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COMPOSER/VOCALIST DANA SANDLER HONORS THE YOUNGEST VICTIMS OF THE HOLOCAUST

“I NEVER SAW ANOTHER BUTTERFLY,” APRIL 21, 2020 (Yom HaShoah)

DANA SANDLER’s debut CD, *I NEVER SAW ANOTHER BUTTERFLY*, set for release on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah), April 21, 2020, is a moving tribute to the youngest victims of the Holocaust. Sandler got the inspiration for this project from the book of the same title.

Originally published in 1959, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* is a collection of poetry and art created by the Jewish children in the Terezin concentration camp in what is now the Czech Republic. The camp held around 144,000 prisoners including Jewish scholars, musicians, and artists. Sandler dedicates her album to Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an Austrian artist and educator who organized secret art classes for the children of Terezin. Dicker-Brandeis collected 4,500 children’s drawings and poems in two suitcases before she was sent to Auschwitz in 1944. Fifteen thousand children passed through Terezin. Fewer than 100 survived.

Sandler first became interested in setting poetry to music while attending the New England Conservatory. Sandler says, “The book made a lasting impression on me when I was first introduced to it as a teenager. Then, in January (2019) I found myself in a position to compose and the melodies poured out of me. I knew that it was meant to be for this moment, at a time where I would be composing this music through the lens of motherhood, at a time when Holocaust survivors able to share their stories are dwindling in number and at a time when, sadly, parallels today are all too present.”

Sandler has been playing piano since the age of four and composing since she was nine. She is a classically trained pianist but focused her vocal studies on musical theater and jazz. She earned a bachelor’s degree in Jazz Vocal Performance from the University of Miami School of Music and went on to earn a master’s degree in Jazz Vocal Performance from the New England Conservatory of Music. She also led a jazz quartet for Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, performing six nights a week in their on-board jazz club, during which time she developed extensive repertoire and honed her skills as a performer and leader alongside her husband, Austin McMahan and pianist Carmen Staaf.

After graduating, Sandler performed with various groups including *Khevre* – a Klezmer group led by revivalist Michael Winograd, and appeared on Carmen Staaf’s debut album, *Reflection*. After some time in the music profession, life changes inspired her to pursue a deep-rooted interest in medicine. Her most recent position was as a physician assistant in the pediatric rheumatology department at Boston Children’s Hospital. She found the work enormously rewarding yet felt a true calling to pursue her most meaningful work to date as a vocalist and composer.

For this undertaking, Sandler enlisted world-renowned musicians who she met while studying at the New England Conservatory, including **CARMEN STAAF** (Dee Dee Bridgewater) on piano, **JORGE ROEDER** (Gary Burton, John Zorn) on bass, **PETER KENAGY** on trumpet and flugelhorn, **RICK STONE** on alto saxophone and clarinet, **MICHAEL**

WINOGRAD on clarinet and her husband, drummer and percussionist **AUSTIN MCMAHON** (Jerry Bergonzi). “When I began composing, I realized I was hearing these particular musicians and what they would each bring to the music,” says Sandler. “It was a dream to work with all of them and honestly a bit shocking that they were all available considering their demanding schedules as international performers and educators.”

Sandler composed ***I NEVER SAW ANOTHER BUTTERFLY*** as a song-cycle that highlights poets in the Terezín Concentration Camp -- Pavel Friedmann, Franta Bass, and Alena Synkova-Munkova, who was one of the few children to survive the camp, as well as additional unknown young poets. The music comprises four sections, each dedicated to a poet and beginning with a through-composed instrumental dedication. “Dear Pavel,” begins the song cycle. Sandler’s lilting soprano voice and crystal-clear enunciation is the perfect vehicle for singing/reciting poetry. “The Butterfly,” was written by Pavel just seven weeks after arriving at the camp and sets up the mood for the entire CD with the lyrics “For seven weeks I’ve lived here / Penned up inside this ghetto / But I have found what I love here / The dandelions call to me / And the white chestnut branches in the court / Only I never saw another butterfly.” Sandler’s composition has a light, airy feel, almost like the fluttering of a butterfly.

The next section is dedicated to Franta Bass, the youngest of the poets. He was just 14 years old when he was sent to Auschwitz. For, “Home/The Old House,” Sandler created a storyline during the compositional process; the music begins with clarinet, which represents Franta, and bass, which represents the house. Sandler imagined the young man daydreaming about his home and garden, and her music has a dreamy quality that tries to capture the child’s inner life. “This Old House” is made even more poignant with Sandler’s young daughter singing the poem. The section ends with “The Garden,” probably the saddest song on the album. The piano and voice pairing creates a chilling effect that adds pathos to the lines “A Little boy, a sweet boy / Like that growing blossom. / when the blossom comes to bloom / The little boy will be no more.”

Alena Synkova-Munkova, who passed away in 2008, is the focus of the third section. The instrumental dedication, “Dear Alena,” reflects the somber mood of the previous tune with a flugelhorn feature. The poems “Untitled” and “I’d Like to Go Alone” reflect a rebellious teenager who was almost defiant in the face of the horrors. Sandler ends “I’d Like to Go Alone” with the melody “Ani Ma’amin,” which was composed by Azriel David Fastag while in a cattle car on its way to Treblinka. “Ani Ma’amin” features Michael Winograd on clarinet in a moving interpretation of this melody, which is still frequently sung at Holocaust Remembrance Day events. “Tears,” the final poem of this section, reminds us that without tears, “there is no life.” The song features a beautiful bass solo by Roeder.

The final section is dedicated to anonymous poets, who were between the ages of 10–16. Although we don’t know what happened to the young poets, the poems themselves, “On a Sunny Evening” and “Birdsong” are hopeful. “On a Sunny Evening” features Rick Stone with a soaring alto saxophone solo following the words, “I want to fly but where, how high?” The final lines of “Birdsong/Butterfly Reprise” leave us with the uplifting message: “Then if the tears obscure your way / You’ll know how wonderful it is / To be alive.”

Sandler’s music is captivating, and her voice is a sensitive, emotive instrument. The topic of the album is heart-wrenching, but Sandler never gives in to maudlin tropes. Instead, she pays great respect to these young people and their suffering, hopes, and youthful insights through her sensitive interpretations with the hope that no other child will ever have to endure these horrors again.

I NEVER SAW ANOTHER BUTTERFLY will be released on Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah), April 21, 2020, and will be available at Amazon, iTunes, CD Baby and everywhere online.

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