

PBS Airs "Phoenix from the Ashes," a Film by Judith Lynn Stillman



Judith Lynn Stillman

RIC Music Professor Judith Stillman's documentary, "Phoenix from the Ashes: Terezín in Words and Music," weaves together her original musical compositions with the poetry of teenaged boys interned at a WWII concentration camp in the Czech Republic. Performing the song cycle is Lori Phillips '86, soprano for the Metropolitan Opera. The documentary will air on Rhode Island PBS from July 27 to Aug. 2.

An internationally renowned pianist and composer, Stillman is also the college's artist-in-residence.

Stillman credits as the film's inspiration "Vedem: The Secret Magazine of the Boys of Terezín," a book she discovered while visiting the home of friends who are Holocaust survivors. "Vedem" contains the art, essays, reviews and poetry clandestinely created by 13- to 16-year-old inmates at the Terezín concentration camp. Of the 140 boys who contributed to "Vedem," only 15 survived and only one, Zdenek (Sidney) Taussig, remained in Terezín until its liberation in May 1945. Taussig kept the nearly 800-page manuscript hidden and retrieved it after he was liberated, taking it with him to Prague.

In this documentary, through interviews interspersed with Stillman's songs, Taussig, 82, tells a compelling story of his comrades.

"The boys of Terezín were extraordinarily talented, filled with brilliance and creativity, and their insights belied their young years," said Stillman. "One poem, for example, juxtaposes the ephemeral life of a blossoming flower with the fragility of a boy's existence. Another explores, with poignancy, the beauty and magic of glistening snow covering the horrors, while there is an underlying inevitable sense that when the snow melts, the atrocities will be revealed once again."

Stillman said she was struck by the depth of emotion in their poetry and began hearing “a kaleidoscope of melodies to the texts” in her head. She wrote most of the song cycle on her way home from Montreal.

“The song cycle is beautiful,” said Phillips, whom Stillman asked to perform the work. “The song texts are poetic, moving, powerful, bombastic at times and very accessible to all audiences. They are existential, yet have a visionary quality. Some are hopeful, which I found to be incredible given the extremely horrific situation in which the poetry was written.”

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In April 2014 “Phoenix from the Ashes: Seven Songs for Soprano and Piano” was the centerpiece of a Holocaust Memorial Commemoration event at the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Washington, D.C., with Stillman on piano and Phillips as soloist. “Sidney Taussig, a delightful man overflowing with spirit and ebullience, was moved to tears at the premiere,” said Stillman.

Stillman holds bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees from The Juilliard School, where she received the Dethier Prize for Outstanding Pianist and won the Juilliard Concerto Competition, among many other awards. She is a soloist, recording artist, chamber musician, choral conductor, composer and artist-teacher.

Award-winning soprano Phillips is a regular performing artist at the Met, known as the venue for the world’s greatest voices.



Judith Lynn Stillman, pianist/composer; and Sidney Taussig, Holocaust survivor.



Lori Phillips, soprano

Airings of “Phoenix from the Ashes” on Rhode Island PBS

July 27 – 6 p.m.

July 29 – 4 a.m.

Aug. 2 – 11 p.m.

Airings on WSBE Rhode Island PBS Learn

July 29 – 8 p.m.

July 30 – 3 a.m.

July 31 – 12 a.m.

July 23, 2014

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