

I SING OF WAR...

David Drew explores some little-known musical testimonies from the Second World War

I ask for one thing: you who will survive this era, do not forget. Forget neither the good men nor the evil. Gather together the testimonies about those who have fallen. The suffering of even the least among them was no smaller than the suffering of the foremost whose name endures in memory.

Julius Fucik, Czech Resistance leader; born Prague, 23 February 1903, executed in Berlin, 24 April 1942

Testimonies of war 1914–1945' is the title of two 'records' – CDs, as we call them – that were planned and first released in connection with the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. Without the example of Britten's *War requiem*, the nature of these 'records' might have been very different. Precisely because the structural unity of a single composition could be respected but not emulated, a formally explosive subject-matter was ideal, for it presupposed a series of independent structures whose centrifugal tendency could only be opposed by some superior and extraneous unity. Hence the notion of a dramatically coherent – and, as far as possible, musically and even tonally integrated – sequence of pieces by composers with widely disparate backgrounds but common links to the experiences of 1914–45.

In the interests of that coherence, planning had to begin with the choice of a principal composer – not, however, from among the established 'modern classics' whose collective output is already widely available in recorded form. Unless the 'Testimonies' were to be a mere anthology, they would have to preserve something of the rawness of primary sources – of the uncensored, the unedited, and even, at the most perilous junctures, the untried. Thus a first-hand account from some relatively insignificant onlooker might in this context seem more telling than, say, the incomparable authenticity of Stravinsky's three-movement gloss on the images he had gleaned in sunny California from wartime newspapers and newsreels.

Far from insignificant, whether as an eye-witness or a symphonist, is the recently re-discovered Karl Amadeus Hartmann, to whose (in form) unique testimonies EMI Classics is currently devoting a laudable series. In an old and honourable sense,

Hartmann is nothing if not a 'German composer'. In a somewhat newer sense that disastrously broke with the old, his near-contemporary Boris Blacher was once denounced as *undeutsch* and *volksfremd*. Despite the enduring and worldwide success of his *Concertante Musik* (1937) and his *Paganini variations* (1947), he has never found complete acceptance in the Germany which was his official home from 1922 until his death in 1975.

Born in China in 1903 and educated there in (successively) English, Italian, and German missionary schools, Blacher was the only son of Protestant Russian parents whose origins were German and partly Jewish. It was not until 1922, as an officially stateless 19-year old, that he arrived in Berlin and began his long and rigorous training at the Hochschule für Musik. Some early and minor successes before 1933 were crowned in 1937 when the Berlin Philharmonic under Carl Schuricht gave the world premiere of the *Concertante Musik*, to such effect that the piece had to be encored.

Armed with a commission from Colonel de Basil for three ballet scores, Blacher obtained a British work-permit in 1938, which was extended during his stay, thanks to a further commission from the BBC. But in the mean time, a recommendation from Karl Böhm had led to his appointment as professor of composition at the Dresden Hochschule für Musik. There, his insistence on the work of such composers as Milhaud and the recently banished Hindemith soon became notorious, and after a year his contract was suspended.

Towards the end of 1942, Blacher completed his Dostoyevsky oratorio *Der Grossinquisitor*, whose text he had prepared in collaboration with his likewise Russian-born friend, the conductor Leo Borchard (who was active in one of Berlin's anti-Nazi circles, and was to be appointed principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic at the war's end, only a few days before he was accidentally shot by an American soldier while travelling, too fast, in the car of a music-loving British army officer).

Der Grossinquisitor would in any event have been unperformable in Hitler's Germany, but after the Nazi authorities had found evidence of Blacher's partly Jewish origins none of his new works was heard before the fall of the Third Reich. The first notable premiere was that of the *Partita for strings and percussion* in September 1945.

One of Blacher's finest works, yet neglected for more than four decades, the *Partita* is in its own way and on its own level as authentic and eloquent a testimony as the *Metamorphosen* of Richard Strauss. As such it became the key-work among the 12 recorded for 'Testimonies of war': for which reason the decision to record it with a Polish orchestra under a Russian conductor was at once indicative and crucial.

Audibly yet objectively composed in the immediate context of 'total war' and its consequences, the *Partita* seems far removed from the *Dance scenes* which Blacher composed in England in 1938. The ballet (which owing to the cancellation of the de Basil season in 1939 was never staged) had the provisional title *La vie*; yet the *joie de vivre* manifest in much of the music is repeatedly the object of coded warnings. Less explicit, in the nature of things, than the admonitions of WH Auden in Britten's *Ballad of heroes*, those warnings were to be substantiated in Blacher's later works, and objectively reviewed in the *Partita* – a score that makes wholly understandable the apparent but not unclouded frivolity of *Chiarina*, another long-neglected ballet score which Blacher composed in 1946 in a still-ruined yet anxiously hopeful Berlin.

The idea of approaching the severities of the *Partita* and the other explicit testimonies by a relatively undemanding 'access-route' comprising *Dance scenes* and *Chiarina* determined the subsequent decision to record *Dance scenes* with a London orchestra (the LPO) and *Chiarina* with a Berlin one (the RSB) – with both orchestras conducted by Noam Sheriff, who had studied composition with Blacher in Berlin and is today Chief Conductor of the Israel Symphony Orchestra Rishon-LeZion.

Meanwhile the supranational casting of the *Partita* recording had suggested other possibilities. Specifically with a view to recalling the notable contribution made by the BBC in its wartime broadcasts to the European mainland – where its news and commentaries were immensely valuable to countless clandestine listeners – the BBC Symphony Chorus was engaged to record two ostensibly incompatible pieces: Vaughan Williams's motet *Valiant-for-truth*, composed in 1940 on the text by John Bunyan, and the protest-march for male chorus, *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen*, which Kurt Weill composed in connexion with the 10th anniversary of the Armistice to Brecht's famous ballad about an anti-war demonstration in Potsdam – the centre of Prussian militarism.

Although other essential links between the two world wars were still needed, the discovery that a tiny fragment of *Dance scenes* was embedded in the first of the two piano sonatinas Blacher composed in 1940 for Gerty Herzog, his future wife, led to the Second Sonatina and its demonstration of respect for the worlds of Erik Satie and of Darius Milhaud. The essential privacy of the Second Sonatina had been invaded in 1943, when the Propaganda Ministry's periodical *Musik im Kriege* denounced a brave young pianist for including so 'un-German' a piece in a series devoted to German music.

That same year, while convalescing in the countryside, Blacher composed his perilously subversive *Drei Psalmen*, for baritone and piano. They were not to be heard in public for nearly twenty years – when Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Aribert Reimann per-

formed and recorded them. Since then, and despite a posthumous orchestral version by Blacher's pupil Frank Michael Beyer, they have been almost completely neglected. They speak of hard things.

From a prison in Lübeck – the first of his many incarcerations before finally being done to death – the indomitable Social Democrat leader Julius Leber wrote in 1933 to his wife:

In this place each man must find his way, hold himself up, and develop strength by himself. 'Here the heart is weighed in the balance, no-one intercedes for him'; this holds true here much more than on the battlefield. For here all pathos and high passion are lacking. Here the heart is put in the scale without any makeweight. Here one can delude oneself about nothing, absolutely nothing, for one is always alone within four walls that in the long months become bright as a mirror of the soul.

The sense that 'Testimonies of war' must include some such moment of individual confinement and isolation led to a decision that there should be an interruption in the sequence of orchestral and choral works – by their very nature, public statements – in order that Blacher's *Drei Psalmen* might find a place beside his Second Sonatina, together with a Chorale for piano composed by Milhaud in 1941 in memory of Paderewski (and indeed of Poland). The *Psalmen* were to be performed by an Austrian baritone and an American pianist; and given the musical character of Blacher's Sonatina no less than that of Milhaud's Chorale, a French pianist was for them the obvious choice.

According to conventional standards of value-for-money, enough music for two CDs had already been assembled. But by any higher standards, the lacunae were still much too large. Where, for instance, was there even a glimpse of the apocalyptic landscapes of 1945? And how could there be a worthy one without Nono's already-recorded *Canti di vita e d'amore: sul ponte di Hiroshima*?

The requirement of contemporaneity had become too great an obstacle. Once it had been removed, an answer to the second question immediately presented itself. The 19th-century Danish writer and free-thinker Jens Peter Jacobsen had ended one of his novels with an old North German prayer probably dating from the time of the Thirty Years War; and the prayer's indictment of human folly, together with its apocalyptic warnings, had seized the imagination of the young Kurt Weill in 1922, and had inspired perhaps the finest of his early works – the *Chorale fantasy* for strings and three winds with male chorus. Performed only once in public since its premiere 70 years ago, it was recorded for 'Testimonies of war' by the Poznań Philharmonic Orchestra.

Two gaps in the 'Testimonies' had still to be filled. From a historical point of view they were closely related and almost contiguous, for they concerned the crucial period between tenth and the 20th anniversaries of the Armistice – between, so to speak, the anti-war demonstration in Potsdam, and the prewar tensions of Blacher's *Dance scenes*.

In the year of *Dance scenes*, and just five weeks before the 20th anniversary, Europe's only guarantee of peace was the lamentable

agreement Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier had brought back from their meeting with Hitler in Munich. Something of the realities from which the western democracies averted their eyes and ears in 1938 was part of the subject-matter of Blacher's *Alla marcia* of 1934, which had its posthumous premiere in Dublin 45 years later. A goose-step in the direction of Orwell's *Animal farm*, the *Alla marcia* rings as true today as it would have done in Berlin, Moscow, or Rome in 1934, had anyone dared to programme it. As far as Blacher is concerned, the local police who had broken up the anti-war demonstration in Brecht's Potsdam are a thing of the past – or rather, they have been issued with new uniforms, and are much more heavily armed.

With the *Alla marcia* – recorded in Berlin last December – 'Testimonies of war' had reached a decisive point on that grid whose coordinates are music and history. Suddenly it became clear that if the two ballet scores were the frame, and the remaining works were presented in the chronological order of their composition, the total picture would be musically coherent, and the juxtapositions effective even with regard to character and tonal colour.

Heard-through in that sense, however, the sequence became insupportable in another one. For between the world of the *Alla marcia* and the solitary confinement of the *Drei Psalmen* the relationship was too close and the gap too wide. *Alla marcia* had therefore to be shifted to the start of the 'dance-music' CD, and the strictly chronological order of the second and weightier CD would have to be modified accordingly. Yet something crucial was still missing. Where might it be found if not in the works of Karl Amadeus Hartmann from the period 1935 to 1940?

Apart from the fact that all the relevant Hartmann works were already available on record, none would have been appropriate in practical terms. So how, if at all, was there to be any testimony to the age-old connexion between war and genocide which had been forged once again in the discriminatory Nuremberg Laws of 1935, and which, to this day, continues to manifest itself?

Quite suddenly, the unpublished, unperformed, uncatalogued, and long-lost manuscript of Berthold Goldschmidt's *Zwei Psalmen* came to light. Scored for high voice and string orchestra, *Zwei Psalmen* was composed in Berlin in 1935, shortly before the composer's flight from Germany.

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Psalms 120 and 124 are set as a single ternary movement, with the second half of the second setting returning to the resolute mood of the initial *Allegro marziale*. The work is almost

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certainly the last Goldschmidt composed before fleeing from Germany in October 1935, and settling in England.

Although the autograph manuscript survived, the composer soon lost track of it, and before long had forgotten its very existence. It was not until the winter of 1991-92 that the autograph was discovered by the German musicologist Michael Struck, and in due course deposited in the Goldschmidt Archive at the Berlin Academy of Arts. The composer himself was reluctant to examine it, but was eventually persuaded to do so with a view to its inclusion in the sequence of 'Testimonies of war'. Once he had not only given his assent but committed himself to conducting the recording himself, the work was heard for the very first time at the actual sessions in Berlin on 7 September 1994, which were followed by the public

premiere four days later.

Goldschmidt's phenomenal memory in his eighties and nineties has been the envy of his friends of every age, and in recent years a source of pleasure and enlightenment for all manner of audiences and publics throughout Europe. How then can so characteristic and indeed (in its historical context) momentous a work as *Zwei Psalmen* have been 'forgotten'? Goldschmidt has two interconnected explanations: first, the anxieties and dangers of the weeks leading up to his escape from Germany, and his subsequent need to put all memory of them behind him; and secondly, his own philosophical development with regard to religious beliefs. A resolute realist and sceptic, the Goldschmidt of today seems wholly detached from all forms of metaphysical speculation, agnosticism included.

Musically, *Zwei Psalmen* is unproblematic. Built upon the same Bachian bedrock that has sustained so much of Goldschmidt's work, it forms the bridge between the *Variations on a Palestinian shepherd's song* of 1934 and the Second String Quartet of 1936. Setting out from the psalmist's cry 'I am a stranger in the land' and his complaint 'I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war', its single-movement form is designed to return to the *allegro marziale* starting-point with a C major whose character calls to mind the words of Shakespeare's Kent as the raving Lear drives him into exile: 'Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here'.

When in the Germany of 1943 Goldschmidt's exact contemporary Boris Blacher composed *Drei Psalmen* for baritone and piano, his choice of texts and his ordering of them – Psalms 142, 141, and 121 – precisely complemented Goldschmidt's. In both cases the psalmist becomes a means of generalising and eventually universalising a personal predicament; in both cases, the danger to each composer at the time of composition is potentially life-threatening, and is increased by the very act of composition.

As with Goldschmidt's two psalms, so with Blacher's three. The messages are plain for all to read. Like Goldschmidt, Blacher begins for a prayer for deliverance, and ends with an expression of hope. His intermediary psalm is crucial, and peculiar to his situation at the time. Whereas his Dostoyevsky-oratorio *The grand inquisitor* (1942) had considered a 'satanic' power in an expressly though complexly Christian context, Psalm 141 – confused though it is in all the standard English versions – is in the Luther version (which Blacher uses) an unambiguous endorsement of the psalmist's plea for the persecuted Hebrews and his hatred of their persecutors. With a courage and a self-awareness that Shostakovich would immediately have understood – schooled as he was in Stalin's terror – Blacher composes the text in such a way that the concept of guilt-by-association is placed at the very centre of the song (and therefore of the cycle), and that its force is enhanced by the very nature of the word-setting: for it is in this crucial recitative (beginning at the words 'Herr, behüte meinen Mund' – 'Set a watch, O Lord, before the door of my mouth') that Blacher at one stroke discovers the basis for the stylised declamation which was to be the very essence of his *Sholem aleichem* opera *200,000 taler* (1969).

Seemingly far removed from Blacher's Old Testament, and indeed from Luther's, Kurt Weill's *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen* is an arrangement for unaccompanied male-voice choir of the version for three male voices and wind orchestra which he had composed for his 'little cantata' after texts by Brecht, *Das Berliner Requiem* (1928). The centrepiece of the cantata – which was written for the tenth anniversary of the end of World War I – is a diptych entitled 'Reports about the Unknown Soldier'. To this profoundly serious setting of Brecht's two anti-war poems, *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen* was a pendant in popular ballad-form, with a minor-mode 'verse' – the pacifist demonstration in the home-town of Prussian militarism – that is repeatedly and rudely interrupted by a major-mode refrain.

The modulatory structure of the ballad is so designed that the final police-action takes place in the falsified purity of C major. In the *Berliner Requiem* version, that last refrain was coloured by a quotation of 'Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit' ('To Loyalty and Probity be always bound'). According to the Prussian royal decree of 1797, the carillon of the Prussian Garrison Church was to chime that secular song on the half hour, and a solemn religious chorale on the hour; and so it did for a century-and-a-half, until the church was destroyed in an air-raid, just a few days before the fall of the Third Reich (for the preceding 12 years, by order of Goebbels, 'Üb immer Treu und Redlichkeit' had been the call-sign of Berlin's principle radio station).

In both versions of *Zu Potsdam unter den Eichen*, the contrast is not between the religious and the secular, but between the grief and protest of the initial strain, and the heedlessness of the jaunty refrain. Whereas the original wind-band version heightens the contrast by means of the satirical quotation, the *a cappella* version deepens it by the nature of its choral writing (and its harmonic consequences). At what cost Chemins-des-Dames was captured by the German army and (in October 1917) recaptured by the French is perhaps more accurately estimated by the unaccompanied chorus; and it is the chorus version, rather than the original

one, which understands that the final police action is no longer something to be joked about, but rather to be reported in hushed and anxious tones.

The very different C major of Goldschmidt's *Allegro marziale* is already, if only in principle, the anticipated response; and musically as well as philosophically the lines of communication between Goldschmidt and Blacher could well have begun with Weill's *Choral-Fantasie*, 'Herrgott, dein Zorn tu von uns wenden', of 1922.

Scored for large string orchestra with horn, trombones, and unison male chorus, the work was first performed on 7 December 1922 at the Singakademie, by the Berlin Philharmonic under Heinz Unger. By that time it had already become the intended finale of Weill's *Divertimento*, whose first and last performance was to be given the following April by the same conductor and orchestra.

Ten years later, at the time of Weill's flight from Germany, the only known score of the *Divertimento* vanished. It has not been recovered; but a 'dummy' version of it, including a reconstruction of the Chorale Fantasy from surviving orchestral and chorus parts, was first performed in 1972 by the orchestra of Südwestfunk, Baden-Baden, under Ernest Bour.

The idea of concluding a *Divertimento* with a penitential psalm and visions of an 'Apocalyptic landscape' (to cite the title of the famous painting by Weill's early mentor, the expressionist artist Ludwig Meidner) was characteristic not only of the young Weill but also of the future composer of *Mahagonny*. As a commentary on the recent war and its aftermath, it was a sequel to Weill's First Symphony, with a clear-headed warning for the future of humanity now replacing the symphony's Utopian aspirations. In that sense the Chorale Fantasy owes more to the tragically prophetic side of Mahler than Weill's teacher Busoni would have cared to acknowledge. But in other respects its perceptible continuity from Bach and the Masonic Mozart is precisely what Busoni was extolling in his last years, whether as composer, as pianist, or as teacher.

The text Weill has used for the chorale comes from the very end of the novel *Fru Marie Grubbe* by the Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847–1885) – best known today for the 'Gurre-Lieder' set by Arnold Schoenberg. Jacobsen was one of Busoni's favourite authors, not least because of his outspokenly anti-religious views. They were not Weill's views – or not yet. While dutifully attributing the chorale-text to Jacobsen, he adopts the original 17th-century North German hymn-text in all its starkness (whereas Jacobsen's first German translator had preferred a sentimentalised rendering of the Danish).

From the vengeful Jehovah of the Chorale Fantasy to the Judgement Day travesty which precedes the destruction of the mythical city of Mahagonny – which Weill saw as a modern reincarnation of Sodom and Gomorrah – was by no means an extravagant leap. From the world of 1930 (when *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* had its tumultuous premiere in Leipzig) to that of 1945 was another leap that the Chorale Fantasy somehow accomplishes. As Günther Anders declares in the unsettable text which Luigi Nono was to leave to his wordless orchestra in the *Canti di vita e d'amore*, the apparition on the Bridge of

Hiroshima – with a curtain where his face once was, and hooks where his hands once were – is a messenger who will not leave his post until his warnings are heeded.

For every outraged appeal to the humanitarian conscience, *Realpolitik* has a dozen reasonable replies. Music, by its very nature, cannot intervene in such debates. But in the highest courts of enquiry, reason and emotion will find no surer arbitrator. Thus the eschatological fears and warnings of a 17th-century text allowed the 22-year-old Weill to define the mediating tone and tonality of a purely musical argument whose logic is essentially constructive. In a secular age, the Fantasy's monothematic tendency is likely to seem more congenial than the monotheism with which it is associated; but to ignore the religious context on the grounds that Weill himself was eventually to discard everything to do with it (or almost everything) would be to risk misconstruing even the music.

Characteristically, the Chorale Fantasy's C minor (inherited from the First Symphony) is reaffirmed in the closing stages, only to be cast aside – first by the subdominant (and its cataclysmic trombones), then, conclusively, by the non-dominant G minor – the first mature example of the dominant inhibition which was to become so important in his future music.

Meanwhile the USA had opened its doors, as it so often had in the course of its history; and for the second time in that history, it was soon to come to Europe's defence in the name of those ideals which the Founding Fathers had brought over from Europe. Comprehensive though the 'Testimonies of war' could never be, the omission by oversight or design of a significant

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contribution from the USA would have been peculiarly heinous. Yet the search for a contribution that was musically and otherwise appropriate to the European ones remained fruitless until, at the latest possible planning stage, a scarcely believable combination of events and coincidences led to a solution as unforeseeable as the earlier discovery of Goldschmidt's *Zwei Psalmen*. In 1942 a remarkable but even in his native Chicago virtually unknown composer named Harrington Shortall (1895–1984) had composed a *Fanfare for those who will not return*. The piece is scored for five trumpets, with 'resultant tones' (resonances) from adjacent instruments. In the rigour of its palindromic and canonic form the Fanfare looks back to the

Middle Ages and forward to the 1990s. 'Pathos and high passion' are excluded, but only because 'here the heart is put in the scale without any makeweight'.

So the second of the two CD collections of 'Testimonies of war' could begin, and does begin, with the wordless prayer of a composer who happens to be, but shall not be, 'forgotten', just as it ends with Bunyan's 'trumpets' in honour of Valiant-for-Truth. Meanwhile, through the intermediacy of Weill's setting of that anonymous 17th-century hymnodist, Vaughan Williams' imprisoned Bunyan valiantly confronts a world in which the defeats and miseries of The Thirty Years' War were prophetic of so many more in our own century.

In memory of Isador Caplan (17 April 1912–17 January 1995)

'Testimonies of war' is available this month from Largo Records

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