

Ilse Weber, née Harlinger (1903-1944) was a Jewish writer, producer, poet, musician, writer of letters and mother. Born and raised in Vitkovice, Ostrava in the Habsburg Empire (present-day Czech Republic), she settled with her husband and two sons in Prague.

As international tensions surrounding the Sudeten Crisis mounted, Weber had the presence of mind to place her eldest son Hanuš on one of Sir Nicholas Winston's famous Kindertransports bound for England. Her letters to Hanuš are typical of any mother, with frequent reminders to wash properly and act courteously alongside occasional scoldings for poor grammar and not replying. They are also filled with longing and the helpless realisation that mother and son will likely never be reunited.

In February 1944 Ilse, with her husband Willi and youngest son Tommy, were forcibly relocated to the ghetto of Terezín. Built in the Eighteenth Century as a garrison town, its numbers swelled from 8,000 residents at the start of the war to accommodate some 60,000 largely Moravian and Bohemian Jews. Of the nearly 140,000 who passed through Terezín some 33,000 died within its walls and nearly 90,000 were sent to death camps: of 15,000 children, less than 150 survived. Separated from Hanuš and with all outbound post censored, Weber found solace and purpose nursing in the children's ward of Terezín. Here she sang and (illegally) played her smuggled lute to the children: testimonies abound of children who prayed for chicken pox, mumps, measles and scarlet fever, all so they might be sent to Weber's ward and escape their harsh daily realities.

Whilst no child could compensate entirely for her distant son, it is evident from Weber's letters and poems that she became a mother figure for countless children. In the Autumn of 1944 she volunteered to accompany a children's transport to Auschwitz where, on 6th October, she was murdered with Tommy and other children in the gas chamber.

*A Stranger's Cradle**

By a strange child's cradle I linger,
often, in evening's glow,
her little fingers
nestled in my hand.
The wide-open eyes of this
unknown child look at me.
Eyes trusting and angelic,
as only a child's can be.
With hardship and dreariness
I'm then overcome.
I feel such love,
as if she were my only child.
Her dear starry eyes,
not yet black from suffering -
perhaps, far away,
someone loves my child!

Ilse Weber (translated Michal Schwartz)

A Stranger's Cradle

Ilse Weber (1903-1944)

Trans. Michal Schwartz (by kind permission)

Angus McPhee (b.1992)

Misterioso $\text{♩} = 40$

Unknown Mother (Soprano Solo)

Mother (Mezzo-Soprano Solo)

Soprano

Mezzo-Soprano

Tenor

Bass

NB. The Soprano soloist could be situated separately from the ensemble and out of sight

mp *dim.*

By a strange child.

mp *dim.*

By a strange child.

mp *dim.*

By a strange child's cradle I lin-ger.

mp

By a strange child's cradle I

Poco piu mosso

S. Solo

Mz. Solo

S.

A.

T.

B.

5

mf *dim.*

By a strange child's cradle I lin-ger.

mf

By a strange child's cradle I

mf *mp dim.*

By a strange child.

mf *mp dim.*

lin-ger.

By a strange child

33 **Stringendo** *f* **Urgent** ♩ = 80

S. Solo
Some-one loves my child!

Mz. Solo
hard-ship and drea-ri-ness I'm ov-er - come. *risoluto*
I feel such

Choir
cresc. ger by
cresc. ger by

B.1
B.2

molto rit.

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S. Solo
Some-one loves my child!

Mz. Solo
love, *ff molto pesante* as if she were my on-ly child!

Choir
a child. *ff*
a child. *ff*

T.1
T.2

40 **A Tempo (as before)** *mp*

S. Solo
Some - one loves my child! As on-

Mz. Solo
mp dolente
Her dear star-ry eyes, not yet black from

Choir
pp Some-times I lin - ger. *pp* I lin - ger. I
mp *sub.p* *mf*
pp Some-times I lin - ger. *mp* *sub.p* *mf*
Some-times I lin - ger. I lin - ger. I

44

S. Solo

ly a child's can be! _____ **G.P**

Mz. Solo

suf - fer - ing. _____ *semplice*
Per - haps, _____

lin - ger. _____ **G.P**

Choir

lin - ger. _____

lin - ger. _____

47

S. Solo

p Some - one loves my child! _____

Mz. Solo

far a - way, _____ some - one loves my child...

Choir