



## The Voice of Resistance in Concentrationary Music

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**Abstract:** There are voices of resistance that still remain unheard. This is the case of the voices of composers and musicians interned in concentration camps during Nazism. In particular, my contribution intends to analyse Viktor Ullmann's musical experience during his detention in the ghetto of Theresienstadt (Terezín in Czech), with specific reference to the oeuvre *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death Abdicates* (*Der Kaiser von Atlantis, oder die Tod-Verweigerung*). This work is the best synthesis of the composer's musical and life experiences, being an ethical manifesto of political and artistic resistance, with frequently occurring references to fragments of *Degenerate Music* (*Entartete Musik*). Viktor Ullmann reacts to the condition of displaced person – as many other protagonists of *Lagermusik*<sup>1</sup> (music in the concentration camps) – through his dedication to music, developing a new compositive language and a philosophical thought, witnessed in the work *Goethe und Ghetto*, a true spiritual testament, also composed in Theresienstadt. Through his musical language, Ullmann expresses his fears, hopes, protests and tries to give shape, overcome and forget, even for a moment in time, the daily routine of the ghetto. Thus music becomes political language, a form of protest, of resistance. The oeuvre *The Emperor of Atlantis* has both characteristics featuring committed and not committed music: on the one hand music is a medium of political, social and moral scope, on the other it expresses the subjective aspect of political commitment, meaning the necessity and urgency to put into music a political protest.

### Introduction

The presence of musical activities in concentration camps (*Konzentrationslager*) is generally unknown (Kuna, 2006: 19). Despite the atrocity of the concentrationary universe (Sofsky, 1995), artistic activities, in particular the musical ones, in some concentration camps immediately began to be a relevant part of daily life. Not all concentration camps' prisoners were directly involved with

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<sup>1</sup> H. G. Adler defines '*fünf ernste Komponisten*' (main five composers) the protagonists of *Lagermusik* with Ullmann as the main protagonist. According to Adler, the main five composers were: Pavel Haas, Hans Krása, Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein e Sigmund Schul (Adler, 1955: 621).

music, however most of them entered into contact with it: marching on its rhythm when they were going or coming back from labour camps or assisting to their inmates' death executions, which were often accompanied by music.

The extension and complexity of this topic force me to operate choices and establish priorities. In reason of the emblematic and highly revealing nature of the concentrationary experience in general and of the case of Theresienstadt in particular, my choice is to analyse Viktor Ullmann's<sup>2</sup> musical experience during his internment in the ghetto of Theresienstadt<sup>3</sup>. In particular I will focus on his opera, composed in Theresienstadt *The Emperor of Atlantis or Death Abdicates*, which is the best synthesis of the composer's musical and life experiences and where the paradox of *Lagermusik*, music in the concentration camps, emerges with all its power<sup>4</sup>.

First of all, I have to explain what Theresienstadt was: from the beginning, it was commonly referred to as a ghetto, while in official documents, such as correspondence and gazettes issued by the Jewish Council, it was defined as a concentration camp. The subject is very controversial: a ghetto is an isolated place inside an already existing urban setting and it is part of a community, with whom it continues - in spite of all - to have relationships.

The concentration camp is completely different. It is a detention system built *ex novo* for annihilation purposes, marked by isolation from the outside world and by the coexistence of a multitude of people coming from different places and forced to do hard labour. In this sense and in consideration of the terror and the misery that were present, Theresienstadt seems to fit the definition of camp (Hilberg, 1999: 465; Oliveri, 2008: 759-62; Laquer, 2001: 327)<sup>5</sup>.

Musical experience in Theresienstadt was unique, as it was established by the Nazis in 1941 as a sort of model camp for prominent Jewish citizens (Hilberg, 1999: 472). For example,

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<sup>2</sup> Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944) was born into a family of Jewish origin on 1 January 1898 in the garrison town of Teschenmann. Ullmann studied in Vienna, where he was introduced into the circle of Schoenberg's pupils, his literary interests embracing Karl Kraus, Wedekind, Heinrich Mann and others. In 1919 he moved to Prague, where he served as chorus répétiteur and conductor under Zemlinsky. He began to establish himself as a composer in the 1920s, working from 1929 to 1931 as director of music at the Zurich Schauspielhaus before moving to Stuttgart. In 1933 he returned to Prague, working as a freelance musician. He was deported to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt in 1942 and was killed in Auschwitz in 1944.

<sup>3</sup> The fortress-town of Theresienstadt, built under the Emperor Josef II at the end of the 18th century, became a Jewish ghetto during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from 1941 to 1945. The idea that the fortress could be put again into use came from the new Reichsprotektor Reinhard Keydrich and from Adolf Eichmann, after Hitler's proclamation of a Judenfrei Czechoslovakia.

<sup>4</sup> The name *Lagermusik* is in itself an oxymoron, since it contains the contradiction between the art of music and the places of horror that are the negation of music.

<sup>5</sup> However, though it can be defined neither as a concentration camp, nor as a ghetto – since it was actually a hybridization of the two (Arendt, 2006: 88) – for simplicity's sake I will refer to it as a ghetto.

Theresienstadt was to be exploited in the propaganda film *The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City*. It was also the site of the superficial inspections conducted by the International Red Cross in 1944 (Murmelstein, 1961: 119). Inhabitants included Jewish musicians, artists, scholars, World War I veterans, and elders.

The musicians and composers who arrived in Theresienstadt suffered from frustration due to the ban of artistic expression imposed by the Nuremberg Laws. However, the extraordinary musical vitality in the ghetto positively impressed them giving them hope and they soon became involved in ghetto's musical activities. While not all prisoners arrived in Theresienstadt were directly involved with music - the same happened in Auschwitz -, most of them entered into contact with it: whether while marching to and from labour camps or while assisting to their inmates' death executions – all activities were often accompanied by music. Music, in this case far from being a source of consolation, tears the soul apart. As Primo Levi writes:

We all look at each other from our beds, because we all feel that this music is infernal. The tunes are few, a dozen, the same ones everyday, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German. They lay 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. When this music plays, we know that our comrades, out in the fog, are marching like automatons; their souls are dead and the music drives them, like the wind drives dead leaves, and takes the place of their wills (...) (Levi, 1959: 52).

Musical activity - as suggested by Primo Levi – was induced by the guards. Therefore, 'The Voice of the Lager' was included in the global strategy of destruction and depersonalisation carried out in concentration camps and while Levi's words refer to the latter, they could however be extended also to Hitler's Ghettos (Corni, 2001: 24-7).

This kind of music – a compulsory instrument of oppression – is opposed to the prisoners' self-arranged kind of music in Ghettos and Concentration camps. Through music, displaced persons expressed their fears, hopes, and protests. They tried to shape, and by shaping hoped to overcome, or at least forget, if only for a moment, the daily life in the ghetto or concentration camps.

Music, therefore, as a form of resistance, of protest, even as a form of political action; this kind of music is at the centre of my analysis of *The Emperor of Atlantis* – an investigation, if you will, on

the compositive aesthetics of the opera to highlight the philosophical and political aspects that characterise Ullmann's thought.

### **The Emperor of Atlantis or Death Abdicates**

An ethical manifesto of political and artistic resistance, the opera features recurrent references to fragments of a category of music at odds with the criteria imposed by Nazi regime. Opposition to Nazi cultural ideology is therefore expressed through style by these fragments of Degenerate Music. Some preliminary considerations are necessary in relation to the manuscript's history.

On 16 October 1944, before getting on the (*Künstler-Transport*) – which transported writers, artists and musicians to Auschwitz – Ullmann handed his scores and his critical writings over to his fellow-prisoner and friend Emil Utitz, a Czech philosopher responsible for Terezín's Library. Ullmann asked him to preserve them in case he would come back or – in case he wouldn't - to deliver them to H. G. Adler, an important figure in Terezín and Ullmann's friend since the Prague's period. Ullmann died in Auschwitz on 18 October 1944, along with other protagonists of the ghetto's musical life (Benz, 2013: 146).

H. G. Adler was also transported to Auschwitz where he stayed only 15 days, before being transferred to other concentration camps from where he was finally released in April 1945. Emil Utitz remained in Terezín until the liberation of the ghetto. The two met in Terezín where Utitz delivered Ullmann's documents to H. G. Adler. For many years the largest part of such material was not revealed by Adler and it was believed that Ullmann's works composed in Terezín were lost. Only in the seventies, the American musician of Czech origins Joza Karas, during his research activities for his book on music in Terezín, discovered that Ullmann's scores and all his critical writings were kept in Adler's house in London (Karas, 1993: 15).

In 1972, the score of *The Emperor of Atlantis* was at last discovered by the conductor Kerry Woodward who, 3 years later, staged the opera in Amsterdam. This was the world première, as in fact it was never staged in Terezín since Ullmann and many of those involved in its production had been deported to Auschwitz while the work was still in rehearsal.

Ullmann started composing the music of *The Emperor of Atlantis* in the summer of 1943 together with his friend and inmate in Terezín, Peter Kien<sup>6</sup>, painter and poet, who wrote the libretto. Kien's lyrics, as Ullmann's music, were filled with quotations and allusions for a strong condemnation of Nazi concentration camp practices. The strong relation between music and words is a testament to the collaboration of the two on the opera.

Initially considered a legend in four scenes (*Legende in Vier Bildern*), Ullmann indicates it to be a play in one act (*Spiel in einem Akt*), subdivided into 4 scenes for 7 singers and 15 instruments. Since there are some spoken dialogues or *recitativi parlati*, *The Emperor of Atlantis* is rather a (*Singspiel*) than a classical opera. It is in one act, it lasts about one hour and it draws inspiration from the *Commedia dell'arte*, mixed with Puppety (*Der Puppenspiel*) and Kurt Weil's early century's cabaret spirit.

The opera's conflated chronology of events within a one-act format reflects the composer's yearning to erase the distance between the events in the opera and the lives of those interned in Terezín. The choice of a limited number of instruments is referable to the scarce availability in the ghetto. The prologue was concluded by Ullmann on 15 July 1943, while, on the score, the first scene is dated 22 September 1943. The first final version is from 18 November 1943. Ullmann added the last *Aria* of the Kaiser on 13 January 1944<sup>7</sup>.

Before the analysis of political symbols and musical elements, I will now present a brief summary of the plot. The characters of the opera are: the Emperor of Atlantis/Kaiser Overall (baritone) - it can be supposed that the Librettist's intention is to disguise the association with Hitler through an English name, for *Überalles* would have been too evident - Death/Der Tod (bass), Harlequin (tenor), Drummer (mezzo-soprano), Soldier (tenor), a girl called Bubikof (soprano), Loudspeaker (baritone).<sup>8</sup>

Among the many allusions in the opera, the title refers to Plato's myth of Atlantis – as the totalitarian vision of the Nazi empire was drenched with myth (Vidal-Naquet, 2006: 113).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Kien, Jewish painter and poet, was born in Varnsdorf in and died in Auschwitz in October 1944.

<sup>7</sup> From the analysis on the copy of the manuscript of the *Emperor of Atlantis* at the Archive of the Jewish Museum in Prag. Catalog: AS T inv. N. 319a.

<sup>8</sup> The opera is based on the interaction among symbolic characters (Harlequin, Death, Emperor, Drummer, Loudspeaker) and characters in flesh and blood such as the girl and the soldier who, however, have a marginal role in the story. Furthermore, the symbolic characters belong to different historical ages or to indefinite ones.

<sup>9</sup> As stated by Vidal-Naquet, the allusions to Atlantis are rare, they appear only in the title and in the evocation of the

In fact, the opera is set in an undefined place, a ciphered symbol for Terezín audience, conscious of the dangerous political implications expressed in the opera. Perhaps, the librettist used Atlantis as an easy symbol to identify a parallel world.

The Emperor of Atlantis opens with the prologue in which the Loudspeaker announces the title, describes the first scene, and introduces the characters, each accompanied by a musical motive, weaving the description of the character with its own portraying musical element, reciprocally highlighting visual and musical elements. The first character described is the Emperor of Atlantis – who has not been seen for years. He spends all his time shut up in his enormous palace, quite alone, so as to concentrate on ruling. The Drummer - girl is almost an unreal apparition, as the radio. The Loudspeaker, who can be heard but can not be seen. A soldier and a girl. Death, a discharged soldier wearing an Imperial Royal uniform, maybe as a memory of the Habsburgic one, perhaps a parallel with Terezín's past as a Habsburg fortress (Sebald, 2008: 202).<sup>10</sup> Another character is Harlequin, who knows how to laugh through his tears. He stands for Life. Throughout all the opera, the Loudspeaker will repeat, yelling, "Hallo, hallo!" representing the loudspeakers in the ghetto, symbols of technological modernity and of the immense power of communication, used by the Nazis for propaganda.

In the first scene Harlequin and Death lament the way in which life and death ceased to have any meaning when they are interrupted by a third character, the Drummer, who announces the total war as Emperor Overall's latest decree. The Drummer's proclamation comes with an attempt to conscript Death to the cause. Death is infuriated by this impertinence and refusing to cooperate, decides instead to break his sword so that nobody from then on will be able to die. This is a very important point.

In Nazi concentration camps and ghettos the sovereign right of murder takes to an extreme the mechanisms of biopolitics, for the deported are reduced to bare life and the power of murder is without mediation. Anti-Semitism is at the heart of this mechanism which, analysed within the concentrationary system, reveals a biopolitical nucleus in the unsubjectivation and dehumanisation

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totalitarian Empire. Himmler tried to identify the German Reich with Atlantis.

<sup>10</sup> The fortress-town of Theresienstadt was built under the Emperor Josef II at the end of the 18th century and named after his mother, Empress Maria Theresa. It became a Jewish ghetto during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from 1941 to 1945. The huge structure of the fortress did not tower above the surrounding area, but it was 'down in the damp lowlands around the confluence of the Eger and the Elbe' (Sebald: 2008, 202). For this reason, from the proximity of Terezín, only the chimney of brewery and the bell tower of the church can be seen. The plan of the fortress recalls the shape of a star, closed by a surrounding belt that protected and at the same time imprisoned its inhabitants, built according the rigorous geometric plan of Campanella's City of the Sun, with a square allowing authorities to control spaces and people.

pursued by Nazism “where inferior races had to be eliminated and the new dominant race has to be forged in the wield of the most terrible power” (Portinaro, 2005: 214). This system is “the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realised”—a space in which “power has before it pure biological life, without any mediation” (Agamben, 1995: 191).

In Ullmann’s opera the sovereign right of murder is transfigured into the right not to die. This new dimension of biopolitics lies between the element of life and the element of death. In this new dimension, the power to kill is without any mediation. Music, standing between the elements of life and death, interrupts the mechanism of biopolitics and rejects the reduction of man as a pure, biological reality.

In the second scene the Emperor discovers that a mysterious epidemic has broken out and that although many are mortally wounded, no one is able to die. The Emperor is appalled but he manages to turn the situation to his favour by claiming knowledge of a secret formula that awards his subjects eternal life. The second scene is set in the empty and cold imperial palace, where there are a writing table, a big black and veiled frame, as a mirror, and the Loudspeaker. The Emperor (baritone), closed in his palace, writes and controls war operations speaking on the phone with the Loudspeaker, who informs him on the events.

The atrocity of concentration camps is evoked in all its merciless absurdity when the Loudspeaker, after having pronounced “*Hallo, hallo!*” on the notes of Josef Suk’s symphony, informs the Emperor that the inhabitants are dead and their corpses have been disposed of, creating a parallel to gas chambers. The Emperor wants to know the number of corpses and the Loudspeaker, epitomizing the cold Nazi bureaucratic machine, answers: ten thousand kilos of phosphorus.

At a musical level, the sound of the drummer alludes to a march and beats time, accompanied by the dissonant chord of harmonium in “*fortissimo*”, thus creating the effect of a spectral and anguished wait – as indicated by the author of the score, with intervals of augmented fourth and diminished fifth. The second scene continues with Overall calling the provincial court to know the fate of the attempter. The Loudspeaker says that the attempter was hanged but Death refuses to serve him and communicates the outbreak of a new disease: soldiers do not die any longer. Overall feels threatened: who is going to respect him now? Nobody will obey anymore if Death refuses serve him. Now, with a coup de Theatre, Overall sings an Aria (*Allegro sostenuto* 4/4), saying: “We, the one and only Overall, bestow on our loyal soldiers the secret of eternal life...”

The third scene is set on the battlefield, where a Soldier (tenor) and a girl, Bubikopf (soprano) are fighting, while the Drummer continues to announce the Emperor's decree in the background. The Soldier, looking close to his enemy, notices her beauty: "Such white skin!". Bubikopf commands him to kill her, instead he kisses her. Bubikopf is on the point of shooting him, but then drops her weapon and flies into his arms singing the Aria "Is it true that there are regions which have not been laid waste by shelling?". At the end of the aria the girl asks the Soldier, in the wonder that accompanies her having always lived in war: "Is it true that there are mountains which glow blue against the clear sky?", on the notes of a sweet and moving melody in which the oboe answers to the notes sung by Bubikopf. The Drummer bursts on the scene, attempting to awake, unsuccessfully, the feeling of the girl towards war. In the finale of this scene, the Soldier and Bubikopf sing a *grazioso duettino*.

When the Soldier and the girl are not singing, the theme song from the overture comes back, suddenly leading the audience to the beginning of the opera, when the war of all against all had not been declared yet.

The last scene is set in the imperial palace, where the Emperor, still at the writing table, is listening to the news broadcast by the Loudspeaker. Suddenly, Harlequin emerges from a trapdoor and sings a melody telling some moments of his childhood, spent together with the Emperor, repeatedly pronouncing his name "We Overall, we Overall". The Drummer arrives, stiff and authoritarian, claiming again the magnitude of the Kaiser, repeating his name accompanied by the sound of the drummer, on the rhythm of a march. Harlequin prefers to sing him a lullaby, which is going to be his epitaph, on the notes of the famous and popular German melody: "Sleep, child, sleep, I am an epitaph". Overall is speaking on the phone and listening to the radio, which is emitting confused sounds, while the Loudspeaker broadcasts war reports and the collapse of his fortresses. Here, the Emperor, gone mad, sings a frantic *terzetto* with Harlequin and the Drummer, on a *café-chantant* melody, and wonders: "Yes, what constitutes a man? Am I still a man?". At the end of the *terzetto*, Overall tears the cloth covering the mirror and finds Death reflected. The covered mirror is a symbol of the obscure spirit of the Emperor, who now sees himself reflected in Death, in a correspondence between the two subjects (Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant: 2005, 415-416). The soul of the Emperor through the reflected image undergoes a transformation and announces the final of the opera: the Emperor is going to die: "Who are you?" asks the Emperor, and Death answers singing an Aria with a liederistic connotation: "I am Death: Death the gardener, who sows sleep in pain-

filled furrows...”, declaring himself redeemer of grief and anguish and quiet and peaceful host. In the chaos of a world where even the seriously wounded are unable to die, Overall acknowledges “We men cannot live without you”, and Death announces: “I will make my peace with you if you will make this sacrifice: to be the first to submit to the new death”.

The Emperor hesitates, but then he accepts to die and seals a pact with Death, who takes him by the hand – as in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* – through the mirror, disappearing. Thus, the Emperor becomes the first victim of the return of Death. Now balance and sense of life are restored. The extremely symbolic aspect of the return of Death, accompanying the Emperor in his last journey through the mirror – symbol of passage and of the duality of being – is associated by J.J. Vlasselaer to Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, where good and evil, light and dark are mirrored, and where an initiatory journey reflects a tale. This leads us to consider Ullmann’s opera as the *Magic Flute* of the 20th century. Not anymore an opera composed for the age of Enlightenment, but for the age of Darkness (Vlasselaer: 2004).

### **Symbolic analysis**

The particular conditions, in which Ullmann lived during his internment, influenced his musical works. The induced creativity in extreme conditions emphasises how music created, among those interned in Terezín, a strong social and ethical cohesion, becoming sometimes an unexpected chance for critical, painful and dissenting expression towards the warders, a sort of soul’s rebellion. Of course it was possible to criticise Nazism only in an elusive, allusive web of symbolism, irony, and metaphor - a sort of disguise poetics that for Terezín’s prisoners resulted in a decipherable aesthetic. In *The Emperor of Atlantis* this disguise poetics, with frequent fragments of political and spiritual messages, is the cipher of the composer’s thought.

The fragments of political and spiritual messages are present at the beginning of the opera, in the prologue. Almost as a *Leitmotiv* – a binding force throughout the score – the recurring calls from the Loudspeaker or, as in the prologue, the Trumpet and the Loudspeaker sound calling: ‘Hallo, hallo’, soar in resemblance to the ghetto’s loudspeaker – the enormous power of communication of Nazi propaganda apparatus.

This *Leitmotiv* is a quotation from the Symphony in C min op. 27 by the Czech composer Josef Suk titled *Asrâel*, the Angel of Death (Benjamin, 1995: 80), and composed in memory of his wife and his father-in-law and teacher Antonin Dvorak. Ullmann used this motif because he knew its value for Czechoslovak population as a symbol of political and spiritual resistance against the Nazi oppressor. In fact, in 1937, two years before Nazi invasion of Prague and after the death of founder and first president of Czechoslovak Republic Tomas Masaryk, it was broadcasted by Czechoslovak radio and subsequently on many official occasions. Ullmann conveys his political message to Terezín's audience through this quotation. The only strength of the deportees was memory.<sup>11</sup>

In the first scene, Harlequin and Death are sitting on a bench. Harlequin is singing while Death is drawing patterns with a sabre in the sand. The character of Harlequin draws inspiration from Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, he is wearing a costume of colourful fragments and a black mask. This surreal figure represents an allegory, endowed with sarcasm and irony, of the man psychologically flattened by inactive nihilism. This symbolises the prisoners of Terezín to whom dignity and their image as men were denied, thus denying the "welcome of the face" (Lévinas, 2006: pp. 202-204). According to Emmanuel Lévinas: «The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power», thus opening a new dimension in which "the face speaks to me and thereby invites me into a incommensurate relationship with exercised power".<sup>12</sup> Through the denial of a face to the Jews, Nazis prevent power to paralyse in relation to the infinite resistance to murder, an ethical resistance, that "gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent". Nazi violence interrupts communication with the Other and brutally hammers at the expression of the face, for the expression is of determination and communication together. The detachment from their life, their loved ones and their dreams is represented through the grid pattern of the costume of Harlequin.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The example is the Angelus Novus, of which Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy in History is about. The Angel's face is turned toward the past and the angel of history might have the same appearance: Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet (Benjamin, 1995: 80).

<sup>12</sup> The total negation of the Being – object of murder - abdicating to confronting and understanding, "exercises a power over what escapes power". The face, expressing itself in the sensible, opposes the power of murder through the "infinity of its transcendence" (Levinas: 2006, 202-204).

<sup>13</sup> The grid pattern evokes a conflictual situation, typical of a Being who has not been able to accomplish his individualization, detaching himself from the confusion of desires, projects, and possibilities. This condition reflects those of the deported, who were taken away from their lives and deported in concentration camps, interrupting the evolution of their personality. (Chevalier, A. Gheerbrant, 2005: p. 101).

In the text, there is a temporal reference to the perception of time of the displaced prisoners when Harlequin, sitting on a bench with Death, sings: “Perhaps it’s Tuesday? Wednesday? Friday? One’s the same as another”. From the musical point of view, Harlequin sings in the first scene the aria *The Moon Strides Over the Hills*, characterised by a cantabile connotation with large ascending intervals, symbolizing innocence and love for life. Harlequin tries to convince Death to rejoice in life. This aria is a clear quotation, with minimum alterations, of *Der Trinkene im Fruhling* from *Das Lied von der Erde* by Gustav Mahler (Principe, 1983: 792-874). Mahler was considered a degenerate composer and his music was banned by the Nazis.

With reference to the lyrics, Harlequin describes a scene rich in surreal elements and corrupted atmosphere. The references to the moon and the blood as well as the melodies recall the *Pierrot Lunaire* by Arnold Schönberg, where, in the first scene, Pierrot is enchanted by the moon which evokes gruesome visions (Neighbour et. al. 1986: 50). This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that Ullmann writes *Pierrot* on the score (Naegele, 2002: 391).

Schönberg was Ullmann’s teacher and the Nazis considered him a degenerate composer because he was a Jew and the founder of the dodecaphony – a style that according to the Nazi was a pollutant to German music. Further on, Harlequin’s singing style changes, drawing its rhythm *ostinato* from Death’s song, but with major second interval that recalls Jazz. Immediately after, Death sings an *Aria in Blues*. Nazism considered both Jazz and Blues degenerate music (Zwerin, 1993).

At the end of the *Aria* the Drummer appears, announced by the above-mentioned melody of Suk’s *Asrael* Symphony. The Drummer announces the Emperor’s decree: ‘Hallo, hallo! Achtung! Achtung! In the name of his Majesty, Emperor Overall!’ Then she lists his aristocratic titles: ‘Emperor of both the Indies, Emperor of Atlantis, reigning Duke of Ophir and Lord High Steward of Astarte, Ban of Hungary, Cardinal-Prince of Ravenna, King of Jerusalem.’ Here, Ullmann sets a gruesome version of the German national anthem: *Deutschland Deutschland über alles*. The German national anthem epitomises German *Kultur*, which is an integral element of The Emperor of Atlantis. Thus Ullmann addresses the German tradition and specifically the Wagnerian one. The intention of the composer and of the librettist might have been to challenge and to mock Nazi power through this thinly veiled parody of Adolf Hitler.

Towards the end of her monologue, the Drummer announces, in the Emperor's name, the war of all against all, inviting Death's alliance. She recalls the figure of Josef Goebbels who also announced the total war.

The third scene is set on the battlefield, where a soldier and a girl are fighting, while the Drummer continues to announce the Emperor's decree in the background, but towards the end of the scene they fall in love and sing a *grazioso duettino*. In this song, Ullmann draws a landscape and a changing sky with violins *pizzicato*, reproducing the sound of the harp, while the other instruments accompany the lovers. Through the element of the sky, Ullmann communicates a transformation. The improvement of weather conditions carries a message of hope and freedom. The dark, grey and cloudy atmosphere of the dictatorship is extinct by the clear and crisp arrival of love and freedom. This relation between the clearing of the sky and the arrival of freedom echoes to me the final scene in Rossini's *Guglielmo Tell*, where *Guglielmo Tell*, during a storm, kills the tyrant and suddenly the sky clears up (Rossini, 1988: 151-3).<sup>14</sup>

Another important point, there are two alternative versions of Overall's final *Aria* in the manuscript that was found in Adler's house. The differences concern the lyrics but not the music. Such differences are important because they are able to change the entire meaning of the opera.

One version was written by the librettist Peter Kien. The title of the *Aria* is *Aries des Kaisers* and it starts with the lyrics Of all the things that can happen, only one fails to make the Gods smile: saying goodbye (*Von allem, was geschiet, ist eines nur, wovor der Götter Lächeln nicht besteht: der Abschied*). In this version, the tone of the *Aria* is apocalyptic and bitter. Kien's pessimism emerges at the end of the *Aria* when he recalls Death and, with it, hunger, love and life (Oliveri, 2008: 270-272).

The other version is found on the handwritten score, where Ullman deleted Kien's lyrics and overwrote The Emperor's Farewell (*Des Kaisers Abschied*) and it starts with the lyrics The war is over (*Der Krieg ist aus*), concluded on 13 January 1943. Here Ullmann's lyrics are taken from Felix Braum's *Tantalos*, which had already been used in the last movement of *Symphonischen Phantasie* for tenor and orchestra. Ullmann wrote the Symphony in 1925 and it was lost during the war. Ullmann's lyrics appear on the typed version of July – August 1944 (Schultz, 2008: 94-125).

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<sup>14</sup> "Tutto cangia il ciel si abbella, L'aria è pura (...) Il dì raggiante (...) La natura è lieta anch'ella". (Rossini: 1988, 151-153)

Which one is the definitive version? The question remains unanswered, not only with regards to the final Overall's aria, but also to other parts where the text of the libretto is modified. In fact in several parts of the handwritten score there are edits, substitutions, and alternatives made in the course of rehearsals. However, while Ullmann's intention is unknown, his thought, strongly influenced by Anthroposophy, leaves no room for Kien's dark and pessimistic view. Hence, Braum's lyrics, which are more poetic and transcendental, are closer to Ullman's concept of life and death. The composer's version of the final follows Wagnerian dictates, in particular in the aspect of catharsis.

As we have seen, in the final of the Opera, Death takes the Emperor by the hand and leads him through the mirror while other characters (Girl, Soldier, Drummer, Harlequin, Loudspeaker) sing on the melody customarily used in Nazi party rallies, the chorale: *Ein' fest Burg ist unsere Gott (Largo semplice, dolce grazioso)*.

Towards the end, the Aria takes the form of a madrigal (*Kanon a cappella. Tranquillo*) on the words 'Come, Death, our honoured guest, enter the chamber of our heart'. At the end, the four characters state the moral of the opera that becomes a sacred commandment: 'Thou shalt not take Death's great name in vain'. In this part, there is a clear alternation between the relaxation of the tensions built up throughout the opera and the last impetus, which becomes the message of the opera, a warning about the future for humanity.

I quote Viktor Ullmann himself regarding that:

Theresienstadt was and is for me the school of form. Earlier, when one did not feel the impact and burden of material life because they were obscured by comfort, this magical feat of civilization, it was easy to create beautiful forms. Here, where one has to triumph over the matter of daily life through form, where all things connected with the Muses stand in utter contrast to the surroundings, here is the true school for masters, if one, with Schiller, sees the secret of the work of art in the annihilation of matter through form, which, presumably, is the overall mission of man, not only of the aesthetic man, but of the ethical man...It must be emphasised that Theresienstadt has increased, not reduced, my musical work, that by no means did we sit weeping at the rivers of Babylon, and that our desire for culture equalled our

desire for life; and I am convinced that all those who, in life and in art, struggled to force form upon resisting matter, will agree with me (Ullmann, 1993: 92) <sup>15</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In light of this analysis, Ullmann's opera written in Terezín offers a new key of interpretation of events that invites us to refrain from the perception of the passive suffering of the Jews and, by extension, of humanity. A distinct aspect of the power of music lies in its ability to unite groups of people in their urge to express opposition, antagonism. Ullmann's work is a mixture of music, literature, and figurative art; an art where new forms of expression are created in order to speak about pain, humiliation, death, and provide contrast between evil and good.

Music and the performance of music not only witness spiritual and artistic resistance; they are also the result of human activity and of social relations, being therefore a historic and cultural document. To quote Adorno: "The forms of art reflect the history of man more truthfully than do documents themselves" (Adorno, 2002: 47). In this perspective, art is where political, social, cultural processes of each époque are written and deposited.

Besides Ullmann, some of the most talented composers in Europe were deported to Terezín for example: Gideon Klein, Hans Krása, Pavel Haas, Sigmund Schul. All of them wanted to compose music, defying the ban imposed by the Nazis and quoting degenerate music. In the heart of Nazi concentrationary system, Jewish musicians were able to bring back to life their works, through a ciphered musical language, which eluded the oppressors' control. This is the paradox of Lagermusik.

Ullmann's strong determination to continue his creative activity in Terezín is reflected in his ability to leave a trace of his political and artistic experiences. Thus it is possible to analyse his philosophical and political thought, as well as the relation between music and politics. The opera *The Emperor of Atlantis* has both characteristics featuring committed and non-committed music. On the one hand music is a medium of political, social and moral scope. On the other it expresses the subjective aspect of the composer's political commitment - his necessity and urgency to put into music a political message (Dahlhaus, 1977: 51).

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<sup>15</sup> Ullmann's essay entitled *Goethe and Ghetto* is published on volume eds. by Ingo Schultz.

Ullmann's works are meaningful also because of their relation between music and the extreme, to quote Tzvetan Todorov's book on the experience of concentration camps (Todorov, 1992). Ullmann's urge to create music is so strong that it's almost biological and this aspect is increased under the extreme conditions of Terezín (Levitin, 2009: 18-22). Music reflects, together with the protest, also the material conditions of production - the material, physical and spiritual restrictions - thus becoming an efficient means to metaphorically communicate thoughts.

Music becomes then a fundamental and decisive instrument to fight for the preservation of human dignity. Salvation instrument as music can return humanity to life, saving the spiritual dimension where life is denied and prevented. Music from concentration camps and ghettos is able to re-create the past, making the compositions written in Terezín documents of memory, where the ineffable and the lost can be re-discovered. Music of such magnitude is a fundamental medium to preserve human dignity, and grant spiritual salvation, to human lives caught in places where life is denied and prevented. Music, to quote Vladimir Jankelevitch, "expresses the inexpressible to infinity" (Jankélévitch, 2007: 61-2). However, the mystery it expresses is not the sterile mystery of death, but the fertile mystery of life, freedom and love. The mystery of *Lagermusik* is not the inexpressible but the ineffable that tells us the obscure and the inexplicable of there is no reason why (*hier ist kein warum*) (Levi, 1959: 45).

The destruction of the Jews in Eastern Europe removed the extraordinary cultural tradition, which took them from the *shtetl* of *Ostjudentum* to Mitteleuropa, enriching the culture in German language. Unlike the general situation, Theresienstadt became the simulacrum of the Jewish community: a kind of *shtetl* where Jews isolated themselves from the rest of the hostile human context, "an organic cosmos" as it is defined by Claudio Magris, where the deported found, or thought to have found, a sort of "umbilical cord with the totality of life" (Magris: 1989, 19). The reality of ghetto was different, in fact the largest part of those interned in Theresienstadt died in Auschwitz gas chambers, also music led to such totality. It is not to be forgotten that music in Theresienstadt was accompanied by an atmosphere of incertitude, arbitrium, fear, and violence. In this sense, musical activity tells a fragment of daily life.

Therefore the reason for Ullmann's artistic expression must be searched in his personal experience, in his way to feel himself and the world, and his urge to communicate it. Hence, music becomes salvation from Nazis perpetrated violence in concentration camps and ghettos. Only music - vital

energy and spiritual catalyst - can re-establish order from Evil (Carrieri, G. Parotto, 2010: 13). This is the reason why, where “the word fell into a sleep”<sup>16</sup> (Amery, 2002: 55), music survived, as salvation, as antidote, as a form of resistance to suffering and torture. Music thus became a testament to give strength, tell events, witness stories and communicate emotions (Settimelli, 2001: 11).

The opera, written by Ullmann in Theresienstadt, is an act of political, social and spiritual resistance, and it offers a new interpretation of what happened. It also leads us to distance ourselves from a passive and pitiful vision of the sufferance of Jewish people and, more in general, of a hurt humanity. Ullman gathers in a definite form the twines of figurative art, literature and music, searching new forms of expression, able to talk about pain, humiliation, death, opposing the reasons of evil to the reasons of good.

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<sup>16</sup> In his book *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a survivor in Auschwitz and its realities*, Jean Amery quotes Karl Kraus's words in the early years of the Third Reich: “The word fell into a sleep”.

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