

GAWLICK *Briefe aus Stalingrad* • Georg Gädker (bar); Chi-Chen Wu, Moritz Ernst (pn) • PERFECT NOISE 1803 (52:14 )

Ralf Yusuf Gawlick was born in Germany in 1969. He is of Kurdish descent but has never lived in his ethnic homeland or in the town where he was born, Pfaffenhofen-an-der-Ilm. He was educated in Germany, Austria, Poland, and the United States and is currently on the faculty of Boston College. He describes his work *Briefe aus Stalingrad* (“Letters from Stalingrad”) as “Eine musikalische Gedenkstätte,” or a musical memorial. The score is written for a baritone, two pianos, and audio montage.

This is no ordinary piece. Gawlick uses the death of his uncle, Bruno Gawlick, during the WW II siege of Stalingrad as the spark to compose a horrifically dramatic and effective work that brings home with extraordinary impact the suffering which human beings are capable of inflicting on each other. Even if we cannot muster sympathy for Gawlick’s uncle, who was a soldier for Hitler’s Germany, this work forces us to pull away from such a specific reaction to absorb what true horror means.

Trying to describe this is not easy, but I will start by saying that I came away from the experience very deeply moved. The musical content is overlaid with recordings of speeches by Hitler and Göring and readings of two letters written by the soldier (one probably on the last day of his life). The notes that accompany the recording place attention on how utterly devastating, to absolutely everyone, the siege of Stalingrad was (approximately 2 million killed), and it brings down to the human level a fading historical event. Also included in the recorded collage is a chorus singing “Silent Night,” Richard Tauber singing “Alone, alone again,” and most movingly of all, the Adagio of Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony in a Wilhelm Furtwängler recording that was broadcast in Germany on April 1, 1942.

That may sound as if I’m describing a confused pastiche. In fact *Briefe aus Stalingrad* has an internal integrity and sense of shape that is both moving and engrossing. It cannot be listened to with half an ear or divided attention. It is also essential to read the extensive notes provided in the two booklets that accompany the disc in preparation for listening. This work is not entertainment, or even a musical experience in the traditional sense. Reaction to it will vary, probably wildly. All I can do is report mine. *Briefe aus Stalingrad* left me with a mix of emotions—anger, sorrow, and frustration at how we humans don’t learn from our past mistakes.

At the same time there was something uplifting about the beauty of that Bruckner Seventh excerpt, about the soldiers singing “Silent Night,” and about the sense of love that inspired Gawlick to make the remarkable effort to create a memorial to an uncle who died 17 years before the composer was born. The beauty of Bruckner is set against radio broadcasts of Nazi speeches and the noise of the battlefield. The contrasts are horrifying because they are real. And then, as if all of those emotions were not enough, I was led to think about some of the terrible things going on in our country at this time and the horrendous divisions that seem to always define human beings, wondering if it will ever get any better. The performances are excellent, but it is almost not important to note that. The baritone (born in 1936) speaks as much as he sings, and the vocal writing is close to chanting. The pianists are very sensitive to the mood of the piece. I suppose that many *Fanfare* readers will not find this work to their taste, but I believe it is something that everyone should hear and absorb, however they eventually react.

I suppose this is an odd recommendation for a classical music recording, but it is all I can think of to say after experiencing such a remarkable work.

Henry Fogel, Fanfare Magazine

Four stars: An unusual and deeply moving experience, not for everyone