

'Close your eyes and see' ...

for orchestra



My first encounter with the subject of Auschwitz was back in 1970/1 when I bought the first recording on the Philips label of the *Dies Irae* by Krzysztof Penderecki which he subtitled *Auschwitz Oratorio*. At the time I was very much involved with improvised music and was studying electronic music and composition at the Royal College of Music so I was at the stage of trying to create new timbres, new colours, textures etc. through electronic means and I had just begun to experiment with conventional instruments by playing them in unconventional ways eg bowing and scraping cymbals using "found" objects as sound sources etc. The impact that Penderecki's *Dies Irae* made, to create this dark and bleak soundscape with his completely new approach to orchestral and choral timbres stayed with me, (I have to say, that throughout my schooling no mention was ever made of Auschwitz or the Holocaust in any history lesson. We were certainly taught and made aware of all the major German/British battles that took place in WWII but not the single most important aspect of Hitler's scheme!)

Well, since then my musical career has taken many different turns, working in many areas from pop & rock to jazz, to theatre, classical and contemporary, I think it's called 'earning a living'. However, the Auschwitz subject has always nestled in the back of my mind. Through my work in music education, I began to think that generally, amateur and youth orchestras were never exposed to the music of their own time, other than commercial 'radio' or film music, i.e. true contemporary music. Repertoire seemed to consist of 'old favourites' such as the Bizet 'suites' the Grieg 'Gynts' the Britten 'Soirees'. etc. While not wishing to undermine or dispute the validity of these great works, I felt youth orchestras and the like were not stretched musically, and often students never encountered contemporary orchestral music unless they were the few who opted to continue their music education at one of the colleges. As a champion of contemporary music I have to admit that most music written after the war was extremely complex due to composers wanting to 'wipe the slate clean' and invent a new language requiring the listener to exercise a razor sharp intellect.

This often resulted in their music only being played rarely and by the world's most renowned orchestras and dedicated ensembles to minority audiences which seems to me self alienation!

So, it was on 27th of January 1995 that I caught the tail end of ITNs' news report of the 50 years anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp with Elie Wiesel delivering his speech from the camp. It was this impassioned oration from a former inmate that re-fuelled my interest in the subject and prompted me to set to work on a piece for orchestra that would be approachable for amateur and youth orchestras at the same time employing techniques used by European composers and opening up a window on the subject to young people.

I began research on the subject by seeking out as much factual information as I could from writers and experts such as Martin Gilbert, Konnilyn Feig, Lucy Dawidowicz, Raul Hilberg and, of course, first hand accounts by Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Elie Wiesel. One of the most important sources of information and background has to be the SHOAH films, a 9 hour video documentation made by Claude Lanzmann. Made over a period of 10 years from the mid 70s to mid 80s Lanzmann travels to the key killing centres in Poland and seeks out common folk now in their later years as eye witness accounts of what actually went on. This was really an eye opener for me as I had never imagined for instance that a chap now a gents hair stylist in Tel Aviv was once forced by the SS to shave the heads of hundreds of people before they entered the gas chambers at Treblinka.

I decided that no research would be complete without visiting Auschwitz itself, so I arranged a trip to Poland later in 1995. I had booked the flight to Krakow but as fate would have it, Krakow airport was being refurbished and all flights were landing at the small airstrip in Katowice which is a 2 hour drive from Krakow. During the slow and somewhat laboured journey through the night I remember experiencing mixed feelings of awe and fascination when passing sign posts to Oswiecim (the Polish name for Auschwitz) thinking how different this journey would have been 50 years ago. I arranged a hire car and set out from Polands' old medieval capital to the town of Oswiecim, about 45 minutes drive. On arriving at the town, Auschwitz Museum is clearly sign posted, however when I was directed off the road into a parking lot it wasn't what I was expecting to see. I had not realised that Auschwitz was a huge complex with many satellite camps spreading over many kilometres. I had arrived at Auschwitz I the main camp. I find it difficult to describe my feeling when passing through the gate with the now infamous motto 'Arbeit macht Frei' as it was a feeling I had never before experienced. To describe Auschwitz in detail is beyond the scope of this article. What strikes the visitor in particular is how the Nazis wasted nothing. In their super efficiency nothing was too valueless.... except life.

Suffice it to say that what one reads about, the mountains of shoes the spectacles, the artificial limbs, the human hair is now a tangible reminder to me of this dire period of history, as was driving the 3 kilometres to Auschwitz Birkenau seeing that famous 'death gate' facade with the railway line disappearing through the arch to 'eventual death' is something that will remain with me forever.



'Close your eyes and see'... is dedicated to all those who suffered the insufferable at Auschwitz 1 and Auschwitz/Birkenau concentration camp during World War II. The title is a fragment from the speech given by Nobel peace prize winner and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps Elie Wiesel at the International Monument to the victims of Fascism, Auschwitz/Birkenau on January 27 1995 to commemorate 50 years of the liberation of the camp. Although the initial inspiration for the piece was Auschwitz, one should not forget the millions who perished in hundreds of other camps in Germany and Eastern Europe in what was surely the darkest period in the history of man.

The aim of the piece is to explore and present in an approachable form, some aspects of contemporary orchestral music to semi professional and youth orchestras. The piece was written in 1995 the year of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Musically it explores textural ideas, some of which are found in the music of Polish composer Penderecki, for example string clusters, ad lib tempo sections and instruments at their extremes of register. Melodic material is built primarily from semitone and tritone intervals traditionally the 'diabolus in musica'.

Even though Auschwitz remains today in the form of a state museum, I believe it to be impossible to imagine what it was like between the years 1940-45. To quote Konnilyn Feig " the substance, the essential senses are missing: the noise, the smell, the sight, the taste, and the faces - the faces of the SS and of the victims".

What is clear though is the sheer size of the place, Auschwitz/Birkenau covered 40 square kilometers, it's the 'extremes' of Auschwitz that hits the visitor and researcher. Extremes such as the size of the gas chambers, the number of transports, extremes of behaviour by SS guards and prisoners, extremes of medical experiments etc. it is these 'extremes', together with a timeless - hopelessness quality of life that existed then, that I have tried to carry over in the music, e.g. extremes of dynamics, extremes of register, simplicity and complexity and also a certain 'timeless' section in the middle of the piece. In no way does the piece propose to be a programme of the events of 1939-45 at Auschwitz but rather a mere representation of my own feelings derived from research into the subject and my subsequent visit to the camp in 1995

'Close your eyes and see'... is scored for conventional orchestra with the addition of bass clarinet, contra bassoon, bass trombone and piano which is part of the extended percussion section whose effects add an indeterminate quality to the piece by using bowed and scraped cymbals etc. whose sounds and harmonic character will be different at each performance. The following narrative precedes the music and should be spoken (possibly over PA.) in Hebrew or English by male or female. Alternatively, the original recording by Elie Wiesel of his text is available on request.

Habee-tu ve-shim-oo et ha-korbanot holchim

likrat ha-lahavot

ko gedolot

nid-meh she-kol ha-olam ba-sakanah

Itzmoo einayich

*ur'oo et mah she-re-eenoo ba-laylah hahoo
Ta-haluchot layliot ayn so-fiot
she-mit-chabrot po
ve-fo tamid layla
Shim-oo tz'ree-chot shel ima-hot mefoo-chadot
Shim-oo et tefilo-tei-hem shel zekaynim ko-avim
Shim-oo et dim-ot yeladim, yeladim yehudim
Emet, she-lo kol ha-korbanot hayoo yehudim
Ach kol ha-yehudim hayoo korbanot*

Look and listen as the victims quietly walked towards the dark flames so gigantic it seemed as if the whole world were in danger

/ Close your eyes and look and you will see what we have seen that night

/ endless nocturnal processions are converging here and here it is always night

/ Listen to the silent screams of terrified mothers

/ Listen to the prayers of anguished old men and women. Listen to the tears of children, Jewish children.

It is true that not all the victims were Jews, but all the Jews were victims.

Elie Wiesel.

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Part of speech given at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27th Jan 1995 as part of the ceremony commemorating 50 years of the liberation of the camp.

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Recorded at Walthamstow Assembly Hall London. 24-11-1996

The FMR Recording Orchestra
leader: Sarah Freestone
conducted by Andrew Parmley

The score for '***Close your eyes and see...***' is available for sale and parts are available for hire [.e-mail for details](#)