

---

Satire and Symbolism within  
Viktor Ullmann's opera Der  
Kaiser von Atlantis

---

What is the nature of the satire and symbolism imbedded within this opera?

---

# Viktor Ullmann



- Student of Schoenberg
  - Did not consider himself Jewish until his imprisonment in Terezín
  - Imprisoned in Terezín in 1942
-

# Terezín



---

# Terezín

- “VIP Concentration Camp”
    - Large population of artists and musicians
  - Was not a death camp
  - Build by Joseph II as a fortress, named after his mother Maria Teresa
    - Only concentration camp not build to be a concentration camp
      - Ideal for the Nazi Propagandist film “Der Führer schenkte den Juden eine Stadt ” and Red Cross inspection
-

---

## Forms in which the Satire and Symbolism appear

- Choice of characters used
  - Plot of the opera
  - Textual quotation and pun
  - Musical quotation
  - Use of musical motif
-

---

# The Characters

- The Emperor

- “transparent allegory for Hitler”
- Locked himself away from humanity in order to “rule better”
  - Only contact with outside world is the Loudspeaker and a radio
- Declares mass “holy war” leaving no survivors



---

# The Characters

- The Loudspeaker

- Introduces all other characters
- Is only heard and never seen
- Transfers information about the outside world to the Emperor
  - One of two sources of information the Emperor has available to him



---

# The Drummer

- Described as a character “not quite real, like the radio”
    - Announces and enforces the Emperors decrees and laws
      - Declares “Holy War” on behalf of Emperor
    - The blind way in which she follows commands and reiterates the Emperor’s decrees is symbolic of the mindless nature of the SS guards following Hitler’s orders
-



# The Characters

- Death

- Personified as an old Austrian Soldier
  - Austrian Arm Uniform rather than hooded robe
  - Sword rather than sickle



---

# The Characters

## ■ Harlequin

- Also known as Arlecchino or Pierro
- Derived from Italian Commedia Dell' Arte
  - Archetypal clown or fool
  - Often plays the role of servant to the aristocracy
    - Similar to the Shakespearian fool
      - Able to make jokes on Aristocracy
      - Able to accurately comment on situations



# Commedia Dell' Arte

- Improvisatory theatre in Italy– birth of slap stick!
- First time women appeared on stage
- Created stock characters who influence all theatre following, especially opera
  - Characters recognized by dialects spoken and masks worn
    - Only the “lovers” spoke in pure Florentine Italian and did not wear masks



---

# Characters— Lovers

- Bubikopf and Soldier
  - “unmasked” –representing emotions everyone can relate too.
    - Able to express the true feelings of the Terezín Audience
      - Evident in Bubikopf’ s aria “Ist’ s wahr” or in English “Could it be”



---

# “Could It Be?”



Could it be that some landscapes exist that are not barren and empty?

And tell me, do some words still exist that no harshness carry?

And tell me, do some meadows exist filled with color and fragrance?

Could it be that some mountains exist that shimmer blue full of radiance?

---

---

# Plot of the Opera

The poorly informed Emperor declares mass “holy war” which will leave no survivors. Death refuses to take any lives as he does not want to be controlled by anyone. Bubikopf and Solder meet, and upon realizing that they cannot kill each other, they fall in love. Death agrees to take lives again and end human suffering only if the Emperor is his first victim.

---

---

# Idea of “Holy War”

- “Holy War” instantly has religious connotations
  - Likened to the Crusades, however instead of spreading Christianity, Hitler was removing Judaism.
    - Reverse Crusade



---

# Morals of the Plot

- Humans cannot control Death
  - Death ends Human suffering
  - Love is always possible, even in the times of darkest despair
  - Where there is life, there is hope
  - What goes around, comes around
-



# Textual Quotation and Pun

Lutheran chorale

“Ein Feste Burg”

A mighty fortress is our  
**God,**

A sure defense and  
amour;

He frees us from every ill

That now befalls us

Ullmann’s variation

in scene IV, no. 18

Come, **Death,** our honored  
guest,

Enter the chamber of our  
hearts

Take from us life’s pain and  
woe,

Lead us to rest after grief  
and sorrow

---

# Textual Quotation and Pun

“Teach us to keep your holiest law: Thou shall not use the name of **Death** in vain now and forever!”

Vs.

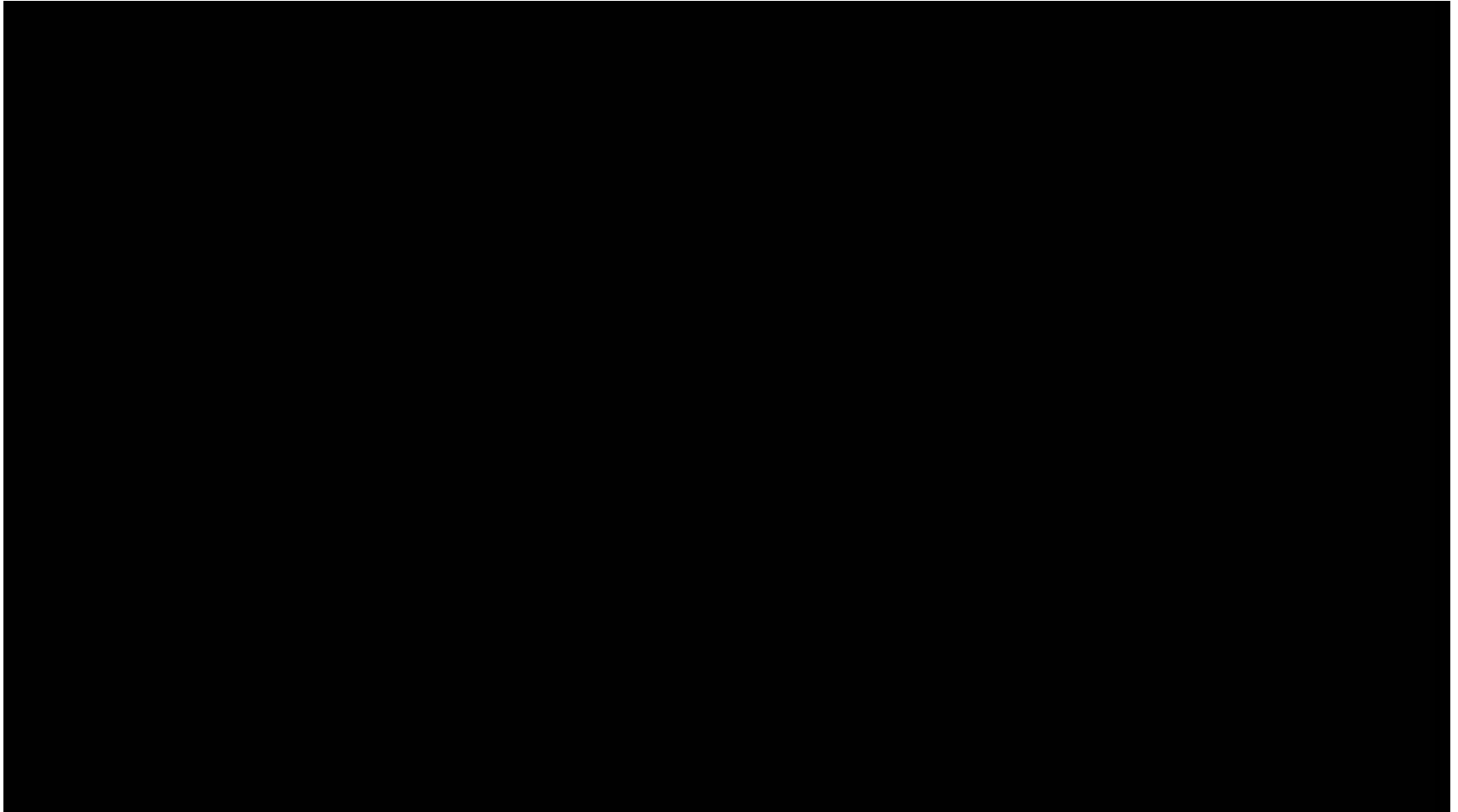
“Thou shall not use the name of the **Lord** in vain”

---

---

# Textual and Musical Quotation

Ein Feste Burg 



---

# Musical Quotation

- Drummer's aria
  - Quotation of German National Anthem  
“Deutschland Deutschland Über Alles” in the Phrygian Mode.
    - Blatant anti-German attack
      - Distorting something distinctly German

Deutschland



Drummer's Aria



---

# Musical Quotation

- Suk Symphony #2 – “Asrael Symphony”
    - Asrael is the Angel of Death
    - Suk wrote this Symphony upon the death of his wife and his Father-in-Law, Antonín Dvořák
    - Played at times of Czech National morning, dignitaries' funerals, ect.
      - Strong sense of Czech nationalism
-

# Musical Quotation and Musical Motif

- Ullmann uses the “Asrael” Motif established in the Suk Symphony
  - He sets it in the same key, meter, and instrument
    - Ullmann wants this theme to be heard, and recognized!!

Suk



Ullmann



---

# Concluding points

- Satire and Symbolism are found within the plot of the opera, the specific characters used, textual quotation and pun, musical quotation and musical motif.
  - Through this opera, Ullmann expresses his views on the war and life in Terezín
-

---

# Concluding Points

At the final dress rehearsal, an SS guard walked in on the rehearsal. The production was canceled and all involved, including Ullmann and his wife and son, were sent to Auschwitz the following day where they met their immediate death.

This opera was finally premiered in 1975, in Amsterdam. It is almost always set in a concentration camp.

---



---

# Concluding Points

“through the tones of the Terezín composers, spurted out of their sorrow and anguish, they speak to us about the eternal hope for a better tomorrow. Are we listening?”

-- Joža Karas

---