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Galit Gertsenzon

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# Music in the Holocaust as an Honors Colloquium

GALIT GERTSENZON

Ball State University

**Abstract:** *Forbidden Sounds: The Music of the Holocaust* considers the historical events of the Holocaust in the context of music. The honors course explores diverse roles that music played during the years 1933–1945, including the Nazi use of music as a means for censorship and discrimination; music performance and creation in various Jewish ghettos and concentration camps in Europe; and ways that composers, performers, and audiences used music for emotional and physical survival and for spiritual resistance during World War II and after. The author provides a rich and varied curriculum, culminating with student performances and a series of public concerts, lectures, field trips, and independent studies. Challenges and strategies for teaching music to non-majors are discussed.

**Keywords:** Holocaust (1939–1945)—songs & music; Terezín (Czech Republic: Concentration camp)—composers; Jewish ghettos; testimony (theory of knowledge); music education

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching the historical events of the Holocaust is especially important during current times. Antisemitic hate crimes as well as Holocaust denial have been on the rise in the past few years. Recent surveys have shown an alarming lack of knowledge about the Holocaust (Claims Conference, 2018), suggesting a lack of understanding that what begins as delegitimizing and dehumanizing can lead to the atrocities of genocide on a most horrific scale.

The musical perspective is an important approach among the many ways to teach about the Holocaust. The music that survived from the Holocaust is a testimony to the experiences and legacies of those whose lives were tragically cut short. If I approached my students with a series of dry facts, a sole testimony, or a lecture or discussion that simply described events in the

Holocaust, they would understand it on a factual level, but instead I approach them through guided listening to music and asking them to reflect on what they hear. I share with them information about the context of a musical piece and the composer who created it in a concentration camp. We explore how the music responds in sound and text to the struggle the composer encountered while imprisoned. As a result, students can listen to the music as if it were a story told in sound, and they hear emotion, message, and communication that has a background tied to it. I then provide more detail about the place and time of composition and how such a place as a concentration camp came to function. I teach students about the Holocaust through having them listen to artistic expression and providing them an opportunity to interpret what they hear using their own sets of experiences and emotions while sharing with them the context and background of the music.

Even though I believe that teaching the Holocaust through music can be a powerful approach, it presents potential challenges. Current undergraduate students are several generations away from the atrocities of the Holocaust. Additionally, many students have little to no musical background and may find the type of music being covered distant from the music they listen to regularly, especially if they have little background in classical European music. Despite these challenges, teaching a course on the music of the Holocaust in a small honors class provides possibilities that would not work in a larger setting.

Other honors faculty, such as Mara Parker, have successfully taught non-music majors within an honors program by using the benefits of small classes and discussion-based learning (Parker, 2008). I applied a similar approach in exploring the music of the Holocaust as a means to understand its historical context. Using the discussion-based and interactive classroom approach, I added a unique immersive component in the form of a concert performed by the students who could play or sing, accompanied by me, thus strengthening the lessons taught in the classroom.

Another source from which I derived guidance in teaching music to non-majors was Amy Beal's description of teaching a course on politics and protest in American musical history (Beal, 2008). Beal's approach was to provide students with an historical overview through the music they explored in the course. Additionally, Beal made diverse choices of musical styles from classical to jazz, rock, and pop. I also chose diverse musical styles, including jazz, twentieth-century avant-garde music, solo piano performances, string ensembles, symphonic works, opera, street songs, and some popular American music.

## COURSE DESIGN AND PROGRESSION

During the past several decades, the growing wealth of scholarly work and online resources on the music of the Holocaust enables those interested in further exploring the subject to pursue that path. Nevertheless, the subject of music in the Holocaust is still relatively new, and structuring a class on the topic is challenging. I framed the course with introductory sessions exploring the topic of music in the Holocaust followed by theme-based sessions that explored the various music-making activities in camps as a means of censorship, resistance, identity, and survival. Toward the end of the course, we discussed music that was composed after 1945 in response to the Holocaust.

I began the class with introductory material about the subject of Holocaust music in general, which turned out to be necessary based on students' lack of knowledge about many of the topics being covered. During class discussion at the beginning of the course, I asked students to describe to the best of their knowledge what they imagined could possibly be the music of the Holocaust. Very few students responded to this question. For example, in the course I taught in 2018, only three students addressed the subject with limited knowledge. A biology major recalled previously playing music excerpts by John Williams from the movie *Schindler's List* and expressed doubt if this was music of the Holocaust. An English education major alluded to some partial knowledge she acquired from a history course on women in World War II, recalling the French pianist, cabaret singer, and composer Fania Fénelon, whose autobiography *Playing for Time* described her experience as part of the women's orchestra in Auschwitz. A psychology major mentioned visiting Buchenwald during high school and recalled the song lyrics written by inmates in the camp that became a symbol of resistance to the harsh circumstances and Nazi occupation. These responses demonstrated only slight knowledge of the subject matter.

Based on the limited information students had on the subject, the first week centered on a general overview of music in the Holocaust, beginning with a review of the role music played in the Holocaust as described in an article on music in concentration camps (Fackler, 2007). In the reflection assignment that followed, students were asked to describe what role music played in their lives and how learning about these various roles of music in the camps might or might not change their views on music and its powerful effects. Students expressed their surprise and shock on learning about all the various forms of music that took place in concentration camps. Learning that an orchestra played while people were walking to gas chambers or on the

way to or back from a day of labor was quite disturbing to the students. Some mentioned that they had always seen music as having a soothing and reassuring purpose and never realized that music could contribute to the torture, manipulation, and discrimination against others.

These sessions laid the groundwork to explore how Nazis used music as a political tool and as a legislative weapon to control and discriminate against minorities. First, students explored images of artwork in the 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibit in Munich, which featured hundreds of confiscated artworks that were subjected to mocking and discrimination for their avant-garde, experimental, and untraditional styles. We discussed how Nazis banned modern musicians as well as artists through a chain of newly organized offices that controlled them and labeled their music as “Degenerate.” Within this context, I played an unfamiliar composition that featured various musical styles and asked the students to identify any characteristics that, according to the Nazi ideals at the time, might be considered “Degenerate.” They detected the jazz style with its unusual instrumentation, somewhat like the style of American music of that time in its rhythms and instruments. They learned that what they were listening to was in fact a popular jazz opera, composed by German composer Ernst Krenek in 1926, titled *Jonny Spielt Auf* about a Black Jazz musician. The opera rose to great popularity and was later banned by the Nazis. They were surprised to find out that “Degenerate Music,” according to the Nazis, also included Black musicians, jazz music, and American musical symbols. We took a quick turn to listen to some excerpts from the music of Arnold Schoenberg, a leading avant-garde composer of Austrian Jewish heritage. Students were asked to describe what they heard in excerpts of the melodrama *Pierrot Lunaire* (Moonstruck Clown), a composition for a reciter (usually a soprano), flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. Here, students detected different styles of music such as dissonant harmonies that sounded like speaking (*Sprechstimme*) and unusual instrumentation—or, as the students expressed it, “music and text that make you think.” By listening to the diverse styles of Schoenberg and Krenek, students learned to appreciate how diverse was the concept of “Degenerate Art and Music,” spanning various styles and nationalities. We then compared the styles and atmosphere of the compositions described above to the music of the Nazi ideals Beethoven and Wagner, which included listening to excerpts from Wagner’s opera *Die Valkyrie* and Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth symphonies.

Following this introductory segment, which established some general knowledge about music in the Holocaust and the way Nazis used it as a tool

for discrimination and propaganda, the course shifted during the third week to discussion of specific camps where music was a central component. We began exploring the music of individual composers and performers and their musical legacy. One of various goals of the discussions was to interpret what some of the music signified in the context of its evolution and to explore the meanings of composers' choices of specific texts and musical instrumentation.

Gideon Klein was the first composer we explored in this part of the course. The students were assigned to read an online biography of Klein (Beckerman, undated) and an article about musical scores as historical documents that focused on one of Klein's musical compositions (Beckerman, 2010), and they then wrote a summary of the assigned readings to prepare for class discussion. Gideon Klein (1919–1945) was a young composer whose work in Terezín while imprisoned serves as an artistic testimony to the atrocities he faced. He was one of the most active individuals in Terezín, encouraging others to create music and art. When I introduced Klein's profile picture to the students, some commented on his good looks and young age. Indeed, Klein's age at the time of his imprisonment was close to the age of most students. We explored songs he wrote prior to his imprisonment in Terezín and then a piano sonata and a string trio he composed while imprisoned, which led to discussion of the artistic expression of composers facing discrimination and hatred. I had asked students, while they listened to the string trio's second movement, to close their eyes and envision what kind of story the music reflected, knowing that he composed the piece shortly prior to his deportation from Terezín camp to Auschwitz and then to Fürstengrube labor camp, from which he never returned. The students expressed a strong sense of grief and despair while listening to the second movement. A student with background in violin studies mentioned the unusual pairing of violin, viola, and cello that made the trio, and we compared this instrumental arrangement to other classical string ensembles that usually form a string quartet. Students referred to a melody they heard in this excerpt, which is based on a famous Czech song that Klein incorporated in the music, suggesting a strong sense of longing and loneliness that derived from the original song's text. Students also noticed the intensity of the minor theme that repeated several times within the section.

In contrast to the string trio, which Klein composed shortly before his deportation from Terezín to Auschwitz, we listened to Klein's piano sonata composed in Terezín two years earlier in 1943. Once again, students closed their eyes and meditated over the various excerpts within the piece. They detected the strong rhythmic motifs in the music. They heard harsh

dissonances that sounded to them like an array of anger, despair, some positive tunes, and sounds of machine guns and trains. The discussions of Klein's music concluded with guided listening to one of three songs he composed in 1940, shortly after his expulsion from higher education studies due to the Nuremberg laws enforced in Czechoslovakia. Students read through the English translation of the third poem and an accompanying article describing the songs and their background (Gertsenzon, 2019). They suggested that the text reflects the loneliness Klein himself was facing at the time: "Dusk has fallen from on high, all that was near now is distant . . . all becomes an uncertain blur, the mists creep up the sky; ever blacker depths of darkness are mirrored in the silent lake" (Goethe).

As the semester unfolded, the class continued exploring different themes each week. The subject of musical life in ghettos and concentration camps has been widely researched by Gila Flam and Shirli Gilbert, who respectively published extensive monographs on the songs of the Lodz Ghetto (Flam, 1992) and music in Nazi ghettos and camps (Gilbert, 2005). Each of these monographs contains hundreds of resources. My rationale for prioritizing certain themes over others from these two important sources was to choose the most communicative musical testimonies that would be simple enough to introduce to the students and that would relate to their lives if possible. Therefore, we listened to a variety of street songs and partisan songs (armed groups fighting against the Nazis during World War II). We explored the musical culture of the Lodz Ghetto of Poland as told in Flam's *Singing for Survival*, specifically analyzing the text of several songs that shed light on ghetto life, politics, and daily struggles. Yankele Hershkowitz was a central figure to this discussion. A tailor by trade, Hershkowitz became the troubadour of the ghetto, singing numerous songs that many survivors recalled and recorded in their own voices after the war. Hershkowitz created satirical songs about life's hardships, ghetto politics, and corruption, all in a humorous manner that paid him well in food, money, and gifts (Flam, 1992). While listening to these songs, we also discussed the historical evolution of the Jewish ghetto since the Middle Ages in Venice and the ways it was operated during World War II.

We adopted a completely different perspective in a subsequent discussion of music of the Jewish ghetto in Poland. We explored Hirsh Glik's partisans' song titled *Zog Nit Keynmol* (*Never Say You Have Reached the Final Road*) along with Shirli Gilbert's chapter entitled *Vilna* on the subject (Gilbert, 2005). We read the translated text of *Zog Nit Keynmol* in the context of the historical events in the Vilna Ghetto and the neighboring town Ponar, where

70,000–100,000 people were murdered between 1941–1944, mostly Polish and Lithuanian Jews, Soviets, and Romani. *Zog Nit Keynmol*, considered an anthem of the partisans, was one of various songs that reflected their morality and encouraged them to continue fighting against the Nazis; it became a popular song in the Vilna Ghetto. For the students, hearing such an optimistic song that emerged from the violent murders and the ghetto struggle provided a new understanding of defiance and resistance.

Other class discussions focused on music in Ghetto Krakow, in which the singer/songwriter Mordechai Gebirtig lived and was murdered in 1942. Gebirtig's songs reflect on the life and family relationships in the small Jewish town (also called a *Shtetl*) in the years that preceded the Holocaust. Students explored these songs while also listening to his song *S'Brent (Our town is burning)*, which he wrote in response to the pogrom (massacre) against the Jews in the town of Przytyk in Poland in 1936. Students were asked to consider how they would describe their hometown and how they would put their personal family and town relationships into a poem. Students also discussed Gebirtig's music in response to identity and brought up the question of how music reflects who we are and where we are coming from. To illustrate better how Jewish small-town life is seen through Gebirtig's eyes, we watched scenes from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*.

In another class session, students watched videos of music in the context of spiritual resistance. The opera *Der Kaiser Von Atlantis* by Viktor Ullmann presented death as a character who decides to strike, and as a result no one can die. The opera mocked Hitler and presented death as the salvation that would redeem people from their misery. Students discussed the libretto in the context of life in Terezín. Following that discussion, we held a session on the children's opera *Brundibár* by composer Hans Krása and on video testimonies of survivors who performed this opera in Terezín. By the end of the session, students viewed the plot and numerous performances of the opera in Terezín as a form of artistic resistance, escape, and healing for the children who performed and watched the opera.

As the course neared the end of the lecture/discussion component, students once again returned to the music of Arnold Schoenberg in his 1947 composition *A Survivor from Warsaw*, which responded to the events in the Warsaw Ghetto. Prior to reading excerpts from *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Wlodarski, 2015), students debated whether *Survivor from Warsaw* featured a genuine testimony on which the composition is based or a fictional one. The students provided their own reasoning for their

interpretation. After reading excerpts from Wlodarski's research on the matter, they learned about the background and evolution of the piece, especially how for Schoenberg his composition might have been a personal reflection on the Holocaust, which he himself survived by fleeing Europe to the United States. Students analyzed the Hebrew text featured in this composition, including the *Shema*, which is a prayer central to every Jewish person. In the context of *Survivor in Warsaw*, this prayer, along with the narration in the piece, led to discussion of ways to commemorate the Holocaust, faith, and identity during times of uncertainty.

The most emotional class session took place when I presented a short introductory lecture on the 1941 massacre in Babi Yar. Babi Yar, a ravine in Ukraine, was the site of a massacre in 1941 that occurred during the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In the aftermath of this event, in which approximately 33,771 Jews were murdered, the Soviet government did not publicly acknowledge the killings and denied requests to commemorate and acknowledge the catastrophe. Two decades later, in 1961, the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko commemorated the massacre against the Jews in a poem titled *Babi Yar*. Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich set this poem to music in the first movement of his thirteenth symphony, also titled *Babi Yar*. While we listened to the first movement of the symphony and analyzed the text and musical elements in the symphony, which reflected both Russian musical traditions and solidarity with the Jewish people, we connected the music, the poem, and the historical events to the personal video testimony of David Ayzenberg, a survivor of the Babi Yar massacre (Ayzenberg, 2016). Mr. Ayzenberg described the walk to the ravine, the treatment of the people at the ravine, the cold-blooded murder of a young child by one of the Nazi collaborators, attack dogs biting those who did not obey the commands, bodies in the ravine, and the ways he survived the atrocity. This class session brought some students to tears. At the end of this testimony, there were no questions. Silence and personal reflection spread in the room.

## **"FORBIDDEN SOUNDS: MUSIC OF THE HOLOCAUST," THE CONCERT**

The concert was the culmination of the semester-long study of music in the Holocaust. The idea of a concert emerged as an additional dimension of learning for those students who were capable of playing it. Performers of musical instruments ranged from 5–6 students per class, and prose/poetry/monologue reciters ranged from 2–3 students per class. The rest of

the students engaged in marketing (honors college blogs, Facebook, Instagram, poster, flyers) or served as photographers, videographers, PowerPoint slide technicians, booklet designers, and program notes editors. For each of the concerts, I brought in some additional professional musicians to elevate the level of performance. Students chose compositions by researching and consulting with me. Among the student performers, the 2018 concert featured two pianists, an oboist, a violinist, a singer, and three reciters. The 2019 concert featured among the students a harpist, a violinist, three singers, two reciters, and a trumpeter, including some from the previous class who wanted to come back and perform again. The concert took place in a 150-seat auditorium, which was at full capacity during both performances. Each of the performances included music by composers banned during the years 1933–1945, music by Terezin composers, and music by composers from other camps (see Figure 1 below with the 2019 concert program). To make such a production possible, students were assigned performing pieces early in the semester, and rehearsals took place throughout the semester during weekday evenings and weekends. The concert was titled in their assignment list as “artistic expression,” and they were required to write program notes for the pieces. All the students in the course were required to attend both dress rehearsals and the performance. Both concerts drew an audience comprising students, their families and friends, the university community, and others from the local community who had heard about the concerts from social media, news articles, and websites.

## **OTHER COURSE ASSESSMENTS**

The assignments for this course were in line with assignments given in other courses within the Ball State University Honors College. Attendance and active meaningful participation in class were crucial for student success and were strictly enforced. Reflection papers were assigned at the end of each week. Some sessions required reading in advance to prepare for the week’s discussions. At the end of the semester, students took a listening test that featured 10–12 music excerpts from the material we discussed in the classroom. Students had the chance to listen to each excerpt for 60 seconds and then write down the title and composer of the assigned excerpt. Each student in the course had to present to the class a chosen subject with an accompanying paper of 2000 words. Some students discussed and expanded subjects we had already explored while others focused on subjects not previously covered in the class.

**FIGURE 1. FORBIDDEN SOUNDS: MUSIC OF THE HOLOCAUST CONCERT PROGRAM APRIL 2019**

**BALL STATE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE PRESENTS:**

**FORBIDDEN SOUNDS: MUSIC OF THE HOLOCAUST**

April 11 7:30pm Hahn Hall

**PROGRAM**

**Serenade**

Sam Turk, Violin & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano  
**Robert Dauber (1922–1944)**

**Hof-Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano, I**

George Wolfe, Alto Saxophone & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Erwin Schulhoff (1896–1942)**

**Excerpts from *A House With Stories to Tell***

Chimere (ChiChi) Nhatubeugo

**Zita Nurok (b. 1941)**

**I Wander Through Theresienstadt**

Arianna Zielinski, Mezzo Soprano & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Ilse Weber (1903–1944)**

**Wiegala**

Cassie Buescher, Mezzo Soprano & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Ilse Weber (1903–1944)**

***Death's Diary: The Parisians***

from **The Book Thief**

Devon Lejman

**Markus Zusak (B. 1975)**

**Wiegelied (Lullaby)**

Wesley Byers, Tenor & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Arr. Gideon Klein (1919–1945)**

**Feuillets d'album**

**Henriette Renie (1875–1956)**  
 I. Esquisse, III. Angelus  
 Lydia Wiseheart, Harp

**Buchenwald Lied**

**Hermann Leopoldi (1888–1959)**  
 (Arranged for Trumpet and Piano by Drew Tomasiak)  
 Drew Tomasiak, Trumpet & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Gedenken (Commemorate)**

**Festordnung am 3.II.1940**

**(Fixed Order on 3.II.1940)**

**James Simon (1880–1944)**

Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**S'Brent**

**Yankele**

Rebecca Braun, Mezzo Soprano & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Mordechai Gebirtig (1877–1942)**

**The Moldau**

Lydia Wiseheart, Harp

**Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)**

**Moderato from the Suite Op. 17**

**for Oboe and Piano**

George Wolfe, Soprano Saxophone & Galit Gertsenzon, Piano

**Pavel Haas (1899–1944)**

(Arranged for Saxophone and Piano by Jody Nagle)

## RELATED COURSES TAUGHT BY OTHERS

Although I believe that the approach I used to teach the music of the Holocaust was successful, other teachers have approached the subject differently. Nick Strimple at the University of Southern California has been teaching courses on music of the Holocaust for the past twenty years, including an undergraduate general education seminar titled “Holocaust and the Creative Impulse,” which introduces students to the music, visual art, and literature of the Holocaust (Strimple, personal communication). Similar to my course, “Holocaust and the Creative Impulse” explores songs from Krakow and Vilna Ghettos and compositions from Terezín concentration camp. Strimple’s course traces the development of artistic activities in Jewish communities and Nazi occupied camps and ghettos from 1933–1945. He also examines the performances of prohibited music such as jazz during that time. His course does not include a performance component.

A course by Rachel F. Brenner and Teryl L. Dobbs at the University of Wisconsin titled “Holocaust: Literature, Music, Memory, and Representation” is a writing-intensive course that examines the Holocaust through literature and music as artistic forms of testimonial memory. An undergraduate research paper is central to this course whereas in my course the writing is on a smaller scale. The music explored in Brenner and Dobbs’s course ranges from some music of the Holocaust to popular music and is discussed only in the context of Holocaust literature rather than standing alone as an independent subject. In their course, memory and representation are analyzed within the commemoration of the Auschwitz liberation, aural and historical testimonies from Auschwitz, testimonies of survival, children in the Holocaust, testimonies of non-Jews, and reception of the Holocaust in Israel. They culminate their course in a research symposium.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Research and performance of Holocaust music in recent decades has been continuously evolving. A lot of the music that has been kept in archives is being digitized and becoming available freely over the internet. There has also been extensive musicological research and recording of the music worldwide of both the known and newly discovered repertoires. Thus, each recurrence of my course will need to include references to the newest findings in the subject.

In assessment of student learning, I believe future assignments should also include writing about the required reading of related literature in the course and a preliminary reading summary submitted prior to the beginning of the week. Having tried this strategy in a few of the sessions, I came to realize that a more rigorous requirement of summarizing the reading helped students develop better thinking and ideas for discussion. Successful assessment so far has included the weekly reflection papers that students submitted showing that they had become familiar with the various topics in music of the Holocaust and were able to connect musical styles in different camps and shared expressions between the pieces. Students also learned to find their favorite musical expression and refer to them throughout the semester. Within the literature used in the course, however, it would help to add selections from books such as *Music of Another World* (Laks, 2000), *Violins of Hope* (Grymes, 2014), or *The Pianist* (Szpilman, 2002) in order to provide an additional dimension to the learning process beyond scholarly articles, web sources, and book chapters.

In retrospect, the performance functioned as an educational showcase for the community, and the students rehearsed and practiced for it with sincere intentions for a successful concert. Their motivation to succeed in the concert performance was greater than just wanting to pass the course. The main goal for this course was to educate the students about the atrocities of the Holocaust and to do so by focusing on music that emerged from those atrocities; at the end, in addition to most students exhibiting good standards in their written assignments and listening test, some transferred their acquired knowledge from the class to our community and beyond.

Additionally, a series of events occurred during the organizational process of the second concert in 2019 as I reached out to several organizations to request small financial assistance in covering costs to pay the guest performers. The assistance from these organizations led to the establishment of a small research and performance fund at the honors college. The initial assistance and then further donations allowed me to take students who showed good standing in the course to performances and projects off campus and to produce professional recordings of the music we performed at the concert. I also sponsored an organized trip at minimal cost for participants to see the *Violins of Hope* exhibition in Fort Wayne and a Holocaust-related theater production of *Ghetto* by Joshua Sobol. What started as an elective colloquium became a valuable and immersive educational experience for students.

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The author may be contacted at

[ggertsenzon@bsu.edu](mailto:ggertsenzon@bsu.edu).