and images, and historical and contemporary musical allusions.

Over the past three years, I have learned two other things that have greatly

impacted this work and that will undoubtedly continue to impact my work in the future.

Firstly, it has become clear to me that if I want to achieve anything artistically, I must no longer accept performances of poor quality. I saw this not only after the failed performance of the mass I composed for this project, but after the incredible experience of working with Duo Gelland, a violin duo of extraordinary ability and professionalism. Secondly, I have learned the importance of recognizing when a piece must end. Studying the music of Anton Webern has had been my most important teacher in this regard. Webern creates tiny portals into immense sound worlds, always giving the listener just enough, and never too much. It was my preoccupation with this quality in Webern's work that led me to cut a thirteen-movement mass down to just five considerably shorter movements. Similarly, the original version of *Für Sie Ist Der Krieg Aus* had a duration of thirty minutes. In its final form, the piece was reduced to just fifteen. Looking to the future, I am still very interested in the use of mixed media, under certain conditions. I have learned how easily a work can suffer without proper care for every conceivable aspect of the work, from conceptual depth, to the quality of the writing and performances, to a clear understanding of necessary technology and proper technical procedures. With all of this in mind, I am currently working on a piece for solo soprano with electronics for performance in October of 2015.

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