

Article

More than an Afterimage: Music as Holocaust Spatial Representation and Legacy

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Abstract: Music occupies a unique and multi-faceted role in spatial representation of the Holocaust, both in terms of documenting its horrors and in cultivating legacy. This uniqueness derives from music's dual temporal and physical essence as it is represented by written scores that serve as a blueprint, as sonic events that fill both time and space, and as musical instruments that operate as conduits for both. String instruments, in particular, have occupied a vital place in Jewish culture and, consequently, during the Holocaust. In the most tragic sense, some of these instruments even became actual containers of genocidal evidence as with violins played outside concentration camp crematoria that filled with the human ash that fell. This article will demonstrate that, when played, these instruments transform into living artifacts and musical witnesses, with voices that can speak for those who have been silenced, and that the resulting music that resonates from the printed page fills a sonic space that serves as a powerful medium for memory and representation. The phrase "bearing witness" often refers to representing the stories of people, places, and experiences through words, either written or spoken. But material culture also has a role to play in representation. While objects, art, and architecture certainly support language-based witness, they also provide their own unique lens and conduit for testimony. This seems especially true for music, which has the ability to exist as and cross between both words and objects. Nevertheless, music as material witness remains a complex and often understudied aspect of historical testimony. As a result, this paper will explore through an interdisciplinary approach the divergent nature of music as an aural form, as a creative art, and as a cultural artifact and will offer examples of how music can enhance, elucidate, and complicate Holocaust representation.

Keywords: music; Holocaust; musical instruments; violin; artifacts



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The phrase "bearing witness" often refers to representing the stories of people, places, and experiences through words, either written or spoken. But material culture also has a role to play in representation. While objects, art, and architecture certainly support language-based witness, they also provide their own unique lens and conduit for testimony. This seems especially true for music, which has the ability to exist as and cross between both words and objects. Nevertheless, music as material witness remains a complex and often understudied aspect of historical testimony. Drawing from the work of researchers in the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, African American studies, comparative literature, religious studies, musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory, this paper will explore the divergent nature of music as an aural form, as a creative art, and as a cultural artifact and will offer examples of how music can enhance, elucidate, and complicate Holocaust representation.

When examined from an interdisciplinary perspective, music can occupy a unique and multi-faceted role in spatial representation of the Holocaust, both in terms of documenting its horrors and in cultivating legacy. This uniqueness derives from music's dual temporal and physical manifestations. For example, Czech composer Gideon Klein wrote his *Trio for Violin, Viola, and Cello* while imprisoned by the Nazis at Terezín. The paper on which he wrote it and from which performers play this piece inhabits a physical space, even

as that object does not fully represent the work of art. Instead, music only exists in its fully realized state as a fleeting temporal event. “Unlike a painting where the object on display does not merely represent the potential for a work of art but is the tangible creation, musical works on paper in their notated form provide only the instructions or blueprint for the creation of music.” (Brown 2020, p. 5). In this regard, some philosophers consider music as in a perpetual ontological crisis, or as what philosopher Alan Tormey coined an “ontological mutant.” (Tormey 1974, p. 207). In her book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, philosopher Lydia Goehr argues that musical works cannot be singly identified as “physical, mental or ideal objects” (Goehr 1992, p. 2) while conceding that all of these facets of music synchronously “stand in a peculiarly intimate relation” (Ibid., p. 3) with each other.

Cognitive psychologist Daniel Levitin does particularly well at coaxing apart the tangled threads of music’s existential identity. He posits that even as music is occupying a temporal framework akin to that of dance and film, it is also functioning simultaneously within the spatial aspects seen in a medium such as sculpture. Then, collectively and inseparably, these juxtapositions create a sonic space—music’s equivalent to the three-dimensional physical space that visual artwork inhabits (Levitin 2008, pp. 17–18). In a different but equally insightful approach, Murray Forman, a researcher specializing in popular music, asserts that music both fills space by its sound waves, which create a sonic habitation, and by its temporal imprint, which “watches” time go by as sands sifting through an hourglass. He asserts that music provides an observable passage or marker of time for listeners as it resounds in the space around them (Forman 2019, p. 262). Grasping the conceptual elements of this allocation of time and space can be especially imposing when taking into account that music has the capacity for omnipresence, being performed or listened to simultaneously in an unlimited number of spaces (Taylor 2019, p. 86).

In addition to accounting for sonic and temporal space, music performances happen in a physical location and so interact with the architecture of that space. The permutations appear endless in that music can be performed by one person or a thousand, or in a prison cell or a grand concert hall or on a grassy knoll. Music making during the Holocaust often took place in nontraditional performance spaces and in scenes marked by suffering and death. Victims of the Nazi regime sang in cattle cars and in concentration camp barracks. They played instruments near crematoria and in camp infirmaries. Ethnomusicologist Benjamin Harbert, who explores music’s presence and role in incarcerated populations, writes about music as human testimony in captivity and emphasizes the complexity of this form of musical witness because it emanates within a system of control and often amid architecture where the sound waves bounce off hard surfaces and either cut through or juxtapose with the noise created by the mechanisms of imprisonment as well as the moans and cries of suffering (Harbert and Gaines 2019, p. 300).

The juxtaposition of incarcerated space and music during the Holocaust can be observed perhaps most clearly in an examination of the musical activities in Terezín. Located about 30 km outside of Prague, Terezín existed simultaneously as a ghetto and a concentration camp. The Nazis used it predominately to hold Czech artists and members of the intelligentsia. While it appeared to function as a typical Nazi camp, Terezín, or Theresienstadt, as the Germans called it, evolved into the most unique location in the entirety of the camp system, often mockingly referred to as a “showpiece” or “model camp.” (Brown 2020, p. 88). While those imprisoned there suffered under the horrific conditions of overcrowding, lack of food and basic necessities, and rampant disease, music and other creative activities flourished due to their talent, passion, and determination. Composers such as Gideon Klein and Pavel Haas composed music. Performers at the height of their profession, such as the virtuoso pianist Alice Herz-Sommer, gave concerts. In fact, Herz-Sommer presented over 100 recitals there, including a performance of all 24 of Chopin’s Opus 15 and Opus 25 études, a rarely undertaken challenge by any pianist under ideal circumstances, which makes this performance by a prisoner on a dilapidated piano, in a lackluster auditorium,

with an audience of people held under duress, one of the most remarkable creative feats during the Holocaust (Brown 2020, p. 98).

Terezín also served as a space for extraordinary collaborative performances. In the late 1930s, Czech pianist and composer Hans Krása composed a children's opera titled *Brundibár*, but the war delayed its first performance, which did not take place until 1942 in a Jewish orphanage. Krása missed the premiere, however, having been deported to Terezín in 1941. When Krása saw the large number of children imprisoned in Terezín, he decided to stage a production of *Brundibár* to give the children something to focus their minds on instead of their hunger and fear. The opera is a moral fairy tale, the story of two small children mistreated by an evil organ-grinder named Brundibár. Through the efforts of three kindly animals and the other children, Brundibár is eventually banished from the village. Incarcerated musicians, visual artists, and others of the artistic community came together to create the remarkable Terezín staging of *Brundibár*, which premiered there in September 1943. The demand to see the production became so great that it was performed every week, 55 times, until September 1944. The opera's story and the spiritual resistance shown in its final sung line, "He who loves justice and will abide by it, and who is not afraid, is our friend," spoke to the soul of those in that place and time. Tragically, almost every performer and audience member would be deported to Auschwitz and murdered upon arrival, including the composer Hans Krása (Brown 2020, p. 105). But despite the efforts to silence it, Krása's opera *Brundibár* survived and continues to be performed, to bear witness, around the world, a musical testimony to resilience.

Returning to the examination of Gideon Klein's *Trio* in terms of reconciling or at least accounting for music's divergent spatial aspects leads to a final consideration: the string instruments required to perform this composition constitute an additional layer as they also occupy physical space, even more so than the paper that serves as the sonic script, and give voice to the filling of the aural and temporal fields. Instruments, in and of themselves, are works of art by their design, craft, and facture. I come from a family of instrument makers and have seen the process of "cutting away" everything that is not a violin or a mandolin. I have also watched Israeli luthier Amnon Weinstein, a consummate craftsman, lovingly tap on a violin as he undertakes a restoration and listens for the instrument to speak to him. As with humans, violins show the physical wear and tear of a life lived, a type of map of their journey drawn with scratches, cracks, and rubbed-off varnish.

Throughout the long arc of human history, instruments have served as vital cultural artifacts and as containers of memory, almost like a physical memory palace. Violins, in particular, hold a special place in Jewish culture and therefore as musical witnesses. The great violinist Isaac Stern famously answered a question about why so many Jewish people played the violin by saying, "It is the easiest instrument to pick it up and to run away!" Although he meant this as a witty retort, Stern also voiced a poignant truth, as the provenance of violins can be traced throughout the Jewish diaspora and thus bear the legacy of Jewish pogroms and persecution. In the most tragic sense, instruments could even become actual containers, as described in the testimony of Amnon Weinstein, who, when restoring a violin played outside an Auschwitz concentration camp crematoria, discovered it filled with the human ash that had rained down as genocidal fallout (Brown 2020, p. 292).

As musical artifacts and their *Sitz im Leben* provide room for keeping and preserving memory, these instruments and musical scores also ground those memories because they have weight to them. We can hold them in our hands and feel their substance. There is something important to be said for that. In Barbara Kingsolver's novel *Unsheltered*, Willa, a retired journalist, wrestles with what to do with cardboard boxes filled with the hard copies of decades worth of her writing. Even though she knows that all her articles are available electronically, she decides that a ghost-like digital object cannot be enough. She needs her work, her creative oeuvre, her legacy, "to weigh something." (Kingsolver 2018, p. 380).

Social scientist and clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle studies how humans interact with objects. As editor of the volume *Evocative Objects* (Turkle 2007), Turkle posits that the objects with which people surround themselves embody deeper meanings beyond function

or purpose, that these artifacts can become inseparable companions to our emotional lives and to cognition—“We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.” (Turkle 2007, p. 5). In her research of artifacts, Crystal B. Lake cautions that objects can be unreliable narrators (Lake 2020, p. 12), and yet she remains convinced that these objects have agency and are “capable of speaking and giving evidence for themselves.” (Ibid., p. 17). It is this latter conviction that is why material objects are vital to Holocaust studies and representation. Emanuel Ringelblum and the others who worked in the Warsaw Ghetto to assemble anything and everything to speak as a testimony of their lives, their Oyneg Shabes project, knew how these objects could continue to be witnesses even if the people who had owned them could not. Religious scholar Laura Levitt describes this connection as the “resonance between artifacts and their power to witness to the crimes against humanity, against individuals, and their ability to make holy the profane.” (Levitt 2020, p. 6). She goes on to offer that when we hold artifacts in our hands, “holding signals the relationship between memories and object. Because they are held, these objects can be carried forward, helping us tell new stories.” (Ibid., p. 72).

The tremendous impact of an instrument in the hands of one Holocaust victim and then survivor illustrates this powerfully. Consider the story of a violinist named Max Beker (Brown 2020, pp. 165–66, 288–90). Max studied violin at the Vilna Conservatory, then was drafted into the Polish Army and later captured by the Germans. When he arrived at the Stalag 8A POW camp, he discovered other musicians there who played together to pass the time and to lift the spirits of their fellow captives. Max managed to acquire a violin from a kindly man he met during his work details. Hoping to audition for the POW orchestra, he contacted the orchestra’s conductor, a Belgian prisoner named Ferdinand Carrion. Max Beker became the first chair violinist of the orchestra and the only Jewish member, playing in that orchestra for two and a half years.

Then, near the end of the war, the Nazis began evacuating Stalag 8A as it became clear that the Allies would win. The Germans released many of the POWs but refused to relinquish their Jewish prisoners. Instead, they forced them on a death march. After several weeks, American soldiers came upon Max’s starving group and brought them to St. Ottilien, a Benedictine monastery about 56 km from Munich. The Nazis had commandeered this monastery to use as a military hospital, but now, with the Allied liberations of the camps, it housed and treated survivors before officially being designated as a Displaced Persons Camp by the U.S. government. At this DP Camp, Max, who had managed to hold on to that precious violin, met other musicians including Fania Durmashkin, a talented pianist who had also studied at the Vilna Conservatory. Fania and her sister Henia had survived Dachau and a death march. Max Beker and the Durmashkin sisters joined forces with other musicians at St. Ottilien to form the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, which gave concerts there at the DP Camp for the staff and fellow survivors. Soon, they started performing for American troops and traveled by bus to give other concerts, including at the Nuremberg Opera House for those overseeing the Nuremberg War Crime Trials. In 1948, 29-year-old Leonard Bernstein guest conducted two of their concerts, including with himself at the piano playing Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

This orchestra was never meant to be a long-term group but served these musicians well during this liminal time as they struggled to envision a future devoid of so many loved ones and separated from their homelands. In 1949, the orchestra disbanded. Max Beker and the Durmashkin sisters immigrated to the United States. Max and Fania married and spent the rest of their lives in their adopted country. The violin, which had been Max’s cherished companion during those horrific years, also remained by his side. Recently, their daughter Sonia donated her father’s violin to Amnon Weinstein and his Violins of Hope project, which collects violins played during the Holocaust and gives them new life through inspiring concerts and educational programming for audiences around the world. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amnon meticulously restored this violin, an artifact inseparably tied to Max’s life and legacy. It now tours with Violins of Hope, having made its post-refurbished premiere in September 2021 in Richmond, Virginia.

In the case of *Violins of Hope*, which has now collected and restored over 80 instruments, the question may arise concerning whether the restoration work invalidates or at least diminishes the authenticity of the witness because an instrument is no longer as it was during that time. This consideration is where musical instruments may differ from other items of material culture. For example, a spoon that belonged to a prisoner in Dachau tells a story about survival. The twisted, scarred, unpolished item bears witness to how the ordinary can become extraordinary in preserving life. A recovered object such as a spoon provides witness without needing to be made usable again. The voice of a violin, in contrast, may have no way to speak if the instrument is not restored to a level of usability. Relegated to a display case, Max Beker's violin would lose its capacity to speak as it had during the Holocaust and therefore could not fully express the musical portion of the violinist's testimony.

Although the scope of this article focuses on Holocaust representation, the argument about the powerful and critical role of musical works and instruments in historiography can be further strengthened by comparing examples from other times and circumstances. In the 19th century, soldiers fighting on both sides of the American Civil War often relied on music as comfort and as a documentary soundtrack to their experiences. In the case of Solomon Conn, his instrument represented an even more direct testimony (Stromberg 2011). Conn purchased a violin in Nashville, Tennessee on 1 May 1863, and he kept it with him during his years serving as an infantryman. Oddly, he did not know how to play but had bought it for the fellow soldiers in his unit. Gradually, in addition to the relief and entertainment this instrument brought them, Conn began to carve a diary into the back of the violin. There he chronicled the places they visited and documented roughly 30 of their battles. Seen today, the instrument's wood bears the physical scars of its war years and also survives as a valuable historical and cultural artifact.

In 2013, 150 years after Conn's instrument purchase, international interest focused on a special violin thought lost, then discovered in an English attic (Cahill 2012). This instrument had belonged to Wallace Hartley, the leader of the band on the *R.M.S. Titanic*. Survivor testimonies confirm that as the *Titanic* sank, Hartley and his fellow band members played on the deck to calm and distract passengers. When the angle of the ship's descent made it impossible to stand any longer, Hartley strapped the leather case containing the violin onto his back and jumped into the frigid water. Two weeks later, recovery teams pulled his body from the water with the case still clinging to his shoulders. After being returned to Hartley's fiancé, the violin disappeared for almost one hundred years. Today, this instrument travels to museums as a musical witness to a horrific accident of historic import and to the sacrifice of this musician.

Violins certainly do not hold a monopoly on instruments with powerful histories, such as in the case of Vedran Smailovic, who in 1992 took his cello into the rubble during the siege of Sarajevo to play a 22-day vigil for the 22 victims killed by a mortar shell while they waited in line for bread. Recently, the publication of *The Lost Pianos of Siberia* features the remarkable research of Sophy Roberts into pianos that were brought to the rugged and desolate areas of Siberia, where they have been sustained, despite the odds, as a testament to strength, endurance, and resistance through music (Roberts 2020). There are, of course, many more stories.

After peering through this narrative lens at the profound and yet varied roles that instruments can play in cultural witness and as material supports for historiography, it appears that musical instruments resonate within the realm of the boundary object. A term more traditionally used in sociology and science, "boundary object" refers to an object that exists in more than one social world or discipline and therefore can function as an interlocutor between those disparate worlds. Boundary objects help to explain how a gestalt-like unity can come from diverse perspectives. Sociologist Tia DeNora suggests in her research that music, in general, fits well with the concept of a boundary object because its meaning and use differs widely from person to person and group to group, while its fundamental nature feels universally understood and shared (DeNora 2016, p. xii).

Holocaust memory scholar James E. Young suggests a similar paradigm with what he calls “collected” memory, which he differentiates from the more commonly used term “collective” memory. While collective memory espouses a more unified and reconciled memory, Young argues that collected memory allows us to gather “our disparate and competing memories” (Young 2016, p. 15) and, through them, to find a common, shared understanding. He advocates for this approach in Holocaust representation because it welcomes all voices and experiences.

Regardless of semantics, music resists monolithism. Music and musicians summon disparate testimonies, and through a patchwork quilt of sound and story, they bear witness to the history and soul of a people. They are the keepers of cultural memory through words and melodies, both explicit and subtextual. “Representations of the visible will always show residues and traces of the invisible.” (Huyssen 2003, p. 10). Yale Professor Daphne A. Brooks uses the term “sonic palimpsest” (Brooks 2021, p. 13) to describe how cultural and social memory can be embedded and layered in music, as song lyrics, instruments, and melodies represent the struggles and triumphs of people and places. Consequently, music resonates from the printed page, filling a sonic space that serves not as a mere afterimage, but instead as a powerful organic medium for memory and representation that is uniquely suited to recreate the past in the present, which is especially vital in combating what Andreas Huyssen calls “twilight memory,” a waning generational memory that “foreshadows the night of forgetting.” (Huyssen 1995, p. 3).

As a result, musical compositions and instruments played in Nazi camps and other places of suffering are not limited to acting as props for storytelling or as museal curations. They are not curiosities perched on the shelf of a *Wunderkammer* or souvenirs in a museum of dark tourism where aural voyeurism titillates the morbidly curious. I propose moving even beyond the ideas of collected memory or boundary objects to suggest that these representations of musical witness be considered “living artifacts” that can assume the role of interlocuter, to give voice to those who are now silent, as with Max Beker’s violin. This supposition is not without foundation. Music historian Robert Greenberg has long maintained that a piece of music endures as a living entity that is revived with every performance and that concert halls in which music of the past resounds should not be classified as sepulchers or mausoleums, but as “reanimation facilities.” (Greenberg 2011, p. 306). This highlights music’s Janus-faced function as a dual portal causing us to look back in time while also insisting that we respond in the here and now. As Amy Lynn Wlodarski concludes, music has a “dialogical relationship between art, history, and memory.” (Wlodarski 2015, p. 2). I suggest that music, as a living artifact, can be an integral part of the suturing process of prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004, p. 2) that might mend the gap between the disappearing voices of Holocaust survivors and those left who must remember, who must ensure legacy and impact the way the living interact with the world by helping point the moral compass toward social and racial justice for all.

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