

'Music in Desperate Times'

November 16 concert with violinist Janice Martin to benefit Ars Choralis programming

by Andrea Barrist Stern

One of the more haunting chapters of the Holocaust involves the orchestras made up of concentration camp inmates who were required to perform as trains filled with Jews and other prisoners destined for the crematoria arrived. Possibly the most famous of these was the all-women's orchestra at Birkenau (the death camp of Auschwitz) that was founded in the spring of 1943.

By the war's end, approximately one and a quarter million people had been killed at Birkenau, more than 90 percent of them Jewish, but all of the 54 women in the orchestra except for its conductor, who is believed to have died of food poisoning, survived, according to a variety of historians. They endured by playing marches and foxtrots as their fellow prisoners were sent off to or returned from forced labor; by performing the SS guards' favorite musical compositions and arias; and by accompanying the selections of new arrivals as they were chosen for mass murder or work details.



Ars Choralis performing 'Music in Desperate Times.'

Ars Choralis, a not-for-profit choral group that draws its membership from throughout the Hudson Valley, is preparing to take its program "Music in Desperate Times: Remembering the Women's Orchestra of Birkenau", which recounts the story of the orchestra through specially chosen choral music, a recreation of the music played by the original orchestra on the same types of instruments, and readings in the voices of three of the Birkenau musicians, to New York City and Germany. The group will perform at the 2,000-seat Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York on March 28, 2009 at 8 p.m., and a month later in Berlin on April 17 at the Heilig Kreuz Passion Church. A program of selections from "Music in Desperate Times" will also be performed at the annual Liberation Day ceremonies on the grounds of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp in Fürstenberg as part of the German tour.

The full program has already been performed four times to wide acclaim in Ulster County in 2006 and 2007, including performances at Temple Emanuel and Holy Cross Church in Kingston, Ulster Community College in Stone Ridge and the Woodstock Jewish Congregation.

On Sunday, November 16 at 2 p.m., Janice Martin, a Julliard-trained violinist, who has played to rave reviews at major venues on four continents, will perform "A Gershwin Fantasy" as a benefit concert to help Ars Choralis raise the substantial funds it will need to take its program to New York City and Germany. (See accompanying article on Martin's benefit.)

At Birkenau, music was indeed the best and worst of things. The best because it filled in time and brought us oblivion, like a drug; we emerged from it deadened, exhausted. The worst, because our public consisted of the assassins and the victims, and in the hand of the assassins, it was almost as though we too were made executioners.

- From the readings that are interwoven through "Music in Desperate Times" and that are culled from two

autobiographies and one biography of three Birkenau orchestra members.

The St. John the Divine concert and the German performance schedule came about after Alice Radosh, a former board member of the Woodstock Jewish Congregation saw the 2006 performance at Temple Emanuel. "I have been to a lot of concerts but never had a reaction like this to a concert before," said Radosh, a Woodstock author and retired research psychologist. Radosh discussed her response the following week with her piano teacher, Barbara Pickhardt, the conductor of Ars Choralis, who had spent years researching the memoirs of Birkenau survivors, conducting interviews and reading other related materials to create "Music in Desperate Times." When Radosh went to Germany soon after to visit her daughter, who lives in Berlin with her partner, the pastor of the Heilig Kreuz Passion Church, the seed for the trip was planted. Radosh's daughter is active with a group of Ravensbrück survivors to educate the public to ensure no similar horror occurs again. In a bit of serendipity, Radosh's daughter knew one of the Birkenau orchestra survivors, Esther Bejarano.

"Her father was a cantor. When she said she was a musician, they asked if she could play the accordion. She said, 'Give me 15 minutes,' and in 15 minutes taught herself enough accordion to save her life," recounted Radosh through tears. "The story of these women and their attempt to resist in any way they could can't die with them. It has to continue."

In late October 1944, the Jewish women in the orchestra were evacuated by cattle car to Bergen-Belsen, according to the autobiography of the orchestra's conductor, "Alma Rosé, Vienna to Auschwitz" by Richard Newman (Amadeus Press, 2000). The Birkenau gas chambers ceased operation the following month and the Germans began to dismantle the crematoria and other evidence of the Holocaust.

On April 15, 1945 the SS gave the order to destroy us and burn the camp. We were to be shot at 3 p.m. The British arrived at 11 a.m.

Pickhardt first learned of the Birkenau women's orchestra in 1993 and recalls thinking, "I had a moment where I said to myself, there's a concert in this. Three years ago, she began her research. The public's response to the March 2006 performance at Temple Emanuel was "unlike any other" she has experienced in her career. "It was so immense and heartfelt," she said. "We are used to getting favorable responses but this went so over the top it encouraged us to do it again."

The composition of the Birkenau women's orchestra was unique, partly because many of the musicians didn't arrive with their instruments and had to play what was available, like Bejarano, in a desperate attempt to save their lives. The Ars Choralis orchestra incorporates three violins, three mandolins, one accordion, one flute, one recorder, a guitar, one cello, one percussion instrument and two soloists. All of the musicians wear lavender scarves to simulate the scarves worn by the Birkenau women to cover their shaved heads. The choral music was selected because it "illuminates the message of the readings," according to Pickhardt. Most but not all of the composers were Jews who lived through the Holocaust. One composer in the program is a Yugoslavian musician, who had been working at a children's hospital in Bosnia. He returned from getting supplies one day to find the hospital had been obliterated. In other cases, Pickhardt included music that is reminiscent of the original orchestra's defiant selection of the works of banned composers.

"People have said to me it meant a lot to them to think their ancestors might have heard that music," said Pickhardt of the response to "Music in Desperate Times." No recordings survived. "When it was over, everyone wanted to forget that part of their lives," she noted.

Guile is the revenge of the weak. I arranged a well-known fox-trot by a Jewish composer as a march. In this way I'd seen to it that the women in the work groups marched off to the rhythm of Jewish music, and some of them clearly recognized it. Not a single SS ever noticed. They listened to it with evident satisfaction,

beating time to this forbidden music.

The funds that Ars Choralis and its three local fundraisers - Radosh, and Woodstock residents Joan Mack and Jody Soltanoff - will have to raise to offset the costs of the St. John the Divine performance and the events in Germany is not inconsequential. The St. John the Divine tab amounts to \$36,000 and the German project will cost \$108,000, according to Radosh, who has received some foundation grants to date and is seeking more.

"This is work I consider to be important," said Radosh. "This is my work on this issue...If these women can go to Germany to do this, I can steel myself for two years."

Adds Mack, "I have a lot of faith about change. There is a new generation in Germany that wants to prevent this from ever happening again."

For those of us in the orchestra, there was a certain level of complete detachment from reality. There had to be. Either forget everything that happened around you to live one more day or think about it all the time and go mad. ++