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Holocaust prisoners and a spirit of song

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By SALLY RUTH BOURRIE / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

"We could sing to the Nazis what we could not say" is how Edgar Krasa explains why he and 149 other Jewish prisoners at the Terezin concentration camp spent long nights in 1943 and 1944 rehearsing Verdi's Requiem. Directed by choirmaster Rafael Schaechter, they performed the mass 15 times for other inmates and ultimately for the Nazi elite – who laughed, then sent them to the Auschwitz death camp.

The event remained almost unknown until Murry Sidlin, former resident conductor of the Oregon Symphony, found a mention in a used book seven years ago. Consumed with finding out why Jewish prisoners would go to such lengths to perform what is a Catholic mass and one of classical music's most demanding and complex works, he uncovered a tale of courage and the power of art.

In *Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin*, airing Wednesday night on PBS and KERA-TV (Channel 13), Mr. Sidlin brings the story to the screen through interviews with surviving chorus members, Nazi film footage and a full production of the Requiem by the Oregon Symphony and the Portland Opera Chorus.

The stars are the Requiem and Mr. Schaechter, sent to Terezin at age 36, ending a promising musical career in nearby Prague. Perhaps only another conductor could have understood that behind the Terezin concerts lay a remarkable leader.

Mr. Schaechter had only a legless, out-of-tune piano, a single smuggled score and starving singers who worked 14-hour days. He rebuilt his choir twice after members were shipped to Auschwitz. He perished later, either at Auschwitz or during a forced march.

By finding chorus survivors and Mr. Schaechter's relatives, Mr. Sidlin, dean of the Benjamin A. Rome School of Music at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., uncovered Mr. Schaechter's intentions. He meant to inspire his choir and prisoner audience "to stay above the despondency, to remain focused on the highest ideals of life and living."

That made it worth the sleep deprivation, says Mr. Krasa. "The singing made you feel that you're free, at least for that period of time."

By choosing Verdi's Requiem, Mr. Schaechter had a message for the Nazis, too: "No matter how you try to degrade us and with what methods you try to kill our spirits and our physical selves, we defy you and resist your efforts by singing at you one of the world's great musical compositions and contained within it, messages that you are destined to experience," says Mr. Sidlin.

Verdi's Requiem focuses on the "Dies Irae," or "Day of Wrath," judgment day when God will punish evil acts. And for the prisoners, Verdi's "Libera me" passage ("Set me free") held particular poignancy.

But showing the world Mr. Schaechter's heroism was only one of Mr. Sidlin's goals. "So much great music that we play constantly is taken for granted," he says. "Very often musical compositions have a startling history or play a major role in some historic event. I hope that people who view this television event will always think of the Verdi Requiem in connection with the Jewish prisoners of Terezin."

"This is not your mother and father's concert hall experience," says Larry Meyer, a representative of the Miami-based John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which funds symphony innovations such as *Defiant Requiem*. Filmed in stark surroundings, the Requiem is subtitled, with the Terezin story told between movements.

"This program falls right in line with what I believe is the destiny of the concert hall, which is a great illumination of what music means, how it communicates, why it exists and the nature of creativity," says Mr. Sidlin. At Terezin, he adds, "music [was] in service of these prisoners to make a very forceful statement decrying the dastardly nature of Nazi oppression. They refuse it, reject it and answer it with some of the greatest art ever created."

Sally Ruth Bourrie is a Portland, Ore., freelance writer.

Defiant Requiem: Verdi at Terezin

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8:30 p.m. Wednesday on KERA-TV (Channel 13). Conceived, written and conducted by Murry Sidlin, directed by Phillip Byrd, produced by Oregon Public Broadcasting and the Oregon Symphony in association with Brandenburg Productions. 90 minutes.

Online at: <http://www.dallasnews.com/texasliving/stories/082603dnlivdefiant.9f536.html>