

VIKTOR ULLMANN

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Viktor Ullmann was another casualty of the Nazis. He was put to death in Auschwitz in October 1944 and his music was forgotten for many years.

He was an Austrian composer of Jewish descent born in Teschen in 1898.

It is believed that his musical training was in Vienna where he lived with his mother from 1909. His father was a military man and away from home a lot of the time. Before the outbreak of war Viktor was studying with Josef Polnauer a pupil of Schoenberg. Viktor attended a grammar school in the third district of Vienna and he developed friendships, the most significant was that with Hans Eisler.



Eisler was born in Leipzig in 1898, an exact contemporary of Ullmann. Eisler was a Marxist and initially wrote political songs and marches. He was exiled in 1933 and worked in Paris, London, Copenhagen and the USA settling in Hollywood in 1938.

In May 1916, while waiting for his school exam results, Ullmann volunteered for military service. He rose to the rank of a second lieutenant. In the last year of the war he enrolled as a law student at the University of Vienna and, in October 1918, he became a pupil of Schoenberg.

Here he also met Alban Berg and Eduard Steuermann, a Polish pianist and composer. All three were interested in twelve note music.

Czechoslovakia was granted independence in 1918. Ullmann arrived in Prague in 1919, newly married and with no prospects and, later, became the assistant to Zemlinsky during 1920 - 1927 at the Neue Deutsche Theatre in Prague as répétiteur with conducting commitments.

For those who are unclear, a répétiteur is the member of an opera house who rehearses and coaches singers in their roles and often acts as a choirmaster.

The Prague opera's pianist was Franz Langer who was to become Kurt Masur's teacher. Ullmann and Langer became good friends. Ullmann's debut as a composer was with his *Seven Leier* for voice and piano of 1923 in which Langer took part, as he did with the *Piano Sonata no. 1, Op 10*, of 1936 written in memory of Mahler and steeped in C minor with some music sounding somewhat like *Gotterdammerung*. Langer was to keep several works of Ullmann in his repertoire.

Zemlinsky expected his students to be as familiar with modern composers as well as with the classical repertoire. He put rigorous demands on his pupils and staff and they had to work with him on such works as Berg's *Wozzeck*, Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin*, *Cardillac* by Hindemith and Krenek's *Johnny spielt auf*.

Ullmann was the principal conductor of the Aussig Opera during 1927 and 1928 and his performances benefited from the strict discipline he had learned from Zemlinsky. Ullman put on Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, Smetena's *The Kiss* and Krenek's *Johnny spielt auf*. He also conducted orchestral works including works he did not like such as Schubert's *Symphony no. 9 in C*.

Ullmann was a very shy and reserved man. He greeted applause with hesitancy and modesty. He was the antithesis of Elgar and Britten. He was also a good-looking man when he was not smoking cigarettes as someone expressed it. His modesty and desire for a change led him to give up conducting for a short while to concentrate on composing which he did on his return to Prague. He composed a *Concerto for orchestra*

which was very well received and his Schoenberg Variations in the orchestration of 1929 which won him the Hertzka Memorial Prize..

He divided his time between 1929 and 1933 at the cities of Stuttgart and Zurich as director of the theatre orchestra at the Schauspielhaus (1929 - 1931). In Stuttgart he was the proprietor of the anthroposophy Novalis book shop.

Anthroposophy was formulated by the Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner. It is the philosophy based on the premise that human intellect has the ability to contact spiritual worlds and these spiritual worlds were fully accessible to all human beings who have an advanced dreamlike consciousness. One could acquire spiritual perception independent of the senses.

In other words, it is a form of spiritualism.

The rise of Nazism meant that Ullmann returned to Prague in 1933 and tried to build himself a career as a freelance teacher. He had lost money over the bookshop in Stuttgart and many of his compositions were in draft and unfinished. Prague had changed politically with Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German Party and many refugees were passing through Prague, many of whom stayed.

In 1935 Ullmann produced a study of all major and minor keys based on Steiner's colour theories. Therefore E major was a mixture of yellow and red, G flat major was reddish-blue, A flat major was pure blue, G major was the colour of the victor and, presumably, heroic, D flat major was the mystic key, E flat major was greenish-blue, A flat minor was purple or mauve and so on.

Scriabin also had a colour scheme associated with keys and developed the mystic chord based on fourths namely C, F sharp, B flat, E, A and D.

Earlier composers associated keys with events or types of events. C was bright, D was military or ceremonial and C minor was tragic, for example.

The piano was the mainstay of Ullmann's output. He wrote seven piano sonatas. The Sonata no. 2, Op 19, was given a private performance in 1940 by the international pianist Alice Herz-Sommer who was born in 1903. The finale are variations on Moravia folk songs in the style of Janacek. The Sonata no. 3, Op 26, was dedicated to the Hungarian pianist Juliette Aranyi to whom he had dedicated his Piano Concerto Op 25 composed in 1939. The finale of the Piano Sonata no. 3 are variations on a theme of Mozart. The Sonata no. 4, Op 38, was dedicated to Alice Herz-Sommer and ends with a triple fugue. Three more sonata followed.

The Piano Concerto is in four movements namely Allegro con fuoco, Andante tranquillo with a largo coda, Allegro and Allegro Molto and lasts just under 20 minutes. In this work the piano is the orchestra's adversary. The first movement is rhythmically inventive but also has some tragic chords. The slow movement is elegiac and the scherzo includes a fugue and the finale in 5-4.

The work seems to me to be restrained and we must remember that Jewish people were living in dangerous, worrying and tragic days and this may be reflected in the music.

Ullmann remained friendly with both Czech and German musicians. He lived in Prague until 8th September 1942 the date that he was transported to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt where he was allowed to compose and organize concerts.

Edith Kraus was born in 1913 in Vienna of Czech parents. She was also Jewish and transported to Theresienstadt in 1942. She had known Ullmann in Prague. The following year Ullmann entrusted his Piano Sonata no. 6 to her. She stayed in Theresienstadt until its liberation in 1945.

Many of Ullmann's works have been lost. But he wrote a short opera The Emperor of Atlantis of 1943 and two other operas have survived, The Slavonic Rhapsody for saxophone and orchestra, Op 23, three string

quartets, the last one written at Theresienstadt. There is the Don Quixote overture, dated 21st June 1944, and the Twelve pieces, The lay of the love and death of Cornet Christoph Rilke for speaker and piano. The short score from Theresienstadt was difficult to read with all its corrections. The dedication reads, "For the birthday of my Elly, who always goes with the century." It is dated 27 September 1944.

An opera Peer Gynt of 1928 is lost. Der Sturz des Antichrist dates from 1935 and based on a play by the anthroposophist Albert Sieffen which seems to lampoon Hitler and the other opera is Der Zerbrockene Krug fom 1943.

There are two symphonies which grew out of the Piano Sonatas numbers 5 and 7. The Sinfonia Von Meiner Jugend was reconstructed by Wulff in 1943.

His death was not only tragic and murder but it deprived the musical world of the possibility of further interesting compositions. Had he survived the Nazi terror he may have given us an insight into music within the camp and the circumstances in which he wrote some of his notable music.

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