

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

In 1944, Viktor Ullmann composed the opera Der Kaiser von Atlantis while in the concentration camp Terezín. Many of the prisoners in Terezín were accomplished musicians, performers or artists such as Gideon Klein. Although their freedom had been taken away, their creativity was not stifled. As Joža Karas points out in his book Music in Terezín, there were many performances of various works in different genres such as chamber music, and staged plays. Opera was also an integral part of the performing scene, including but not limited to productions of La Serva Padrona by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, The Bartered Bride by Smetana, Verdi's Rigoletto, Puccini's Tosca, Hans Krása's children's opera Brundibár, and Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro and The Magic Flute. (Karsa, 27-28). Along with the performances of previously composed works there were a number of new compositions being written by some of the imprisoned composers in Terezín. Such is the case with Viktor Ullmann's opera Der Kaiser von Atlantis (The Emperor of Atlantis). As Hugh R. N. Macdonald discusses in his review of Der Kaiser von Atlantis, this opera was composed in 1944, however it did not receive its world premier until 1975. He also illuminates the popularity of other works in the camp such as Krása's Brundibár, which received fifty five performances in Terezin (Macdonald, 42)! This large gap in time between Der Kaiser von Atlantis's composition and its premier forces the question, why is it that Krása's Brundibár had a run of fifty five performances in Terezín while Ullmann's Der Kaiser von Atlantis had to wait over thirty years to be performed for the first time? The answer is quite simple: subject matter.

Ullmann's Der Kaiser von Atlantis is filled with satire, symbolism, and musical and literary quotes. Paula Kennedy describes the opera as a "transparent allegory on the nature of fascism and the low value it places on human life" (Kennedy, 12). Der Kaiser von Atlantis also has a second title: Die Tod-Verweigerung (Death's Refusal). Its plot, according to William Lloyd in his review of the work, concerns an overzealous emperor who declares the extermination of all people everywhere in a mass holy-war. Death however refuses to take any lives, which leads the Emperor to beg, plead, and bargain with Death to end the suffering of the living. Death only agrees to return to his work if the Emperor is his first victim (Lloyd, 106). When examining this work it becomes evident that it is as Kennedy claims a "transparent allegory". Allegories, by definition, are filled with satire and symbolism, which leads us to the question: What is the nature of the satire and symbolism present in this work?

In order to better determine the nature of the satire and symbolism in Der Kaiser von Atlantis, it will be helpful to look at the most popular opera in Terezín so as to understand the role which opera served in the life of the Terezín audience. This opera was Krása's children's opera Brundibár. As stated above, Brundibár was a staple in the Terezín repertory. Karas presents an in depth history of the opera as well as a detailed description of the plot in Music in Terezín (Karas, 93-102). This charming story is derived from a Czech fairy. The fairy tale aspect to the opera made it appealing to the children and helped to create a sense of normalcy within Terezín as well as helping everyone to cope with their surroundings. In fact, when the International Red Cross came to inspect the camp, the Nazis took care to make sure there was a performance of Brundibár for them to see. This performance has also been forever immortalized in the

propagandist film Der Führer schenkte den Juden eine Stadt (The Führer gives the Jews a City) (Karas, 93-102).

On the complete opposite side of the spectrum from Krása's Brundibár and its epic number of performances is Viktor Ullmann's opera Der Kaiser von Atlantis which did not receive a performance until thirty plus years after its composition. As we have seen through the examination of Brundibár, opera was used as an entertaining way to escape the reality of being in a concentration camp. Der Kaiser von Atlantis also acted as an escape for the Terezín audience, only it was not geared for children, it was entertainment for adults. This opera is derived from the cabaret style of writing which was popular in between the two world wars as can be seen in works such as Kurt Weill's The Three Penny Opera. This style is characterized by a use of a variety of musical styles, musical quotations and a plot imbedded with satire and symbolism.

After determining the role which opera played in Terezín and briefly discussing the musical styles from which Der Kaiser von Atlantis is derived, we will now take a closer look at the satire and symbolism present in Der Kaiser von Atlantis through score and libretto analysis. The opera begins with a prologue delivered by the character Loudspeaker. The prologue is a melodrama and in it, the Loudspeaker introduces all of the characters and attempts to set the scene. We first hear the leitmotif which introduces the Loudspeaker, which is actually a direct quote from Suk's symphony op. 27. As Paula Kennedy points out, this symphony became something of a landmark during the First Czechoslovak Republic, and it was often performed during occasions of national mourning and thus was deeply associated to death, earning it the name of the "Asrael symphony" (Kennedy, 10). Ullmann uses this quote as a leitmotif to declare an

announcement. The first time we here it, it introduces the Loudspeaker and then the Loudspeaker begins the opera saying:

“Hallo, hallo! Sie hören jetzt: Der Kaiser von Atlantis—eine Art Oper in vier Bildern. Es treten auf: Kaiser Überall von Atlantis in eigener Person, den man schon seit Jahren nicht gesehen hat, denn er ist in seinem Riesenpalast eingeschlossen, ganz allein, um besser regieren zu können. Der Trommler, eine nicht ganz wirkliche Erscheinung, wie das Radio. Der Lautsprecher, den man nicht sieht, nur hört. Ein Soldat und ein Mädchen. Der Tod als ein abgedankter Soldat, und Harlekin, der unter Tränen lachen kann, das ist das Leben. Das erste Bild Spielt irgendwo; Tod und Harlekin sitzen im Ausgedinge, das Leben, das nicht mehr lachen und das Sterben, das nicht mehr weinen kann in einer Welt, die verlernt hat, am Leben sich zu freuen und des Todes sterben zu lassen. Hallo, hallo! Wir beginnen!”

[“Hello, hello! Tonight you’ll see: The Emperor of Atlantis—a kind of opera in four scenes. And now the characters: first of all we have the king, Emperor Overall of Atlantis. He’s locked himself away in his gigantic palace, so that he can rule better, no one has seen him for years. The drummer, not quite a real figure, like the radio. The loudspeaker, who is only heard, not seen. Then there’s a soldier and a maiden. Death, you’ll see Death as a retired soldier and Harlequin how under his tears still manages to laugh, that’s life. The first scene takes place somewhere: Death and Harlequin are waiting in the wings of life so to speak, they sit and watch the world go by, this world where the living have

forgotten how to laugh and the dying how to die. Hello, hello! We're beginning!" (Ullmann, 13-15)]

The Loudspeaker as he himself states is only heard and not seen and that the Emperor has locked himself away from everyone leaving his only contact with the outside world to be the Loudspeaker and the radio. The comment about the Drummer being "not quite a real figure, like the radio" is also ironic seeing as the radio and Loudspeaker are the only forms of communication the Emperor has. This statement alone paints the Emperor as making uninformed decisions as he has no contact with the people of Atlantis and his only sources of information are not quite real.

The second scene opens with Harlequin and Death sitting together. The stage direction reads: "Aur einer Bank sitzen Harlekin und der Tod. Harlekin, ein bärtiger Greis, singt. Der Tod, in abgetragener k.-u k. –Uniform, zeichnet mit dem Säbel in den Sand" ["Harlequin and Death are sitting on a bench. Harlequin, a bearded old man, sings. Death in an old uniform of the Austiran Empire is drawing in the sand with his sword"] (Ullmann, 17). The symbol of Death wearing an Austrian uniform is an unmistakable illusion to the war and the political changes that were taking place, and it would be exceedingly recognizable by the audience in Terezín. Another interesting choice that Ullmann, and his librettist Kein, made was the inclusion of the character Harlequin, or as he is originally known: Arlecchino.

Harlequin or Arlecchino is a character from the Italian Commedia dell'arte, which would have also been a clear symbol to the Terezín audience. Commedia dell'arte was established in Italy in the 16th century and was ground breaking for many reasons. It was the first time that women were allowed to perform onstage, it introduced the concept

of stock characters and slap-stick comedy, and it was the birth of improvisatory theatre. The plots would have a rough skeleton planed ahead of time and they usually concern themes like love, jealousy, adultery, and old age. A defining characteristic of this genera is that all of the characters, except for the lovers, wore masks and spoke in dialect. Arlecchino/ Harlequin is the basis for what has become the modern day clown. He is the servant to a wealthier character, however his intentions do not always fall in line with those of his master. Harlequin seeks what is in his best interest and what will gain him his own immediate fulfillment. His character also serves a similar purpose to the Shakespearian fool in that he is on the outside of the action and can accurately comment on what is truly taking place¹.

This is exactly what Harlequin is doing in his diegetic song. He sings, “Da Wird die Welt so kunterbunt und dreht sich wie ein Tingelspiel. Wir fahren auf dem Bock... Was bleibt uns armer Welt zu Teil? Wir bieten uns auf dem Jahrmarkt feil. Will uns niemand kaufen? Weil jeder sich selbst los sein will” [“The world’s all topsy turvy now and whirling like a carousel. And soon we’ll all fall off... In this poor world then what’s our share? We’re up for sale at the cattle fair. Will nobody buy us? No they’re all out to help themselves”](Ullmann, 19-21). Harlequin’s account of how the world no longer seems to have a purpose and how nothing makes sense any more not only exposes aspects of the plot, but also brings to light the psychology of the Jewish prisoners. After all, how can the world make sense and life go on as normal when people are no longer treated like people, families are broken apart, and people are being denied basic necessities like food, water and a bed? When looking at the opera from both the perspective of the plot and the historical circumstances surrounding the opera’s

composition, it makes perfect sense why Ullmann and Kein would include a character who could comment directly to the audience on the events taking place as an outsider, or in this case a fictional being.

As touched on above, another important symbol is Death in an Austrian uniform. However, what we did not focus on was the other part of the stage direction: Death is drawing in the sand with his sword. As Hugh R. N. Macdonald states “the opera is a morality centered on the figure of Death, who abdicates his duties” (Macdonald, 42). The image of Death putting down his sword is the basis for the entire opera! Ullmann and Kein are showing that death had become so prevalent that the value of life and death had been forgotten.

This idea is hammered home in the duet that Death and Harlequin sing together when they say in unison: “Tage, wer kauft Tage? Schöne, neue, unbekante, Einer wie der andre” [“Days, days for sale! Lovely new ones to discover! Each just like another!”] (Ullmann, 23-24). The idea of selling time is a common literary device which is generally used in a situation where those involved are no longer human and therefore have nothing else to sell. The fact the time is being sold gives time, something invaluable, a value. Thus showing that time has lost its importance. In this circumstance, Harlequin and Death are selling their time because they no longer have a use for it. This raises the question however, what is life but an amount of time each of us has been allotted? Ullmann and Kein again use Harlequin to disclose the true psychological state of the Terezín audience. The selling of time is another indication of the poor treatment received in Terezín and the lack of regard for human life.

We again hear the leitmotif stolen from Suk's symphony op. 27 when the Drummer, the character which the Loudspeaker introduced to us as being "not quite real like the radio", enters and makes the announcement that Emperor Overall has declared a war which will have no survivors. Her exact message is,

"Achtung! Im Namen seiner Majestät des Kaisers Überall!... Zur erherrlichung unserer göttlichen Natur Erzpapst, haben in unsere unfehlbaren, alles durchdringenden Weisheit beschlossen, über all unser Gebiet den grossen, segensreichen Krieg aller gegen alle zu verhängen!"

["Attention! In the Name of his magesty the Emperor Overall!...To glorify our divine descent from God, Arch Pope, have in our flawless truly perfect all penetrating wisdom, decided to declare throughout our empire total all out holy war! Each against the other. No survivors! "(Ullmann, 36-39).

The adjectives used here are very interesting. Ullmann and Kein use words like "flawless", "truly perfect", and "all penetrating wisdom" to describe Emperor Overall. While this may appear to be an exercise of verbal irony, it is actually closer to dramatic irony because we know that the Emperor is not well informed in his decisions and that he has not had contact with his people since he shut himself away in his palace. We can all generally agree that a war which leaves no survivors on either side is neither practical nor an example of "flawless penetrating wisdom". It is also demonstrating the mindless nature with which the Nazi solders followed the commands of Hitler. Ullmann did not only use Suk's theme for this aria, he also chose to quote the German national anthem "Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles" only he sets it in the Phrygian mode (Ullmann

36/4/3-38/1/3). Again, this reference would have been blaringly obvious the Terezín audience as a blatant criticism of the Nazi's and their so called 'holy war'.

Death's reactions to the Drummer's aria, although comedic, are rather serious. Death is upset at the way he is no longer revered and the way that the Emperor is usurping his power and taking over his job. He says to Harlequin, "Hörst du, wie sie mich höhnen? Die Seelen nehmen kann nu rich! Die Fahne vorantragen! Meine groß Vergangeheit! Eute große Zukunft! Freund Heins Nachfolger!" ["Do you hear how they mock me?! To take men's souls is my job not his! Lead the way with my banner! My glorious past! His great future! Huh! He's after my job—the little upstart!"] (Ullmann, 43). Death is pointing out that no one has the right to determine who dies or when they die. This could easily be directed to Hitler and his decree to make the Jews extinct. Directly following this, Death breaks his sword and refuses to take anyone's lives. He points out that he is the one who determines the length of someone's life saying, "Ich mache die Zukunft der Menschen groß... und lang... lang!" ["I'm making the future of mankind great... and long... long!"] (Ullmann, 44-45).

The 'holy war' commences, and in the next scene we see the Emperor alone in his palace. He is speaking to the Loudspeaker getting the latest statistics from the apocalyptic war he has just ordered when it becomes clear that no one has yet died. The Emperor is furious and concerned that no one will obey him if the threat of death is no longer there. This is an interesting sentiment which again can easily be applied to Hitler and his regime. Had Hitler not used the ultimatum of death for all the Jews, he would not have been as powerful as he was. Wasn't Hitler merely using death to serve his own needs and doing the job for Death? It seems clear from the libretto and the general plot

of the opera that these were some of the messages intended by Ullmann and Kein. When the Emperor asks the Loudspeaker for the statistics of the new war, the Loudspeaker responds with, “Tausende ringen mit dem Leben, um Sterben zu können” [“Thousands are wrestling with life at this very moment, doing their best to die “] (Ullmann, 57). This comment by the Loudspeaker does not necessarily fully pertain to the audience in Terezín, however the general statement of thousands holding onto life is again accurate of the conditions within the concentration camp.

Ullmann and Kein chose to show that despite the drastic situation their audience was in, love was still possible and in fact, in some places in full bloom. They chose to do this through the characters of a nondescript soldier who is called simply Soldier, and a young girl named Bubikopf, or roughly translated into English, a girl with bobbed hair. When these two meet they try to kill each other. However, once they realize that they cannot die, the soldier realizes Bubikopf’s beauty and they fall instantly in love. Bubikopf sings an aria about her longing to be in a beautiful place where there is no more war and the two lovers can be together. She sings,

“Ist’s wahr, daß es Landschaften gibt, die nicht von Granattrichetern
ödsind? Ist’s wahr, daß es Worte gibt, die nicht schroff und spröd sind? Ist’s
wahr, daß es Wiesen gibt, die voll Buntheit und Duft sind? Ist es wahr, daß is
Berge gibt, die blau von strah lender Luft sind?”

[“Could it be that some landscapes exist that are not barren and empty?
And tell me that some words still exist that no harshness carry? And tell me do
some meadows exist filled with colour and fragrance? Could it be, that some
mountains exist that shimmer blue, full of radiance?] (Ullmann, 67-68).

This aria exposes the hope that so many of the Terezín prisoners must have felt, that they would one day be free again. Roy Kift in his article Reality and Illusion in the Theresienstadt Cabaret comments, “This, I would suggest, was the great achievement of the Theresienstadt cabaret: its ability to bolster up the will of its audiences to cling on to hope and refuse to capitulate even in the midst of the most appalling circumstances” (Kift, 165). Ullmann and Kein did a wonderful job of presenting this through the characters of the lovers. In Commedia dell’arte, the lovers were the only characters who spoke in a pure Italian without a dialect and who did not wear masks. Therefore, Bubikopf is expressing the true desire of the soul without the mask of comedy or any other device.

For the finale of the opera, Ullmann again makes reference to another piece of music which his Terezín audience would be familiar with. He chose to set the finale to the Lutheran Hymn “Ein Feste Burg”. The text which he and Kein chose to use maintains the four line structure of the stanza, however as Osnat Netzer point out in her unpublished paper The Role of Musical and Literary Quotation in Viktor Ullmann’s *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, they replace the reverence for God with a reverence for death (Netzer, 14). Particularly striking is the last line of the opera which is sung together by all onstage. It is, “Lehr uns das heiligste Gebot: Du sollst den großen Namen Tod nicht eitel beschwören!” [“Teach us to keep your holiest law: Thou shalt not use the name of Death in vain now and forever!”] (Ullmann, 104-106). This play on one of the Ten Commandments is also an allusion which the Terezín audience would understand. Not only is it showing the Nazi’s lack of regard for the rest of the commandments, namely ‘Thou shalt not murder’, but it is also illustrating how death has overrode God’s

importance, going against the commandment 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'. This blatant offence against the Ten Commandments exposes the Nazi's actions as ungodly and sacrilegious.

Viktor Ullmann's opera Der Kaiser von Atlantis allows us to get a closer look at the thoughts and feelings of those imprisoned in Terezín. The satire and symbolism within the opera take the form of pun, musical quotation, common literary figures and archetypal characters, and they draw upon material which the audience would have been familiar with. As Macdonald point out, the opera was "miraculously" rehearsed and is "superficially... an anti Hitler satire, a fact obvious enough for the Nazis to ban its performance in Theresienstadt". Macdonald believes this work to be the reason Ullmann and all involved with the opera were sent to their death in Auschwitz (Macdonald, 43). The opera is a work of art which, through the use of satire and symbolism, allows us a deeper insight into what the life for the Terezín prisoners was like.

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ⁱ More can be found on Commedia Dell'arte in: Pirrotta, Nino. *Commedia Dell'Arte and Opera*. *Musical Quarterly* 41.3 (July 1955) p 305-324.