

Song cycle gives new voice to boys of Terezin

By Amy R. Handler

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Judith Lynn Stillman *Composer* When Sidney Taussig was 14, he risked his life by burying 800 pages of poems, stories, interviews and drawings at Terezin, the Nazi concentration camp outside of Prague.

Taussig was among a group of 100 boys – age 13 to 16 – who lived in the same room at Terezin and secretly documented their lives in a weekly magazine called *Vedem* (Czech for “In the Lead”). Had they been caught, they would have been executed.

With the Nazis regularly sending trainloads of inmates to the death camps, Taussig had the foresight to bury the manuscripts near the blacksmith shop where his father worked. Realizing that the boys themselves would probably not survive, he hoped that at least their words and pictures would.

Taussig was still at Terezin when it was liberated, one of only 15 of the boys still alive at the end of the war. He returned to dig up the manuscripts. Much of the material was published in the 1995 book, “We Are Children Just the Same.”

Judith Lynn Stillman has set the boy’s poetry to music, creating the seven-song cycle, “Phoenix from the Ashes.” It will debut at Rhode Island College in Providence, on March 21, with soprano Lori Phillips of New York’s Metropolitan Opera accompanied by Stillman on piano. Also performing will be local cantors and the Rhode Island College Choir.

Taussig, who now lives in Florida, will be the guest of honor and will answer questions from the audience. The evening presentation of the program will also include the Northeast debut of John Sharify’s documentary, “The Boys of Terezin,” which includes interviews with Taussig and other survivors.

A pianist, composer and choral director, Stillman has performed as a soloist, and accompanied chamber ensembles and orchestras worldwide. Besides recording with members of major classical orchestras, she made a top-selling CD with jazz great Wynton Marsalis.

Stillman – now artist-in-residence and a professor of music at Rhode Island College – learned

about the Terezin writings while visiting two Holocaust survivors in Montreal. She was particularly moved because at the time her daughter was writing lyrics as part of her studies at Harvard University.

“I was struck by how fortunate it is that her lyrics have the gift of life – they live in current music – and how overwhelmingly heartbreaking it is that the young Terezin voices were extinguished,” she said in an interview on the Rhode Island College Web site.

Stillman spoke with *The Advocate* about “Phoenix from the Ashes” and her life in music. The conversation has been edited and condensed.

Q. Will the actual words of the children of Terezin be used in this concert?

A. Every single word is taken from poetry by the children. You don’t need any artwork because the imagery is so poignant and powerful. It’s overwhelming that children could write these words and concepts.

The centerpiece of my music is one of the poems of Hanus Hachenberg, one of the children who perished. The poem is called “For Children.”

Q. How long did it take you to write the music?

A. When I was driving home from Montreal, all of a sudden these lyrics and melodies just went through my head. I thought to myself, I need to write these down. So in the middle of Vermont – in the middle of nowhere – I got off at a random exit and tried to find some paper. Unbelievably, I found a music store that miraculously had one notebook left. I sat on the roadside and wrote out the songs by hand – boom, boom, boom. ... The initial waterfall was a flow, but I feel that it’s a work in progress. I want to do justice to the text.

Q. Do you hope that this concert of the past will inspire its Jewish and non- Jewish audience of the present?

A. I’m hoping that audience members will be struck by the resilience of the human spirit, the mind’s capacity for inexorable boundlessness, and the miracle of how creativity and imagination can be victorious, in perpetuity, over imprisonment and evil.

I have to say, whether someone is affiliated in a Jewish way or not, everyone I’ve approached is interested in this. Genocide is something that’s not limited to one group of people – so it’s quite universal.

Q. Does Judaism inform your musical choices?

A. I’m a musician, and, for me, music is tolerant and all-encompassing – so anything I can do musically to support and promote that notion is my doctrine.

Q. How did you get started in music?

A. I was raised in New York City, the youngest of four children, and the only girl. From a very young age – so folklore has it – I would sit on the couch during my middle brother’s piano lessons, apparently, in rapt attention. At the end of his session when he ran outside to play baseball, [I would] race to the piano bench and play his pieces by ear.

My mother, a lyric soprano, who’d studied with Robert Merrill’s mentor, then decided it was time to teach me how to read music, just before my third birthday. Among my favorite memories were trips to the Schirmer music store with my mom, where there was a private room with an upright piano for sight-reading music before purchasing it. I’d eagerly sift through, and choose,

new repertoire. That was my candy store.

Q. So you were a child prodigy.

A. (Laughs) I was accepted to Juilliard at age 10, studied there from pre-college through bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees; [won] the concerto competition and a prize for outstanding pianist of my graduating class.

Q. How have your interests in music evolved?

A. Diversification, and being open to new possibilities, has helped me shape, define and expand my career. Often I would take on a new challenge, hesitantly, feeling entirely out of my element, and, somehow, things would ascend in a fresh and gratifying direction.

Although [I was] "groomed" as a soloist, my career is now collaborative piano, chamber music, choral conducting, musical directing, arranging, composing, recording.

Q. Did having your own children have anything to do with your musical evolution?

A. Part of the process occurred during the years of raising my daughter. As she became enamored of theater as a child, I'd shuttle her to her various commitments. Waiting outside the rehearsal studio one time, I was greeted by the director of the All Children's Theatre in Providence, Wrenn Goodrum, who recognized me from having attended some of my concerts. Wrenn approached me with a request: to try my hand at conducting a children's choir in the context of a play she was directing. I was quite reluctant, but Wrenn had an ebullient personality and convinced me to take on the challenge. One thing led to another, and eventually, after serving as musical director for ACT for many years, I served as both director and musical director for musicals in La Jolla, Calif., and as musical director in various other locations and venues.

[I was also the] bookwriter/ lyricist/composer of two children's musicals that [were] performed across the country.

Similarly, [I was] asked by the CEO of North Star Music to create a recording with my own arrangements. I had never arranged anything before, [but] his unwavering trust in me [gave] me the courage to try arranging/composing. To my surprise, my first CD sold 200,000 copies and was featured on the front page of *USA Today*.

"Phoenix from the Ashes: A Musical Remembrance of the Holocaust," March 21 at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. in the Nazarian Center's Sapinsley Hall, Rhode Island College, Providence. Call 401-456-9883 or visit www.ric.edu/pfa.