

## ***The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death's Refusal***

**By Paula Kennedy**

There are few more poignant episodes in the history of cultural endeavor than the story of the intense creative activity which took place at the concentration camp of Terezín (Theresienstadt) from 1941 to 1945. This small garrison town in north Bohemia was selected by the Nazis in 1941 to function as both a transit camp for the “processing” of Jews from Central Europe (many of whom soon resumed their journeys to Auschwitz and the gas chambers), and also as a “model ghetto” to deflect attention from the reality of the Final Solution. In a (partially successful) attempt to deceive the outside world, the Nazis allowed the Jews of Terezín a measure of self-government and even encouraged them to organize cultural events in the camp.

When the composer Viktor Ullmann was transported to Terezín in September of 1942, he found an already flourishing concert life and plenty of opportunities for putting his talents to good use. Ullmann was soon enlisted by the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Administration of Leisure Activities) to act as the camp’s official music critic, and the relatively light duties this imposed on him meant that for perhaps the first time in his life he was able to concentrate on composing.

Even more than the other composers incarcerated in Terezín (of whom Pavel Haas, Hans Krása, and Gideon Klein were the most prominent), Ullmann found that camp life liberated him from the mundane pressures of everyday living and at the same time gave an added urgency to his artistic expression. Taking his motto from Goethe (“Live within the moment, live in eternity”), in his diary he stressed the imperishability of the human spirit and the regenerative role of art within the appalling conditions of the ghetto, writing, “By no means did we sit weeping on the banks of the waters of Babylon...our endeavor with respect to art was commensurate with our will to live.” In marked contrast with Ullmann’s sporadic output of the previous two decades, during the two years he spent at Terezín he produced a number of major works, including three piano sonatas, a string quartet, song cycles, and the opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*—his masterpiece.

The libretto for *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (*The Emperor of Atlantis*) was provided by Peter Kien, a young poet and painter who had come to Terezín in 1941. Kien’s text is a transparent allegory on the nature of fascism and the low value it places on human life. Ullmann wrote the music in 1943, casting the work in the form of a chamber opera; the scoring (for seven singers and 13 instrumentalists, including parts for banjo and alto saxophone) reveals something of the range of musical talent available to the composer. Rehearsals were held over the summer of 1944; the work was almost ready for performance when (according to the testimony of some survivors) an SS delegation turned up at one of the final rehearsals and found the Hitler-likeness of the Emperor too close for comfort, and so, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* never reached the stage in Terezín. The relative freedom enjoyed by Ullmann and his fellow musicians was brutally terminated—following a cynically stage-managed visit by the International Committee of the Red Cross on June 23, 1944, the “model ghetto” was deemed to have outlived its usefulness, and on October 16 nearly all the composers and artists in the camp were sent to their deaths in Auschwitz.

The concert audience in Terezín was an extremely sophisticated and musically educated one (not surprisingly, as it consisted mainly of former members of the cultural elites of Prague, Brno, and Vienna), and both Kien and Ullmann must have been confident that most of the allusions contained in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* would have found their mark. Although it was never performed in the conditions for which

it was intended, subsequent performances have shown that this opera's significance transcends the narrow confines of the ghetto, and that it still has the power to move audiences in our own day. It is certainly not necessary to grasp all the musical references in order to appreciate the dramatic power of the work, or to be moved by the eloquence of Ullmann's vocal writing and the richness of his textures.

*Paula Kennedy is a writer and editor with a special interest in the music of Central and Eastern Europe. She provided liner notes for a number of recordings in the critically acclaimed Decca/London Entartete Musik series devoted to composers banned during the Third Reich.*