

## ***Brundibár* in History and Production: Holocaust Studies and the Performance of Musical Theatre**

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On 8 April 1975 in the Jewish community of West Hartford, Connecticut, Polish-born Czech violinist Joža Karas oversaw the American premiere of composer Hans Krása's children's opera *Brundibár*. This work, which premiered in Prague and the Nazi camp of Terezín during World War II, saw little national exposure until 1995 when the Washington Opera Camp, seeking a wide American audience, organized children performances of *Brundibár* at the Kennedy Center and the new United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C.

The opera, based on the Czech librettist Adolf Hoffmeister's adaptation of a Czech folktale, relates the story of two young children, Aninka and Pepíček (or Annette and Little Joe in English), whose quest in obtaining milk for their ailing mother is thwarted by the organ grinder, Brundibár. The children eventually triumph over him with the help of neighborhood animals and village children. Characters encountered by Aninka and Pepíček, all played by children, include: a sparrow, a dog, a cat, the milkman, policeman, baker, ice cream man, local children, and, of course, Brundibár. The opera ends with a victory song celebrating children and their resourcefulness.

*Brundibár*, like most of the music performed and composed in Terezín, (or Theresienstadt- its German name), virtually disappeared after the war. Besides a 1955 performance in Israel, the opera was not revived again until after Joža Karas, a professor at the University of Hartford, made a research trip to Terezín in the early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> He was promptly introduced to Eliška Kleinová (a Terezín survivor and the sister of composer Gideon Klein who lived in Terezín and died after being deported to Auschwitz). Kleinová provided Karas with the piano reduction and complete score of *Brundibár*. Although not himself Jewish, Karas valued *Brundibár*'s connection to Czech Jewish culture. Upon returning to Hartford, transcription and translation work occupied Karas until the opera's American premiere in 1975.<sup>2</sup>

Between the 1975 Hartford and 1995 Washington performances, Holocaust studies in the United States underwent rapid change due primarily to the influence of

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<sup>1</sup> There is a documented 1955 performance in Hebrew at the Kibbutz Givat Chayim in Israel, an early example of Jewish ownership over the opera. Berthold Gaster, "Joža Karas Back from Israel With Data for Research on Terezín Music," *Hartford Courant*, February 17, 1977, 3. Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford.

<sup>2</sup> The world premiere of the finished English translation took place on November 14, 1977 in Ottawa, Canada with Karas as conductor.

popular culture.<sup>3</sup> (What scholars call the “Americanization or universalization of the Holocaust.”)<sup>4</sup> The journey towards realizing the national museum in Washington D.C. exemplifies this change.<sup>5</sup> By the 1990s, the Holocaust was used as the ultimate analogy for judging the evils humans have afflicted upon other humans.<sup>6</sup>

*Brundibár* rapidly gained in popularity during the early 2000s, especially as a tool for Holocaust education due to its adaptability and remarkable history (which within Terezín included 55 performances for inmates, a performance during the International Red Cross’s welfare tour of the camp, and a subsequent propaganda film intended for future use).<sup>7</sup> The opera itself does not directly reference the Holocaust so schools and professional companies today tailor *Brundibár* by manipulating visual elements of the opera, providing pre- and post-performance Holocaust education, and adding other material to the program (poems and plays that directly reference the Holocaust, for example).<sup>8</sup> Some performances even change the source material- an example is playwright Tony Kushner’s 2003 adaptation for the Chicago Opera and subsequent children’s book. Kushner’s version uses post 9/11 themes and the larger Holocaust experience in Europe as a thread of commentary throughout his work, both visually and textually.

Using practice-based research, this paper presents a director/musicologist case study of the 2012 Texas Tech University’s children’s opera ensemble’s production of *Brundibár* and the subsequent musicological questions that arose out of local elementary and middle school performances. Issues encountered with the 2012 TTU performances are indicative of issues found on a larger American scale.

This paper now looks at modern performance and audience issues with *Brundibár*, which are numerous. For time’s sake I will concentrate on two common issues: content and musical difficulty. Challenges for modern realizations center on the

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<sup>3</sup> The years 1975 and 1995 are the thirtieth and fiftieth anniversaries of the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp during World War II, which was liberated by American troops.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), 157. In this study, universalization (or, in the past, “Americanization”) is defined as the changing of the Holocaust’s meaning from the 1970s through the 1990s. In the 1970s the *Holocaust* was associated with a tragedy that occurred on European soil with minimal American involvement. In the 1990s, however, *Holocaust* took on universal implications that highlighted American values of liberty, individuality, rescue, heroism, and justice. Alan Mintz’s book states that the Holocaust became “an agent of moral seriousness that changes people’s lives for the better.” The term *Holocaust* is originally from the ancient Greeks meaning a sacrifice by fire. History used the term *Holocaust* in the secular world to denote a complete destruction- especially in the early 1900s. During the massacre of the Jews in Europe, *Holocaust* was used, but referred to a broader meaning. By the Eichmann trial, usage of the term *Holocaust* in the Western world began to be adopted and strengthened in popularity with Holocaust the miniseries. “Frequently Asked Questions,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/faq/details.php>.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Jean Schemo, “Holocaust Museum Hailed as Sacred Debt to Dead,” *The New York Times*, 23 April 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Mintz, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Daina Beth Solomon, “Echoing Voices of a Sorrowful Past: L.A. Opera Camp Youths will Perform *Brundibár*, a Holocaust-era Work,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Kozinn, “In a Children’s Opera, a Holocaust Connection,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 2003.

fact that, as mentioned before, *Brundibár* the opera has no direct Holocaust content- a topic that instigates most *Brundibár* productions. Children exposed to the opera alone tend to relate the material to Hansel and Gretel or common Disney stories, with no real life connection.<sup>9</sup> This proves especially troublesome in educational environments made up of extremely young children unfamiliar with formal Holocaust education. In contrast, middle school students usually have some form of Holocaust education, but the knowledge depth varies from school to school, or in many cases- from class to class.

The music's difficulty is another problem frequently encountered. Much of the music is doubled in the accompaniment, in unison, and lyrical (qualities of many great children's operas); however, harmonically *Brundibár* resembles Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* (which premiered in Weimar in 1893) and Kurt Weill's *Der Jasager* from 1930 (a production that by 1932 over 300 German speaking schools experienced). Considering Krása (*Brundibár*'s composer) and Hoffmeister (the librettist) were large members of the Prague German speaking population, chances are, influence from Humperdinck and Weill is likely. Since children usually make up *Brundibár*'s cast, the opera is unique in its use of such chromatic harmonic language. Many *Brundibár* performers from Terezín testify to finding the work a challenge for them. Even college age performers find parts of *Brundibár* challenging. An example is on the slide taken from a section entitled, "Ensemble" (the last five measures). Here, at the most climatic moment in the opera, Aninka and chorus sing D-C# then leap down to D# and Pepíček and chorus sing B-A then leap down to B#. The TTU children's opera found those intervals to be difficult through most of the semester, even with the accompaniment doubling the lines.<sup>10</sup>

My own experience with the 2012 TTU Spring Semester's *Brundibár* performances with the children's opera possessed additional issues unique to the children's opera program. The Texas Tech Children's Opera is a spring semester course designed for freshman performance majors seeking experience before experiencing TTU's main stage operas. Two days before the semester began, my supervisor informed me I would be directing the opera *Brundibár* as my doctoral teaching assistantship. The opera choice was no coincidence- the previous semester I expressed my interest and previous musicological research on *Brundibár*, however- hearing about the children's opera performances came as a surprise.

The first class session, armed with articles believed to be the most accessible and relevant, I introduced students to *Brundibár* hoping they would love the work as much as I did. Let us say, I experienced what many a scholar experiences- a captive audience mainly captive because of class credit. They seemed interested, but wanted to know more about the opera itself, not necessarily its background alone. Students desired timely

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<sup>9</sup> U.C. Knoepfelmacher, "The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome: Survivorship Fantasies and Parental Desertion," in *Children's Literature* 22 (2005), 171. Although French, Maurice Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges: Fantaisie lyrique en deux parties* or *The Child and the Spells: A Lyric Fantasy in Two Parts* (1925) was seen in Prague on February 17, 1927. Although this work is meant for seasoned adult performers, it employs many animal roles, as does *Brundibár*.

<sup>10</sup> Musical and textual choices were based off of Karas's English edition published in Prague in 1993. This score juggles between the different versions of *Brundibár* performed in Prague and later in Terezín.

casting and an approachable score and libretto. As the semester went on, *Brundibár* became less of a historical artifact for me and more of an exercise in practical problem solving. Parameters, both predetermined and not, shaped my artistic decisions.

Our relevant predetermined factors (those performance decisions already decided and non-negotiable) will be divided here into those regarding the opera, performers, and performances.

Those parameters regarding the opera, itself: Instrumentation (keyboard and some percussion) and the performance language- English was required by my supervisor. Those parameters regarding the performers: their age, sex, and number (which I will go in depth with a little later) and the syllabus objectives, which stated that the children's opera must provide the performers with opportunities to expand their knowledge of the human condition and human cultures. Lastly, those parameters regarding the performances: the course's allotted funds- \$50 and the need for portability (a small set was essential). Also, the Texas Academic Standards which only directly addressed high school Holocaust education and the Lubbock Independent School District (otherwise known as LISD- for whom Holocaust discourse in elementary and middle school is based on individual schools and individual teachers).

Some undetermined parameters I sought to work through include (These will also be divided into three categories of opera, performers, and performances). The main issue regarding the opera, itself, involved whether or not we needed score cuts and alterations, which happened mainly because of time issues. With the performers, I, alone, planned rehearsals and assigned parts. Regarding the performances, I sought performance opportunities and promoted the opera; and lastly, I decided preshow and after show discussion topics.

All of these parameters decided, performances were then solidified and ended up as the following:

At Wright Elementary it was kindergarten and we presented little backstory; at Roberts Elementary we performed for Kindergarten through fifth grade and we presented a basic backstory using the singers; at Smiley Wilson School- sixth through eighth grade with an in depth backstory; at Stewart Elementary- kindergarten through third grade with little backstory; and Lubbockview Christian Church- all ages present with an in depth backstory.

During these performances, two questions kept challenging me- 1. How do I present and validate *Brundibár* without historical accuracy? And 2. How do I present and validate *Brundibár* with or without its backstory? I will now explore these questions through three artistic choices musicology helped me make.

These artistic choices include the show's portability- physical and mental, the timbre of voice assignments, and *Brundibár* the opera versus *Brundibár* the backstory. All three, for time's sake, we will primarily engage through the lens of historical accuracy.

Due to individual student performers' erratic college schedules and the performance schools' strict schedule, physical portability was essential. Because of the performance quantity, student performers missing class was an impossibility. Therefore, the set, costumes, and props were light, simple, and small. Most of the time, time restraints required I alone load the set into my vehicle- sometimes in the morning. This physical portability trumped many historically accurate options for set, costumes, and props. While resolving these issues, I decided to look at my own definition of visual historical accuracy (that being strict adherence to the original visual concept) and engage with my definition from a different angle. Why was portability not a form of historical accuracy?

The original performances required portability. Besides the fact that the set design needed flexibility since circumstances changed completely from the Prague orphanage to Terezín, the performances within Terezín moved locations.<sup>11</sup> Dusty attics and large auditoriums housed performances that, for the most part, involved the same cast and crew. Much of the costumes, set, and instrumentation changed, but some things were just adapted to different venues, such as blocking.<sup>12</sup> The children adjusted according to space expansions and limitations. Were not our TTU opera performances of *Brundibár* demonstrating a similar need for flexibility and portability? Could the need for flexibility not be a form of mental portability? In that respect, having a simple set that totally deferred to our performance needs is historically accurate.

The second musicological based artistic choice this paper addresses is the timbre of vocal part assignments. The children's opera course enrollment included six young sopranos, one mezzo-soprano, and three tenors of various abilities. My casting based itself on making the timbres assigned to me work for characterization.

This slide explains the ideal casting for *Brundibár* for U. S. productions using children- that I encountered through musicological research, which are generally based on the Terezín productions where twelve year olds played most of the leads.<sup>13</sup> Ten to fourteen year old boys and girls portray the lead roles of Little Joe and Annette, respectively. In most cases, young boys playing Little Joe sing with a softer timbre associated with prepubescent boys, so that the two leads match timbres when singing in unison or parts. The same boy age range, with or without a prepubescent sound, portrays *Brundibár*. Ten to fourteen year old boys and girls, in combinations fitting the ensemble's needs, portray the three animals. I have never personally encountered a male singing the cat, because the Terezín performer, Ela Weissberger, is well known for attending and participating in larger scale *Brundibár* productions. She made a children's book about the experience. Because of this, girls typically play the cat. The other two

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<sup>11</sup> Photographs of the Prague and Terezín premieres provided by the Terezín Initiative, an organization that brings together and represents former Terezín prisoners. It strives to preserve the memory of those who did not survive the Holocaust; the initiative has also documented much of Terezín's history.

<sup>12</sup> The limited performance space and resources available to Krása in Terezín, compared with the Prague premiere, forced him to use a much lighter orchestration consisting of piano, violin, and drums. Hans Krása, *Brundibár*, ed. Blanka Červinková (Prague: Tempo Praha, 1993), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Karas, 81.

roles, again go either way- the original in Terezín had a boy playing the dog and a girl playing the sparrow. Various gender combinations with a larger age range play the Baker, Ice Cream Man, Milkman, and Policeman and the children's chorus.

Honoring timbre combinations helped decide the TTU ensemble part assignments. If I could not be historically accurate with age and gender, I used what I believe to be pretty historically accurate timbres. Two young and lighter voiced sopranos portrayed Little Joe and Annette so that their timbres approximated prepubescent children's unique unison and part singing timbres. My heaviest tenor voice played Brundibár since he never sings with other characters directly and made a nice timbre contrast. A mezzo portrayed the bossy dog that wakes everyone up and young sopranos played the sparrow and cat- all three ladies' timbres matched well when in unison. The Baker and Milkman were slightly heavier sopranos who matched well with my non-voice major tenor playing the Ice Cream Man (these three roles speak separately, but sing together in unison). My most robust and advanced tenor sang the Policeman part, which has a commanding little aria begun in different entrances according to school. Lastly, I had no chorus, but one extra lady.... I decided that her "part" was a solo that she shared with the kids in the audience. I encouraged her to play directly to the kids and involve them directly in her decision making since it is ultimately the children's chorus sticking with Little Joe, Annette, and the animals that ultimately defeat Brundibár.

Lastly, while the music, instrumentation, and opera storyline remained the same for all performances, my former musicological work greatly enhanced how and when I approached *Brundibár's* backstory. With the lower elementary schools, the approach became *Brundibár* the opera.<sup>14</sup> Various characters spoke to the children beforehand (the performers were encouraged to be themselves, not their characters) and the children actively engaged with them. I gave a synopsis, the animals led the children in making various barnyard noises, and *Brundibár* presented his organ, made by the student performer. At the first school, a kindergarten, *Brundibár*, himself, encouraged the children to boo when he played during the opera- something changed at subsequent schools to a thumbs down, for obvious reasons. In this way, younger children became a part of the story and helped our heroes defeat Brundibár (who always showed back up at the end victory song further solidifying separation of performer and character). *Brundibár* became a fairy tale teaching the merits of teamwork and friendship.

With Roberts Elementary (Kindergarten through fifth grade), we used the same concepts as the lower elementary performances but added a little backstory during the preshow discussion. Each performer presented themselves as actors, characters, and finally said the name of the original performer in Terezín, if known. We made the connection that these were real people performing this, stated that the circumstances were not the best, and asked them to think about what performing or listening to *Brundibár* might have meant to the original performers and audience members. Honoring teacher request- the Holocaust was not directly mentioned.

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Rogowski, "Teaching the Drama of the Holocaust," in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2004), 234.

Middle school students received a preshow discussion more in depth. However, believing that some topics within Holocaust discourse are best left to teachers that know their individual classes, I asked the students what they knew about the Holocaust and let that guide my talk. Most knew basics through engaging with materials in Social Science classes and engaging with *The Diary of Anne Frank* (which provides an indirect experience).<sup>15</sup> I briefly discussed the cultural life at Terezín and mentioned that a few of the performers did not survive the war, but kept individual fates out of the discussion. Polling the room revealed that many of them were twelve- the same age as the Terezín leads. The opera began after a brief synopsis- no performers presented themselves before the performance and or asked the students to help during the opera, as had been done with the younger children.

After the performance a question session with the middle schoolers proved revealing. Many connected the preshow discussion with the opera and, although many questions were aimed at the performers themselves (such as how do you learn to sing opera?), many other questions were asked about the original performers and how knowing the backstory affected my TTU performers. One even stated that he did not care for the opera (or operatic styles of singing) himself, but knowing the backstory beforehand kept him engaged.

In conclusion, I find in hindsight that the lessons I learned did not hinder or disconnect from my musicological work, but enhanced it. Engaging with musical material in new ways can be very fruitful for a musicologist. New questions arise and challenge research even if complete answers are not possible. In my case, I am still exercising my mind over whether or not portability qualifies as a form of historical accuracy. Maybe the very act of questioning my previously held idea of historical accuracy has value in and of itself.

Less than ideal performance situations force a scholar to clearly define their own priorities. The main instigator of my previous *Brundibár* research (historical accuracy) changed over the summer of 2012 (with the help of my dissertation committee) to a search for how *Brundibár* became such a large part of United States Holocaust education in the first place-, which became my entire dissertation project.

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<sup>15</sup> Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, Second Ed, 2002), 88.

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