



Triumph of the spirit

Many artists were held in the Nazi show camp of Terezin. An opera written there is going on tour.

By Jessica Duchon

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In 1944, the Nazis released a propaganda film entitled *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*. Terezin, in north-west Bohemia, was the place in question: it had been turned into, supposedly, a show-camp, a smokescreen to blind the world to what was really going on in other concentration camps. The film – an elaborate hoax – showed artistic individuals within Terezin engaging in creative activities, giving concerts and even putting on their own operas. It did not disclose the grimmer reality that more than 50,000 people were crammed into living quarters designed for 7,000, where thousands were dying from starvation and disease.

Much of Prague's Jewish population was deported to Terezin, including a number of brilliant musicians and intellectuals; and, perhaps in a terrible irony, they were indeed able to pursue their creativity with what facilities were available. But after their deaths, the musical achievements of Terezin's inmates, including the composers Viktor Ullmann (right), Gideon Klein, Pavel Haas and Hans Krasa, lay forgotten for decades, until in the 1970s efforts began to be made to rediscover them.

This autumn, English Touring Opera is taking up the cause of one of the most substantial works forged in these extraordinary circumstances: Ullmann's hour-long opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (*The Emperor of Atlantis*). In a new production by ETO's artistic director James Conway, and paired with a staged Bach cantata, *Christ lag in Todes Banden*, it will be seen at the Royal Opera House and then enjoy its first-ever UK nationwide tour.

The libretto is by a gifted young poet Peter Kien, who was also imprisoned in Terezin. It is a black comedy poking fun at a dictator who faces a predicament when Death goes on strike. No prizes for guessing which dictator it satirised. That makes it all the more remarkable that the work reached its dress rehearsal in 1943 before the authorities spotted the nature of its content. Once they did, the performance was cancelled, the opera was banned and those involved were put on the next transport to Auschwitz. Ullmann, and Kien met their deaths there in 1944.

Before Ullmann was forced into his last train journey, he gave the opera's manuscript to a friend, a former philosophy professor, for safekeeping. Yet it was only in 1975 that it was performed for the first time, in Amsterdam. The first British production was at Morley College in 1981.

Ullmann more than deserves wider recognition. Born in 1898 in Teschen, Silesia, he was from a family of Jewish background that had converted to Catholicism; both he and his father served in the First World War, and the young composer's experiences in the conflict between Austria and Italy fed into *The Emperor of Atlantis*. His output includes many excellent art songs and chamber music, as well as an earlier opera, *Fall of the Antichrist*.

The music is a fragmented and eclectic mix of cutting-edge contemporary style, jazz influence and pastiche: "It literally goes from Schoenberg to vaudeville in the space of two bars," says the conductor Peter Selwyn, who is at the helm for the tour. "It has moments of extraordinary lyrical beauty. And suddenly the drums come in and you're whisked away into a showpiece number."

The Bach Cantata, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, has been specially orchestrated for almost the same forces that the Ullmann employs – including the saxophone, but minus the banjo – to unify the two soundworlds. "The Ullmann finishes with a chorale, so the evening will end with a mirror of the way it began," Selwyn points out. "The Bach cantata concerns the triumph of the spirit and of humanity in the face of death and despair. And the triumph of life over death is the message of the chorale at the end of the Ullmann."

"I want the evening to have a consonance about it," says James Conway of ETO who first directed *The Emperor of Atlantis* some years ago in Ireland. "This opera is a beautiful testimony to the artistic lives of people at Terezin. "

'The Emperor of Atlantis';, English Touring Opera, Royal Opera House Linbury Studio, from 5 October 2012, then on national tour until 3 November. Full tour details at <http://englishtouringopera.org.uk/tour-dates/autumn-2012>