

Homage to SZYMON LAKS 1901-1983



“Since I was for a long time a member of the orchestra at Auschwitz II and during a certain period its conductor, I regard it as my obligation to relate and some way to commemorate this strange chapter in the history of music, a chapter that will probably not be written by any professional historian of this branch of art ...”

From Szymon Laks 'Music of Another World' (1948)
Trans. Chester A. Kisiel. Reprinted by kind permission of A. Laks

Jacqueline Cole *piano*

Sunday 16 January 2005 at 5 pm



In Commemoration of the 60th anniversary
of the liberation of Auschwitz Birkenau

Szymon Laks writes:

"[It is difficult] to write about music in Auschwitz-Birkenau without referring to the background against which this music is played ... one could also say: about music in a distorting mirror. ... For a while, a 'Czech camp' that had come from Theresienstadt (Terezin) had existed near us. The modus vivendi of these Czech Jews was enviable ... In short, a paradise against the background of the nearby hell, but there was something ominous about it. Then one fine day the terrible news. The impression it made on us proved that we had still not become completely insensitive. It began very innocently.

Our music stands, which had long since become rotted from continual exposure to the elements, could barely stand up straight and were hardly fit for use. The carpenters had promised us to fix some of them and put together a few new ones, but somehow they seemed in no hurry to do so. ... After a few days a messenger came with instructions for us to report immediately to the commander with a few musicians but without instruments. We went there, highly intrigued.

After the regulation "Attention! At ease!" the commander pointed to twelve black music stands in the corner and told us to take them, explaining: "I heard that you need music stands. Take these. I organised them especially for your orchestra". We recognised those stands. They came from the Czech camp, which we had once had the opportunity of visiting on official business. Last night the four thousand Czechs, whom we had envied for their carefree prosperity, had been turned into ashes. That was the price of those music stands. Along with the stands we also inherited from the Czechs a few violins, a trumpet and a priceless violoncello, whose lack I had painfully felt. Not only would it enrich the sound of our orchestra, but it would give me the opportunity of forming a string quartet, writing from memory a few works of the great masters and also composing my own work for this classical group."

From Szymon Laks, 'Music of Another World' (1948), Trans. Chester A. Kisiel.
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Left: Szymon Laks. Right: A macabre photo of the prisoner Franz Nierychlo from Silesia, kapo of the kitchen, conducting the Auschwitz 1 Orchestra on a Sunday afternoon in 1941.

Programme

SZYMON LAKS (1901-1983)

Sonata Brève (Paris 1946)
UK Première

PAVEL HAAS (1899-1944)

Suite Opus 13 (Brno 1935)
Praeludium
Con molto espressione
Danza
Pastorale
Postludium

VIKTOR ULLMANN (1898-1944)

Sonata No. 7 (Theresienstadt 1944)
'A mes enfants Max, Jean, Felice'
Allegro
Alla Marcia, ben misurato
Adagio, ma con moto
Scherzo – Allegretto grazioso
Variationen und Fuge über ein hebräisches Volkslied

Interval

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Première communion de la Vierge
Regard du silence
from 'Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus' (Paris 1944)

SIEGMUND SCHUL (1916 -1944)

Fugue (Prague 1941)

SZYMON LAKS

Hommage à Chopin – Ballade (Paris 1949)
UK Première

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In Praise of Szymon Laks'

A Letter to the Polish Institute, November 1984

"I have known Szymon Laks since he arrived in Paris in 1926. Both of us being of Polish origin, we both also chose France as the framework for our musical activities. We were separated by war for a lengthy and sorrowful period of time. I had the good fortune of leaving the country with my family on the last boat before the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Szymon Laks was deported to a concentration camp where he was only able to save his life because the Nazis enjoyed music ... In the last few years of his life his literary works took a place of growing importance.

In his books he returns, in various forms to those ideas, which were beyond musical composition, the three most central interests of his life: musicological problems, linguistic problems and finally political problems, especially those concerning Jews all over the world and in the Middle East."

Aleksander Tansman, trans. © Krysta Close. Printed by kind permission of André Laks.

Hommage to Szymon Laks



My 'Hommage to Szymon Laks' is not an attempt to erect a memorial to him in the context of Auschwitz-Birkenau, but rather to offer a celebratory musical tribute, which, it is hoped, will inspire a greater awareness and interest in his artistic life and works. His compositional output is beautiful, abundant and still waiting to be discovered. After his 'liberation' and political exile to Paris in May 1945, Szymon Laks continued his artistic life on a solitary path as writer and composer. He died in Paris in December 1983.

Szymon Laks had stood alone, and as an outsider – a free man despite the legacy of his journey through the abyss. His voice and his writings, polemical as they are, remain as relevant now as they were immediately after his liberation, uncomfortable and challenging as his political perception has the justification to be. When are we going to listen?

Sonata Brève consists of three minimalist movements in a baroque style with clear affinity to Johann Sebastian Bach. Written and dedicated to the celebrated French harpsichordist Marcelle de Lacour, a pupil of Wanda Landowska, Laks completed this work in 1946. I am full of admiration for this composer who was able to summon up the inspiration for this beautiful sonata and I am honoured to be performing the UK Premiere of this composition.

Hommage à Chopin – Ballade is quite a different kind of piece altogether. Composed in Paris in 1949 for the centenary of Fryderyk Chopin's death, Laks won the Chopin Prize for this work in 1950.

In one continuous improvisational movement, this Homage to Chopin sets out with an introductory 'berceuse' and like a burning mirror, sets out before us the pure piano landscape of quintessentially Polish musical characters, before ending dramatically in the key of F sharp minor.



The French harpsichordist Marcelle de Lacour (1896-1997) performed the world première of Lak's Sonata Brève on 30 May 1949.



Left to Right: Szymon Laks with his friends, the pianist and author Zygmunt Dygat (left) and the composer and pianist Aleksander Tansman, Paris 1972.

“And the blood screams for the peoples’ soul ... redeem and be redeemed” from Pavel Haas’ setting of *Al Sefod*

Pavel Haas (1899-1944)



One of the greatest losses suffered by Czech music during World War II was the death of the remarkable composer and genius **Pavel Haas**. With the exception of his short stay in Saarbrücken and the last three years spent in Theresienstadt (Terezin) concentration camp (2 December 1941–16 October 1944), all his life is linked with Brno and its Janáček tradition. Haas received his musical training first from Janáček’s disciples Jan Kunc and Vilém Petrželka

and completed it at the school for master composers directly under Leoš Janáček (1920-1922). His breadth of musical language as evidenced from the richness and diversity of his surviving work, imbued as his style is with the influence of the outstanding musical personality of Janáček, reveal contemporary classical and jazz components which Haas’ very keen intellect never failed to transform into an original whole. His Chamber music compositions from the period of occupation and imprisonment show the degree of his intense resistance towards those people who were trampling law and human dignity.

Pavel Haas entered the active life of Theresienstadt as a composer. Beside Viktor Ullmann, Haas shared the same fate as Hans Krása, Karel Reiner, Franz Eugen Klein, Gideon Klein, Carl Taube, Siegmund Schul, Petr Kien and others. Many of his compositions disappeared with him in Auschwitz.



*Disposal of ashes
at Theresienstadt
(1944-45).*

*Engraving by
Bedřich (Fritz) Lederer.*

Suite Opus 13 was written by Haas for his friend the outstanding pianist Bernard Kaff, who also was sent to Theresienstadt before being killed alongside Haas in Auschwitz. The composition had its première at the musical evening of the Club of Moravian Composers on 10 February 1936 in Vienna and met with well-deserved success. The odd movements with their grotesque and expressionistic quirkiness and references to popular dance forms of the 1930s, work very well for the piano and complement the intense, dreamy and impressionistic colours of *Con molto espressione* and *Pastorale*. The work is lent special charm by the polymetric rhythmic components so typical of Haas, and *Praeludium* is one such example which, with the bell-like sonorities reminiscent of Haas’s love of the St. Wenceslas Chorale contrasted with the staccato cross rhythms, has an animating and prismatic effect. The crowning achievement is the sardonic and jazzy *Danza* whose precipitous driving energy accelerates in the dance rhythm of the Latin American ‘rumba’ to a dramatic climax.

In the final movement of the Suite – *Postludium* – which finishes with a generous sweep of hazy dissonant sonorities underscored with ‘stride piano’ writing, Haas presents an allusion to a particular popular jazz hit of the decade, *The Lady is a Tramp*. This tune appears later in Ullmann’s operatic masterpiece *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* as the first seven notes of the *Harlequin* motif written in Theresienstadt Camp during 1943-1944. This surely is more than simply coincidence?



*Drawing of Pavel Haas
by Petr Kien.*

“We search for the forgotten song of angels”

Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944)



Viktor Ullmann was born in the Silesian border town of Teschen, the son of a distinguished commanding officer of the Austrian Imperial Army. Educated in Vienna, studying composition with Arnold Schoenberg, Ullmann became very interested in the writings of Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society.

Ullmann's last work, his **Piano Sonata No. 7**, written on scraps of lined paper, was dedicated to his children and completed on 22 August 1944 in the Theresienstadt ghetto. There are five movements whose themes draw their inspiration from Ullmann's most personal references and are full of quotations; for example from Gustav Mahler's *The Song of the Wayfarer* and Richard von Heuberger's *Der Opernball* – an operetta that received its première in the year of Ullmann's birth. And though it is rumoured that Ullmann was no lover of operettas, nevertheless, as répétiteur and conducting assistant to Aleksander Zemlinsky at the German Theatre in Prague, he would have been involved with the preparation of singers and chorus in Zemlinsky's rare production of *Der Opernball* staged in Prague in October 1923. In the grotesque *allegretto grazioso*, the *scherzo* and *trio* of Ullmann's Seventh Piano Sonata, *Der Opernball* is quoted as if in a dream, but offers no respite even in fleeting distraction, from the grim and violent reality of life in the Theresienstadt ghetto. “Silently there is still hope (in me) for a late return” Viktor Ullmann wrote at that time.



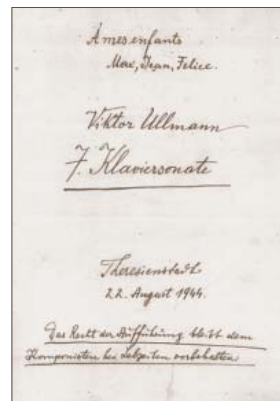
One of the ‘Ghetto Swingers’ still frames from the 1944-45 Nazi propaganda film about Theresienstadt, titled ‘The Gift of the Town’.

With acknowledgement to Yad Vashem, Israel.

The climax of the sonata is the *Theme, Variations and Fugue* based on the melody of Yehuda Sharett's Zionist song, composed in Berlin in 1932. Each of the minimalist variations weaves in and out of Sharett's *Song of Rachel* which is a setting of a poem by the Russian Jewish poet Rachel, in which she imagines herself as the namesake of the Biblical matriarch; “Behold her blood flows in my blood, her voice sings in mine – Rachel who tends Laban's flock, Rachel, mother of all mothers”.

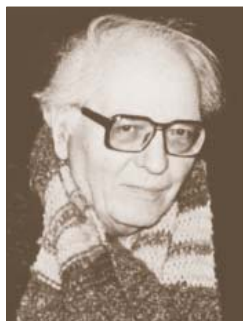
Ullmann may well have come across this song, widely sung by the pioneers settling the land of Israel, from members of Zionist youth movements in Terezin. Ullmann also found similarities between this melody, the Slovak National Anthem *Lightning is over the Tatra* (banned by the Nazis), and the fifteenth-century Hussite Hymn *Ye who are God's Warriors*, combining all three with great flair to create the illusion of one single song. He quotes J. Cruger's Chorale *Now thank we all our God* in the same breath as the German nursery song *Hänschen klein, ganz allein* (*Little Jack, all alone*) and the note-names *B-A-C-H*, and there is even an allusion to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in the glorious resolution of Ullmann's epic, monumental, valiant final work.

The Fugue ends majestically and triumphantly in the key of D Major, with greatness and genius of spirit and the best of humanity.



Left: Front cover of the manuscript for Ullmann's Seventh Sonata. Right: Caricature of Ullmann from the journal ‘Anbruch’ 1925.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)



The first performance of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* took place on 15 January 1941 in Stalag VIII A, a prison camp at Görlitz in Silesia (now in Poland), in front of an audience of five thousand from all walks of life. "Never", said Messiaen, "have I been listened to with such attention and understanding". The young French composer had been captured as a medical auxiliary in May 1940 in the

company of three other musicians as they were making their way on foot to Nancy, France. The title of the Quartet could suggest that it was written in response to his imprisonment, but he always resisted such an interpretation, saying only that the inspiration and source of the work was the imagery contained in the Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

After his repatriation, Messiaen came into contact with the brilliant pianist Yvonne Loriod through his composition classes at the house of Guy Delapierre in Paris. The immediate result of this contact was a large work for two pianos, *Visions de L'Amen*, which was first performed by the composer and Loriod in Paris on 10 May 1943. One year later, Messiaen commenced working on his masterpiece for solo piano *Vingt regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus*, which he completed in September 1944. For piano writing, this formidable work, which the composer wrote with Loriod in mind, was a new departure, giving to its repertoire unprecedented challenges and treasures akin to the piano writing of Sergei Rakhmaninov, Franz Liszt and Aleksandr Nikolayevich Skryabin.

The source for the work comes from the composers' study of the mystical writings of St John of the Cross and the New Testament Gospels. It is poignant to reflect that Olivier Messiaen was engrossed in the task of writing *Vingt Regards* at the very time when his contemporaries, Szymon Laks, Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Haas and Siegmund Schul were fighting for their lives in a concentration camp. His own experience of captivity during the Second World War cannot have been comparable to life in a concentration camp, but Messiaen must nevertheless have been profoundly aware of how fortunate he was to have been able to return to Paris and resume his life without threat of being arrested, only by accident of birth.

Première communion de la Vierge

"After the Annunciation, Mary adores the Jesus within her ... 'my God, my son, my Magnificat! my wordless love' ..." The 'Theme of God' is heard pianissimo in B flat and Mode 2 with a 'birdsong' motif as the higher harmonics, like coloured reflections and rapid, melodic shimmering impalpable resonances. Other timeless melodic garlands express the wordless love, evoking the sublime, ineffable and serene iconography of Leonardo da Vinci.



The Theme of Chords can be heard pizzicato and pianissimo over a reference to 'The Virgin and Child' which precedes the unprepared – for entry of the Magnificat. Now, the Theme of God recurs faster as a joyous and ecstatic dance. After the canticle of joy and praise, regular pulsations in the bass, representing the heartbeat of the unborn Child, can be heard prior to the return of the birdsong (higher harmonics of the 'Theme of God') and a rapturous close. The 'Theme of God' returns, and the accompanying celestial motif quietly diminuendos into silence and the final major third of the inward embrace.

Madonna image from the church of St Cyril in Kiev, restored by Mikhail Vrubel

Regard du silence

Here, the top part consists of an ostinato of seventeen chords in Mode 3, while the similar ostinato of the lower part is written in Mode 4. Following this introduction, where the music seems to emerge from silence like colours emerging from the dark – are two strophes. There are several different registers, several intensities, several bands of colour – forming a 'harmonic litany' on the notes G and F. This section includes chords of 'transposed inversions', 'chords of contracted resonance' and a concentrated version of the 'chordal theme' as well as contrary motion and crossed-hand arpeggios with all the delicacy of fine lace.

This is multi-coloured, intangible and impalpable music – music of confetti and delicate jewels, with colliding reflections, and two rainbows one encircling the other. The 'adoration of silence', the 'gaze' of Mary and Joseph, and of the cattle around the manger worshipping "a little child, God before the ages ..." (*Kontakion on 'The Nativity of Christ': St Romanos the Melodist*. Trans. Archimandrite Ephrem Lash

Siegmond Schul (1916-1944)

*And should you play the harp to the melodious sun
and live in word, in wind and delight
and should you create witnesses in wounded songs, they shall all,
should we lose you, make peace ...*

Viktor Ullmann, verse poem 'On contemplating Schul's coffin'. Trans. Michael Haas
Composed in Theresienstadt concentration camp, June 1944.



Siegmond Schul (1916-1944) was born in Chemnitz, Germany on 11 January 1916, of a devout traditional Jewish family. His father, the small businessman Mendel Schul (born 8 October 1865), was from Glojow in Galicia, Poland. His mother, Olga Seligman was born in Dortmund, Germany on 18 October 1876. Siegmund spent the first twelve years of his life in Chemnitz. He undertook his first musical composition lessons in Kassel Germany, and after leaving Germany in the 1930s for Prague

to further his musical training, received tuition from Fidelio F. Finke, Viktor Ullmann and Alois Hába. Briefly in the mid-1930s Schul was accepted as a student of Paul Hindemith in Berlin, but given the highly dangerous political climate of the time, it is unlikely that he was able to follow this through. He therefore remained in Prague. His special area of study was the collating of prayers and chants from the synagogue in Prague, which aroused the keen interest of his teacher, Alois Hába – the pioneer of microtonal tuning and quarter tone composition technique in the first half of the twentieth century. Siegmund Schul died in the Theresienstadt ghetto in June 1944.

This **Fugue** – the Third Movement of his Piano Sonata – is the only surviving fragment for solo piano, which was completed on 19 July 1941 in Prague at around the time of his marriage to Olga Stern. Tragically, within months of their wedding both Siegmund and his wife were sent from the Fair Trade building in Prague, on the second transport to Theresienstadt on 30 November 1941. Olga survived, and after the war married Pavel Brandeis, whose first wife Friedl Dicker Brandeis, an artist of the Bauhaus period, lifelong friend of Viktor Ullmann, student of Arnold Schoenberg and Paul Klee and a carer of the Theresienstadt children, was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944.

The following poignant last words of Viktor Ullmann from his 'Memoir' clearly show his admiration and respect for Siegmund Schul, and the weight of deep sadness he must have felt at Schul's untimely and tragic death from Tuberculosis in the ghetto:

In the last years he (Siegmond Schul) liked to discuss all the problems of the new music, questions of form and tonality, their reshaping and breaking up, questions of style, aesthetics, the current view of the world and many details pertaining to some of his works in progress ... I was thus getting a rare insight into the artistic development of this personality whose true calling was music ... I am not using the commonplace phrase of 'In Memoriam' when I maintain that he was fully justified in saying, just before he died: "What a pity I have come to this". ... And it was the truth.

For me this *Fugue* is a work of genius whose roots are in the *Five Variations and Double Fugue on a Theme of Arnold Schoenberg* that Viktor Ullmann wrote in the 1920s. There is a direct quote from Ullmann's masterpiece, through the intense, dark and brooding textures of Schul's fugue, subject and counter subject. I also find an intriguing similarity of style and outward focus, between Schul's *Fugue* and the *Fugue* from Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant-Jésus – 'Par Lui tout a été fait'* (Paris, May 1944).

The very expansive theme itself, (Schul) held up in the light, majesty and symbolism of the Word as subject, (Messiaen) reminds me of the creation of the stars, photons and galaxies which Schul's French contemporary sought to convey through a similar soundscape. I find myself pondering an imaginary encounter between these two extraordinary composers.



Autograph manuscript of the opening bars of the third movement of Schul's piano sonata.

Programme Notes © Jacqueline Cole, 2005

THIS CONCERT IS DEDICATED TO THE CHILDREN OF VIKTOR AND ANNA (WINTERNITZ) ULLMANN



LEO HAAS 1901-1983. 'Worship in a garage' 10 June 1943, Theresienstadt.
Permanent Exhibitions of the Terezin Memorial in the Former Magdeburg Barracks.

“These brilliant people had civilisation in mind: they contributed their knowledge and insights, in their majority – though by no means all of them – as Jews. We must not only remember them, which is a cheap and superficial cliché – we must learn from them.” Yehuda Bauer, Academic Advisor, International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Vashem, Israel

The Viktor Ullmann and Pavel Haas Foundations were created in 2002 by the British concert pianist Jacqueline Cole. The purpose of these international and inter-faith organisations is to acquaint a wider public with the life and works of Viktor Ullmann, Pavel Haas and their contemporaries. The emphasis is on performance as a means of increasing holocaust awareness in the 21st Century.

www.viktorullmannfoundation.org.uk www.pavelhaasfoundation.org

On behalf of the Viktor Ullmann Foundation, Jacqueline Cole would like to thank Clive Marks, the Polish Cultural Institute, the Jewish Music Institute and the JMI International Centre for Suppressed Music, and Leo Hepner for their generous support and sponsorship of this 'Homage to Szymon Laks'.

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Jacqueline Cole

Clive Bardsa



Jacqueline Cole is a pianist, artist, writer and founder and artistic director of the Viktor Ullmann and Pavel Haas Foundations UK, and the Fundacja Instytut Viktora Ullmanna Cieszyn Poland. She has given concerts throughout the United States, Sweden, France, Holland, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, and in the Czech Republic and Poland. She is an international artist whose focus is performance of the neglected and unrecognised composers of the first half of the 20th Century.

She is currently engaged in research for the writing of a biography of Szymon Laks. Future concert engagements in Europe as ambassador for Viktor Ullmann and his contemporaries include an interest in discovering, commemorating and collating the neglected works of Polish and Polish Jewish composers who suffered in the Holocaust.

Jacqueline's teachers have included Nadia Boulanger, Vlado Perlemuter, Yvonne Loriod Messiaen, Jeanne Loriod (Ondes Martenot), James Gibb, Kenneth van Barthold and Mary Fedden RA.

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