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EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLOCAUST IN MUSIC: EXAMINING THE CASE OF ARNOLD SCHOENBERG'S 'A SURVIVOR FROM WARSAW' OP. 46¹

*A certain minimum of rights
unchangeably valid for all peoples
and races should be searched for.*
Arnold Schoenberg (1984: 507)

Schoenberg, Religion, and Politics

The purpose of this paper is to give a record of Arnold Schoenberg's engagement in the advocacy for human rights before and during the World War II, as well as to examine his dodecaphonic work *A Survivor from Warsaw* Op. 46 in terms of so called "secondary experience" (Włodarski 2015: 18) of the Holocaust and a tribute to the victims. Arnold Schoenberg was an Austrian composer of Jewish origin, the leader of the Second Viennese School, originator of atonality in music as well as the twelve-tone technique called dodecaphony. His way to Judaism was long and complex but once the composer decided to follow this direction, he did it with a full commitment. *A Survivor from Warsaw* was, after *Moses and Aron* and *Jacob's Ladder*, a kind of settlement, not only with religious issues, but also with the very recent past. Schoenberg's relation to his religious belief led him toward radical political convictions. In 1911, after a concert of his works, Schoenberg received a letter from Wassily Kandinsky, which has started a long lasting friendship based mostly on a similar view on art. However, in 1923 a crisis of their friendship appeared due to some anti-Semitic remarks made by Kandinsky. In one of his letters to Kandinsky Schoenberg wrote: "But what is anti-Semitism to lead to, if not to acts of violence? Is it so difficult to imagine that? You are perhaps satisfied with depriving Jews of their civil rights. Then certainly Einstein, Mahler, I and many others, will have been got rid of" (Wlo-

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darski 2015: 5). In 1925 Schoenberg moved to Berlin, where, at the beginning of 1930s, the political situation started to be difficult for him to cope with. Being still in Europe Schoenberg had in mind a daring project and made a plan with the intention

(...) to engage in large scale propaganda among all of Jewry in the United States and also later to other countries, designed first of all to get them to produce the financial means sufficient to pay for the gradual emigration of the Jews from Germany. I propose to move the Jewish community to its very depths by a graphic description of what lies in store for the German Jews, unless they receive help within the next two or three months. (Strasser 1990: 135)

What is astonishing is Schoenberg's incredible sharpness of view on the political matters and his concerns for the future of European Jews.

On 24 July 1933, just before leaving for the United States, Schoenberg re-entered the Jewish community by making a formal declaration in Paris (DeVoto 1993: 7). As witnesses served Dimitri Marianoff and Marc Chagall. For the composer it must have had a symbolic meaning as a form of solidarity with the victims of growing anti-Semitic attitude in Europe. In the United States Schoenberg tried to create some awareness about the dramatic situation of the European Jews, however without much success due to "a general indifference in America to the tenebrous developments in Germany" (DeVoto 1993: 8). In 1934 the composer even wrote to Rabbi Stephen Wise of the American Jewish Congress, but no radical steps against the Nazis in the 1930s could be possibly promoted by a "rabbi who represented assimilationist Jews" (Feisst 2011: 87). In December 1938 Schoenberg created himself *A Four-Point Program for Jewry*, on which he has worked for several years. Schoenberg warned that "millions of European Jews were in danger and asked in the opening paragraph: »Is there room in the world for almost 7,000,000 people? Are they condemned to doom? Will they become extinct? Famished? Butchered?«" (Feisst 2011: 86). He was, however, unable to publish this text, despite many efforts made in that direction.

During the years of the World War II Schoenberg could not proceed with any other action of that kind. His only dream that came true was the creation of the State of Israel, on which he commented in 1951 in the following manner: "For more than four decades it has been a most cherished wish of mine to see erected an independent Israeli state. And more than that: to become a citizen residing in this state" (Feisst 2011: 84). This wish was never to happen. The same year Schoenberg died in Los Angeles.

A Survivor from Warsaw Op. 46—Origins

A Survivor from Warsaw was written in the short time between 11th and 23rd August 1947. At first the idea of the work came in 1947 from Corinne Chochem, a dancer of Russian origin (Strasser 1990: 52). She sent to Schoenberg the music and words of “a Partisan Song that was sung by the Vilna Ghetto” (Strasser 1990: 52). About three weeks later Schoenberg replied, giving some details of the planned work: “(...) 6–9 minutes for small orchestra and chorus, perhaps also one or more soloists on the melody you gave me. I plan to make this scene—which you described—in the Warsaw Ghetto, how the doomed Jews started singing, before going to die” (Strasser 1990: 52). Schoenberg called for \$1000 fee and did not agree to reduce it. Since then there was no further correspondence between them (Strasser 1990: 53), nevertheless Schoenberg continued working on the project on his own. A few weeks later a commission for an orchestral work came from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation. Since the composer was given the freedom to decide the cast, he wrote on 24th August 1947:

I am happy to inform you that the piece you commissioned (...) is finished... I could not change the piece into a symphonic poem as I had hoped to do. It would not have been the same thing, I wanted to express. But, though I employ one narrator and a men’s choir, I could at least eliminate the second speaker – it required many changes! (Strasser 1990: 53)

Schoenberg wrote the text for the work himself, adding at the end one of the most significant Jewish prayers: *Shema Yisroel*. It is unknown from how many sources Schoenberg took inspiration. René Leibowitz reported that the composer based the text on a story told him by a young survivor from the Warsaw ghetto (Leibowitz 1949: 322–323). Schoenberg indicated in the score that the text was “based partly upon reports which I have received directly or indirectly.” Michael Strasser points out that the “precise time references have been removed” (Strasser 1990: 59) from the text. In an early sketch of the text stays: “»I cannot remember all that happened the last day before I lived underground, in the sewers of Warsaw«. In the final version of the text [...], the listener no longer knows exactly when the events of the story took place” (Strasser 1990: 59). Why did Schoenberg then keep the original title? It is not without importance that

the Warsaw uprising had a special significance for Schoenberg, as it must for all Jews – for there they fought back. (...) The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the largest and best-known revolt, and it has come to be universally regarded as an inspiring symbol of the indestructibility of the human spirit (...) (Strasser 1990: 61),

even though it came almost one year after the most massive ghetto extermination, so called *Großaktion Warschau* (July/August 1942). Therefore, the text and music of the *Survivor* will be analysed in view of theories and testimonies coming from diverse sources, including Auschwitz as one of the Holocaust synonyms. Although the exact place of *Survivor*'s action is impossible (and unnecessary) to determine, all the quoted relations seem to be universal enough to apply them as generalized ideas referring to the human condition.

“Experience that does not exist” (Nycz 2012: 142)

Composer's experience of the world, transmitted then through music, raises questions not only about the origins of a work and biographical details. It is a kind of a statement, a testimony reworked through art. One of the most dramatic “experiences” of the twentieth century manifested in art in many different ways was the experience of the Holocaust, as Ryszard Nycz states: “an experience that does not exist”, since “we can doubt if it is still an experience as such?” (Nycz 2012: 142). According to Giorgio Agamben, we refer here to a witness as a subject in ethical sense: “the one who cannot bear witness is the true witness, the absolute witness” (Agamben 2002: 150). Nevertheless, experience of the Holocaust manifested itself strongly not only in the output of the mid-century composers, but also later ones, for whom it was not given directly and thus served as a way of settlement with the past. Purely aesthetical experience of music became ethical experience.

What makes the difference between an authentic witness of the Holocaust and a composer “giving a testimony” or simply being a secondary musical witness? (Wlodarski 2015: 11) As Agamben notes, we are dealing here with two dimensions of experience—as delivering a testimony and as a survival (Agamben 2002: 132). In some cases the survival depends on determination to deliver the testimony (Agamben 2002: 15). However, “the untestifiable” has a name: “In the jargon of the camp, it is *der Muselmann*, literally »the Muslim«”(Agamben 2002: 41): “The *Muselmann* is not only or not so much a limit between life and death; rather, he marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman” (Agamben 2002: 55). We should pose the question if it works only one way? Where is the borderline after which the aggressor becomes totally dehumanized? Ones of the most shocking scenes in memories of Szymon Laks are those in which the Nazis in the concentration camp write letters to their families and are moved to tears while listening to music (also Jewish music). As George Steiner commented: “We know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning” (Polony 2010: 118). Agamben states that “(...) Auschwitz marks the end and the ruin of

every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm. The bare life to which human beings were reduced neither demands nor conforms to anything. It itself is the only norm; it is absolutely immanent” (Agamben 2002: 69). Life has no dimensions, a “flat” space occurs everywhere: from the living space to the metaphorical one. Even the suffering has no depth anymore. There is simply no suitable context for it. Degradation concerns not only life, but also death (Agamben 2002: 72). As Agamben writes, “(...) it is certain that, with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews” (Agamben 2002: 45). In Schoenberg’s *Survivor* the difference between a witness and a *Muselmann* shows in a few moments. That is why the *Shema* prayer at the end of Schoenberg’s *Survivor* has such symbolic importance—“the lost creed” suddenly reappears and not only confirms the prisoners identity but also carries the message from all the survivors: we remember who you were.

Survivor’s Text and Music

The text of *A Survivor from Warsaw* represents a kind of autobiographical literature, for which Florian Znaniecki coined the term “personal documentary” (Leociak 2013: 6–7). In case of Schoenberg’s *Survivor* the term “double authorship”, coined by Alina Skibińska, would be useful as well. It means an interference of a second author with the original testimony (Leociak 2013: 6–7). Amy Lynn Wlodarski utilizes the term “secondary witness” to describe the composer’s position (Wlodarski 2015: 18). It should be kept in mind that Schoenberg not only did not follow a complete, original testimony of a Holocaust witness, but he reworked the text inspired by such testimonies himself in an artistic way, suitable for his expressive and ideological purposes.

The text tells scarcely a fragment of the survivor’s story. The scene pictures a few moments from the camp’s ordinary day, but this day is to be the last one for some of the prisoners. Although time and place of the action are not given precisely, the story casts at least two different places (Warsaw ghetto and a concentration camp) and we may even assume that the counting of prisoners mixes three potential situations: the regular counting made every day during a roll-call, the counting of prisoners for the train transport (possibly Umschlagplatz in Warsaw) and the counting before sending them to the gas chamber. A possible explanation for that may be the figure of a second speaker in the preliminary sketches, as Schoenberg mentioned himself. It is not excluded that originally he had in mind not only two survivors but also testimonies from two different places. At the end the *Shema Yisroel* prayer outbursts directly from the counting situation. The recalled reality of the text is *quasi*-oneiric. According to many testimonies the camp’s scenes return often in dreams (Levi 1988: 101):

(...) Auschwitz marks the irrecoverable crisis of authentic temporality, of the very possibility of 'deciding' on the disjunction. The camp, the absolute situation, is the end of every possibility of an originary temporality, that is, of the temporal foundation of a singular position in space, of a *Da*. (Agamben 2002: 128)

The Narrator as well as all the people appearing in his story are nameless. The *Survivor* encompasses two different kinds of experience: of a real witness and a composer, co-experiencing the past through his sensitivity, compassion and musical imagination. The experience of Holocaust merges together with the experience of facing the Holocaust through music. It should be stated that at the same time the Narrator plays the role of a double witness—first recalling the past and then reliving it again.

In Schoenberg's *Survivor* the special status of memory is emphasized, not only in text but also in music. The composer insisted on the importance of memory and its role in comprehensibility of any musical work (Wlodarski 2007: 581–608). Primo Levi confesses: "The memories of my imprisonment are much more vivid and detailed than those of anything else that happened to me before or after" (Levi 1988: 26). This captures very well the specificity of *Survivor*'s text. Remembered key moments serve as a kind of compass in the distorted time-space. The Narrator navigates between fixed points of his memory and all the other situations remain slightly blurred. Ernst van Alphen comments that such way of Holocaust experiencing is typical for a certain category of survivors, pointing at "the lack of a plot or narrative frame, by means of which the events can be narrated as a meaningful coherence" (Van Alphen 1999: 29). The feeling of disorder is underlined by the appearance of a unifying prayer. The value of the *Shema* in *Survivor*'s ending proves to be not only symbolical and aesthetical. Following the thought of Laks and Agamben in the camp's dehumanized conditions the probability of such scene was close to zero. Still, there exist witnesses who recalled the scene of prisoners reciting the *Shema Yisroel* just before they went into the truck serving as a mobile gas chamber (Strasser 1990: 59). A similar scene took place at Auschwitz, where prisoners refused the order to disrobe before going to the gas chamber and they began to sing the Czech national anthem and the *Hatikvah* (*The Hope*) (Strasser 1990: 59).

Apart from being written in a dodecaphonic technique, the *Survivor* also employs "a free recitation method" as well as the "accentuated rhythm of narration" (Rognoni 1978: 302), which provide a greater realistic and dramatic effect by cutting off all the possible aesthetics associated with singing in the first part of the piece. The orchestral Introduction and the first six lines of the Narrator's tale announce and at the same time summarise the events. But it happens like through a veil of a far remembrance, giving an obvious sign of the fact, that the

Narrator has survived. The only figures that did not lose their frightening power on the story teller are the trumpet fanfare and the trills of the woodwinds—signs of an experience that went “into the bones”. The Narrator becomes himself a double witness first by remembrance and then re-participation in the past events. Already in the Introduction remembrances of counting and fear are emphasized the strongest (Föllmi 1998: 50).

Textual and Musical References to Violence, Threat, Humiliation, Fear, Despair, Unity, and Hope

The musical layer of *Survivor* does not only follow or illustrate the textual details, but also comments and adds extra meanings to certain situations. Schoenberg was using motives as a tool for “unity, relationship, coherence, logic, comprehensibility and fluency” (Schoenberg 1967: 8) in music that was not tonal. The below chart presents textual references to violence, threat, humiliation, fear, despair, and unity that can be observed in *Survivor*, together with their musical equivalents.

REFERENCES	TEXTUAL	MUSICAL
Violence (physical and psychological)	Awakening at dark: “Get out!”; Separation from family; “Too much noise, not fast enough”; “Should I help you with the rifle butt?”; They hit everybody; “I had been hit very hard”; “We all (...) were beaten over the head”; “Abzählen!” (“Count down!”); “The sergeant shouted again”	Trumpet fanfare ; “Motive of Counting”; “Motive of Suffering”; “Motive of Anger”; Trills; <i>Ostinato</i> ; <i>f</i> and <i>ff</i> dynamics;
Threat	“Should I help you with the rifle butt?”; “How many I will send to the gas-chamber”	“Motive of Anger”; “Motive of Counting”; Trills
Humiliation	“They came out very slow: the old ones, the sick men”; “They hurry as much as they can”; “It was painful to hear...”	“Motive of Suffering”; “Motive of Anger”; “Motive of Counting”
Fear	“Nervous agility”; Fear of the sergeant; “It had become very still...”	Trumpet fanfare ; “Motive of Suffering”; <i>p</i> and <i>pp</i> dynamics

Despair	Worries all night; No news about the family; Sleeplessness; “It was painful to hear...”	“Motive of Suffering”; “Motive of Counting”; “Motive of Anger”; Trills
Unity	The waking up situation; The counting situation; The prayer – “the <i>grandiose</i> moment”	Series construction; Chord <i>subito ppp</i> after the words “gas-chamber”; <i>Ostinato accelerando e crescendo</i> before the prayer; <i>Unisono</i> singing (the prayer)
Hope	“I remember...”	“Motive of Remembrance”

As Ernst van Alphen notes, “in the twentieth century, experience can also stand for influences external to individuals” (Van Alphen 1999: 25). Thus the references to violence include also those to threat and humiliation, understood as an experience coming always from outside, while the fear and despair references are proper to one’s own internal experience. As it was mentioned above, the “Motive of Counting” dominates Narrator’s mind. It appears as a grim reminder in almost every situation. The only motive that comes independently from the text is the “Motive of Remembrance”. It is the only reference to hope in the work; hope as memory. Van Alphen notes: “Memory is not something we have, but something we produce *as individuals sharing a culture*. Memory is, then, the mutually constitutive interaction between the past and the present, shared as culture but acted out by each of us as an individual” (Van Alphen 1999: 37).

One of the “Unity” motives—the second counting trial (*ostinato accelerando e crescendo*) before the prayer is accompanied by the words: “it finally sounded like a stampede of wild horses”, which is a synonym of freedom. At the same time the use of *ostinato* points at the unavoidable discipline. The unity comes then as a trial to reach metaphorical liberation and leads directly to *unisono* singing of the *Shema*. Through the prayer Schoenberg restores not only dignity of the prisoners: both witnesses and *Muselmänner* (since, as Michał Głowiński insists: “everyone who has died from the murderous decrees, has died with dignity” (Głowiński 1998: 33)), but most of all he restores their humanity. The composer’s emphasis of the fact that the massively recalled process of dehumanization in the camps refers mostly to the Nazis and not the victims, is of a great value. Schoenberg renders voice to all those who could neither speak nor sing anymore. In this case there is no other hope then remembrance.

Experience of the Holocaust in Music: Represented, Embodied, or Relived?

When Paul Ricoeur asks: “Isn’t the relation to the past a sort of *mimēsis*?” (Ricoeur 2012: 24), he probably has in mind the difficulty to grasp the true identity of any past event and to differentiate between memory and imagination. Van Alphen states: “(...) the problem is not the nature of the event, nor an intrinsic limitation of representation; rather, it is the split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation with/in which the event can be experienced” (Van Alphen 1999: 27). The fact that Schoenberg was considering the genre of a symphonic poem and did not follow this idea, pictures his doubts of formal and expressive nature as well as representational one. The Holocaust is often being described as unrepresentable or unimaginable (Wlodarski 2015: 18) experience. A “failed experience”, using van Alphen’s formulation, which “excludes the possibility of a voluntarily controlled memory of the event (...)” (Wlodarski 2015: 37). Are there any limits of the Holocaust representation? If so, of what nature: artistic or ethical? Berel Lang notes that “the reference to the limits of representation (...) might seem to imply that limits themselves are not representations” (Lang 1992: 300). Van Alphen states that representation may express even extreme experiences. It seems to be reasonable to speak about representation of the Holocaust’s experience in Schoenberg’s *Survivor* rather than representation of the Holocaust itself, which is what Berel Lang calls a “representation-*as*” (Richardson: 2). For the Narrator as a witness and a survivor the recurring musical motives, as well as “the mimetic dialogue between textual and musical events” (Wlodarski 2015: 17), mean the experience relived. However, in the Introduction, where the Narrator did not take that role yet, they are embodied. Introduction makes appearance of all the motives, also the instrumental anticipation of the *Shema*, which make us hear the whole story in fast motion. Even the use of onomatopoeic effects does not make the representation more realistic. Those are all transformed sounds, transformed through the Narrator’s mind and memory, as he is not able to recall everything; as his experience is a “failed” one. As a conclusion I wish to quote the words written by Lydia Goehr:

(...) an art of mourning does not require artists to decide about how best to portray the horror of a specific act, because this would be to think about the art in terms of its copying or representing the world as it *appears*. Rather, the demand is for an art that, in its formal or expressive capacity as art, reveals something about the concealed violence of a society that allows explicitly violent acts to be performed without objection in its name. To displace our attention from *representation* to *expression* is one way how not to take »the name« in vain. (Goehr 2008: 201)

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Summary

Experience of the Holocaust in Music: Examining the Case of Arnold Schoenberg's 'A Survivor from Warsaw' Op. 46

The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which the experience of the Holocaust can be represented, embodied or relived in/through music. The category of experience has gained recently a great recognition and importance in the interdisciplinary research. Surprisingly, it is still little applied in musical art, although it seems to be a major category when talking about the compositional process, as well as referring to the performance and listener/interpreter points of view. The experience category (as defined by Ryszard Nycz) thus serves as a main methodological aid in this survey. It helps to reconstitute the process of expressing the experience of the Holocaust in music, specifically in music of Arnold Schoenberg. 'A Survivor from Warsaw' Op. 46 for narrator, men's chorus and orchestra came into existence two years after the Second World War was finished. Schoenberg wrote the text himself including at the end of the piece a Jewish prayer 'Shema Yisrael'. Textual and musical figures representing violence, fear, despair and hope are discussed in detail. Lastly, all these aspects are explored in the context of Schoenberg's written opinions and ideas regarding human rights.