



# BRUNDIBÁR

By Hans Krása  
Libretto by Adolph Hoffmeister

A Guide to Crafting a Performance  
With Regards to Historical Context and Present Day Implications

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## **Special Thanks**

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## **THE GIDEON KLEIN AWARD**

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### A Note to Directors

This curriculum is meant to serve the stage director and music director of *Brundibár* as a guide to teaching the performers about the historical context and present day implications of the piece through an exploration of the characters and the support of the music. The suggestions in this guide may help students understand more fully the thematic elements of the opera. Games and activities serve as ideas to bring the characters and messages of the opera to life. The games and activities may be helpful in creating the staging of the piece.

In many sections, you will find “Questions for Discussion”, which are recommended for facilitation with the performers.

## HANS KRÁSA, COMPOSER OF *BRUNDIBÁR*



Hans Krása was born in Prague in 1899. He studied piano and violin as a child, and then studied composition at the German Music Academy in Prague. Krása's debut as a composer was in 1921 with *Four Orchestral Songs* Op. 1 and was widely acclaimed. His last work *Brundibar* was completed before his arrest in 1942, when he was sent to Theresienstadt. Krása became music director of the camp and rescored *Brundibár*. In 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz where he was considered too old to work and a possible threat to order. He was murdered in October 1944.

### **HISTORY OF THERESIENSTADT AND *BRUNDIBÁR***

The children's opera *Brundibar*, written by Jewish Czech composer Hans Krása and set to Adolph Hoffmeister's libretto, was originally written as a submission for a children's opera competition in 1938. The winner of the competition was never announced, due to the invasion and occupation of Germany during World War II. Cultural activities among the Jewish community became forbidden. In 1941, *Brundibár* had a secret performance in a Prague orphanage, but Krása was unable to attend, as he was arrested and sent to Theresienstadt.

Theresienstadt, or Terezín, was an old military fortress that had been turned into a ghetto camp by the Nazis. Among the transports of Jewish people of all ages who were sent to Theresienstadt as prisoners, many of Prague's finest artists, musicians and performers ended up there, which led to an artistic life and presence in this camp. Much of these artistic endeavors were done in secret and hidden from the Nazis, but some of it was encouraged because of Nazi propaganda. Theresienstadt was being used as a "model" camp, and the Nazi's were attempting to deceive the rest of the world into believing that the Jewish people were being kept safe during the war. In reality, the residents of Theresienstadt were treated as prisoners in a concentration camp and living conditions were poor. Formal education of the children was forbidden, however some brave individuals secretly educated the young people.

Because of the attempt to use Theresienstadt as a piece of propaganda, Krása was appointed head of musical activities of the camp. With a smuggled piano reduction of the score of *Brundibár*, he re-orchestrated the opera for the musical instruments that were available at the camp. Frantisek Zelenka, the former stage manager at the Czech National Theater, directed the first public performance of *Brundibár* on September 13, 1943 in the Magdenburg barracks. The opera went on to have 55 performances at Theresienstadt, including a performance for a group from the International Red Cross who were there on a humanitarian visit. The Nazis essentially tricked the Red Cross visitors by making Theresienstadt appear as a “spa town”, a safe haven for the Jewish people. They brought in food, painted signs and fixed up the camp to trick the Red Cross into believing that life at Theresienstadt was pleasant and comfortable for the Jewish people. Footage of this visit is captured on a film the Nazis were making titled “Hitler Gives a City to the Jews”. The film was meant as further propaganda, but was never released. Footage of *Brundibár* is also on this film. \*

In the story of *Brundibár*, the children are victorious over the evil organ grinder Brundibár. The theme lent itself perfectly to a symbolic representation to what the performers and Jewish audience members were experiencing. The character of Brundibár represented Hitler. The message of the oppressed overpowering the oppressor was transported into every individual who participated in or watched the opera: the hope for the obliteration of evil, the belief in oneself - no matter how small, to have the ability in a community to overcome. The opera was so influential for the morale of the children it has been said that they would whistle musical phrases from the opera to one another outside of performances in order to encourage one another - like a secret code.

While Theresienstadt is not considered a death camp, roughly 33,000 people perished there. Theresienstadt was considered the Gateway to Auschwitz, where many more Jewish people perished. Approximately 15,000 children passed through Theresienstadt, of which 90 percent eventually perished in death camps.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

How do you think the performers at Theresienstadt felt when they were performing for an audience of Nazis?

In thinking about your production of *Brundibár*, do you think it is important for performers and directors to know the history of when this opera was written and first performed? Why or why not?

Do you think it is important for contemporary audience to know the history? Why or why not?

Can you think of any present day situations that may be helped by the themes of the story of *Brundibár*?

## **SYNOPSIS OF *BRUNDIBÁR***

Anna and Pepicek must leave home to buy milk for their sick mother, but they don't have any money to buy the milk. The children head to the town square and observe how the organ grinder Brundibár plays his instrument in the marketplace and people give him money. Anna and Pepicek decide to sing to earn money, but no one listens to the singing over the organ grinder's music. The children are disheartened, and dance wildly to Brundibár's music, poking fun at how it sounds. The adults become annoyed, and Brundibar chases the children away.

Anna and Pepicek feel helpless and alone, but realize that "there are only two of us. Many more would make a fuss". A nearby sparrow, cat and dog have heard their troubles and agree to help. The animals make a plan to gather the neighborhood children and form a choir to earn the money.

The next morning, the animals gather all the children of the town together and give them instructions. Brundibár is also in the town square and prepares for his day's work, but is attacked by the Dog. The children quickly gather together and sing a lovely lullaby, which charms the crowd. Brundibar tries to drown out the children, but it's no use.

While Anna and Pepicek talk about all the money they made, Brundibár sneaks in and steals the money. The children and animals surround him. Brundibár is outnumbered, and the money is returned to Anna and Pepicek. The children sing a song of victory.

## **CHARACTERS**

ANINKA  
PEPICEK  
BRUNDIBÁR  
ICEMAN  
BAKER  
MILKMAN  
POLICEMAN  
ADULTS IN THE MARKETPLACE  
SPARROW  
CAT  
DOG  
CHORUS OF CHILDREN

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Ask each performer to decide on the turning point or an important moment of decision for their character. Perhaps it comes with a particular line or action. How does their character decide to do what they do?

Have each performer write out an inner monologue of what their character is thinking and feeling in making their decision. Ask performers to present their inner monologues for the group, or in pairs.

Discuss how the music attributes to character, the plot, moods and ambiances of different scenes and areas.

What are the musical themes for each character?

## MAJOR THEMES

### Questions for Discussion

The following lines from *Brundibar* reflect the major themes in the opera. In your own words, what are the themes?

“There are only two of us, many more will make a fuss.”  
*Pepicek*

“Your huge majority gives you authority.”  
*Dog*

“He who loves justice and will abide by it, who is not afraid, is our friend and can play with us.”  
*Chorus of Children*

Can you find other lines from the opera that relate to this theme?  
Are there other themes in the opera? What lines relate to those themes?  
What is the significance of a particular character singing that particular line?

### Thoughts on Setting for Performance

It is imperative to decide the context and setting of the play in your performance. Will it be set in the time period in which it was written and originally performed? Or will it be set in modern day? Either way, how will you draw in your audience to the context of the opera historically?

## GAMES AND ACTIVITIES

### STATUS

Bring two performers in front of the group. They will be given a slow count to 3 in which they both must attempt to use their body and face in a way as to appear to have lower status than the other actor. After the count of 3, the performers hold their positions and the rest of the group talks about who appears to have the lower status and why. Do this several times with low status. Then have the performers attempt at high status. A couple of chairs may also be helpful.

### Questions for Discussion

What characters in *Brundibar* have high/low status?

How can the performers show this through the way they use their bodies or the way the scene is staged?

Do the statuses change throughout the course of the play? How can this be shown?

**Further Application:** Play the Status game with the performers as their characters.

### FEAR AND PROTECT

If the group is large, half of the group gets up to play at a time, and the others observe. If not, the whole group should go together. The director asks the performers to move about in the whole space, then add make eye contact with others you meet, next acknowledge them non-verbally. The director then tells them to choose someone to fear, and without letting them know, try to stay away from them. Allow them to explore this awhile. Then the director tells the players to choose a protector, and try to keep the protector in between them and the one they fear, still without making it obvious who they fear. At the end, ask each person if they thought they were feared by anyone and if they thought they were protecting anyone.

### Questions for Discussion

In *Brundibar*, who fears whom? Who protects whom?

Does the character actively know they are fearing or protecting another character?

How can this be shown in the way they use their bodies? In the way the opera is staged?

**Further Application:** Play the same game of Fear and Protect with the actors playing as their characters.

*Depending on how much time you have in working with the students, you may want to only play the version of the game under Further Application.*



### **VOX POP INTO TABLEAU**

The actors stand at one end of the room lined against a wall. The director calls out a scene or idea from the play. This may be directly related, for example: Anna and Pepicek's Home, The Marketplace, The Children of the Town, Where the Animals Live; or something more abstract like: Brundibár's Childhood, What Happens Next in the Story, etc. The actors each enter the playing space and create a character or object from that suggestion. They should move into a pose – using different levels, and vocalize a word or line or make a noise that would reflect whatever they are creating. Performers are encouraged not to think too much about what they are going to do, but rather enter the space and create their pose, and making their vocal contribution heard. Performers are also encouraged to interact with each other. The end result is an entire frozen scene. This activity will help the performers imagine and visualize the world of the play.

### **Questions for Discussion**

What appears through these tableaux that you haven't thought about before?

What characters emerge? What situations take place?

Would an actual tableau be useful in the staging of the play?

The following is a poem written by a young boy at Theresienstadt.

TEREZÍN

That bit of filth in dirty walls,  
And all around barbed wire,  
And thirty thousand souls who sleep  
Who once will wake  
And once will see  
Their own blood spilled.

I was once a little child,  
Three years ago.  
That child who longed for other  
worlds.  
But now I am no more a child  
For I have learned to hate.  
I am a grown-up person now,  
I have known fear.

Bloody words and a dead day then,  
That's something different than  
boogie men!

But anyway, I still believe I only sleep  
today,  
That I'll wake up, a child again,  
and start to laugh and play.  
I'll go back to childhood sweet like a  
briar rose,  
Like a bell, which wakes us from a  
dream,  
Like a mother with an ailing child

Loves him with aching woman's love.  
How tragic then, is youth which lives  
With enemies, with gallows ropes,  
How tragic, then, for children on your  
lap  
To say: this for the good, that for the  
bad.

Somewhere, far away out there,  
childhood sweetly sleeps,  
Along that path among the trees,  
There o'er that house  
Which was once my pride and joy.  
There my mother gave me birth into  
this world  
So I could weep...

In the flame of candles by my bed, I  
sleep  
And once perhaps I'll understand  
That I was such a little thing,  
As little as this song.

These thirty-thousand souls who sleep  
Among the trees will wake,  
Open an eye  
And because they see  
A lot

They'll fall asleep again...

--Michael Flack, 1944

### Questions for Discussion

Is Michael Flack's description of Theresienstadt similar to the way you imagined the camp? What is similar? What is surprising?

Do you think Michael Flack was a performer in *Brundibár*? Why or why not?

If you don't think Michael Flack performed in *Brundibár*, do you think he saw it?

What do you think was his experience of watching *Brundibár*?

Can you relate to anything in this poem?

## EDUCATION OF CHILDREN IN THERESIENSTADT

Formal education of the imprisoned children was forbidden, however adults such as Ambassador Zeev Shek, pianist and composer Gideon Klein and nurse Ilse Weber took it on themselves to attend to this vital need - to pass on to the next generation whatever they could salvage. The creativity of these adults led them to utilize what they were allowed, such as playtime, and turn it into what the education they needed. Songs and games were used to teach geography, literature, and even religion.

Zeev Shek said this about the children: "They were in the ghetto and we wanted to bring these children out of the ghetto spiritually, mentally sane, so that they would become quite normal people. I would call it 'positivistic approach to life,' this normalization under abnormal circumstances, giving all these people a kind of belief that under any circumstances, you are a human being, and it is up to you to react as a human being. They can break your body; they can't break your spirit without your cooperation. This is what we used to tell them. After all, the logical way to fight death is to stay alive, isn't it?"

Quote about actor playing Brundibár, Honza Treichlinger, : "From the moment in which he "made" the character, he played all performances without understudy. Anybody else would have failed. What might he have become? An actor or engineer? How he could have humanized his own life as he had his role! That he was rather short was fateful to him. He was fourteen years old. He went to Auschwitz with the old and the small children and directly into the gas chamber."