

“Profoundly moving. I am overwhelmed by what Jeremy Eichler has achieved.”

—Edmund de Waal, author of *The Hare with Amber Eyes*

TIME'S ECHO

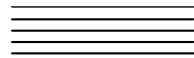
THE SECOND WORLD WAR, THE HOLOCAUST,
AND THE MUSIC OF REMEMBRANCE

JEREMY EICHLER



Time's Echo

The Second World War,
the Holocaust, and
the Music of Remembrance



Jeremy Eichler



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For my family

Only history itself, real history with all its suffering and all its contradiction, constitutes the truth of music.

—Theodor Adorno

Time measures

Nothing but itself

—W. G. Sebald

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Prelude: In the Shade of the Oak

The wooded slopes of the Ettersberg stand in the center of Germany, a few miles north of Weimar. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the area served as the playground of dukes, who went there for hunting, and later as the preserve of poets, who traversed its rugged hills while contemplating the wonders of nature. No less an eminence than Goethe, the greatest of all German poets, traveled often to the forests of the Ettersberg, and over the years he grew particularly fond of one large oak tree near a clearing with expansive views of the countryside. On a bright autumn morning in 1827, a banquet-like breakfast was laid out in the shade of this grand oak. Leaning back against its regal trunk, Goethe feasted on roast partridges, drank wine from a gold cup, and gazed out at the rolling landscape. “Here,” he declared, “a person feels great and free...the way he should always be.”

After Goethe’s death, as a cult of reverence formed around him as the standard-bearer of both German genius and European humanism, the legend of his favorite local tree evidently survived—all the way down to one summer day more than a century later. That day in 1937, a group of prisoners was led into the same high forests of the Ettersberg, stopping at a limestone ridge just six miles north of Weimar. Under harsh conditions and with minimal equipment, these men cleared away the trees to make room for a concentration camp.

As the prisoners labored day after day, building their own future prison, their guards identified one particular oak that would not be felled. This oak, it was determined, must be the mythic Goethe’s oak. And so the anointed tree was left standing, and in the years that followed, the concentration camp of Buchenwald rose up around it on all sides.



To the Nazis who created Buchenwald, Goethe's oak represented a tangible link to German history at its most illustrious, a history that proved the German people's cultural superiority while pointing toward the thousand-year empire of their dreams. To the inmates of Buchenwald, the tree took on different meanings, as an incongruous vestige of the older Germany, a potent reminder of European culture's utopian promise, and a silent witness to unspeakable crime. Over the course of the next seven years, the men and women in the surrounding camp were enslaved, murdered, and worked to death. Some of Hitler's victims, according to one account, were hanged from the branches of Goethe's tree. The oak itself eventually stopped producing leaves. In one photograph taken by a prisoner with a stolen camera, its branches appear bare and skeletal, reaching up into the empty sky.

Some prisoners linked the tree's fate with that of Nazi Germany, which by the summer of 1944 was careening toward its own downfall. At approximately noon on August 24, 1944, 129 American aircraft converged over the camp and rained down their fury, dropping one thousand bombs and incendiaries and successfully destroying a munitions factory attached to the Buchenwald

complex. That factory had been their prime target, but there were additional casualties: one hundred SS men, nearly four hundred camp inmates—and the old oak tree, which had been scorched by flames. The camp leadership had it felled and sawed for firewood, but one resourceful inmate named Bruno Apitz—a Communist prisoner who had survived in the camp since the year it opened—managed to smuggle back to his barracks an entire block of the tree’s heartwood. With his fellow prisoners standing guard, Apitz risked his life to carve from the wood a bas-relief in the form of a death mask. He called it *Das letzte Gesicht* (The Last Face).

This simple, rough-hewn sculpture—later smuggled from the camp and now owned by the German Historical Museum—individualizes the enormity of Nazi violence through the prism of a single face. It can be thought of as among the early memorials to the Second World War and to the events that, years later, would be called the Shoah or the Holocaust. The grief that lines this last face is grief for all that died at Buchenwald: for the inmates but also perhaps for what the oak represented—that is, the grand European promise of a high culture of poetry, music, and literature, and the very idea of a humanism that might one day unite all people as equals.



While Apitz was at work, chisel in hand, another memorial inspired by the heartwood of German culture was taking shape some three hundred miles away. In Richard Strauss’s villa in the mountain-ringed town of Garmisch, the eighty-year-old composer wrote out two short poems by Goethe, the first one opening with the lines “*Niemand wird sich selber kennen, / Sich von seinem*

Selbst-Ich trennen” (No one will ever know himself / Separate himself from his inner being). The second poem begins “What happens in the world / No one actually understands.” These reflections on the limits of self-knowledge must have resonated with Strauss, a composer who had spectacularly failed to understand his own actions and the world in which he found himself in 1933. During the years of the Third Reich, he had severely misjudged his surroundings, remained in Germany, and forever tainted his reputation by working with the Nazis in the area of cultural policy. He also witnessed the suffering of his Jewish family members (which included his daughter-in-law and his grandchildren) and the wartime destruction of his true spiritual homes, the opera houses of Munich, Dresden, and Vienna.

Now, in August 1944, the world-weary Strauss began work on a choral setting of the first of the Goethe poems, but never completed it. Instead, he swept the musical ideas, which still bore the ghosted impressions of Goethe’s language, into a new composition—a spiraling work of mournful grandeur titled *Metamorphosen*. It would become an elegy to German culture, a death mask in sound, and one of Strauss’s most moving musical utterances, speaking forcefully to the emotions while sealing its secrets behind the music’s veil of wordless beauty. On the score’s final page, Strauss inlaid a quotation from the funeral march of Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony, and below it he inscribed a single lapidary phrase: “IN MEMORIAM!”

Unlike the artist of the sculpture carved at Buchenwald, however, Strauss did not specify what precisely his music was attempting to remember. To this day, whenever the piece is performed, the question reappears. It is no longer his to answer.

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From Hiroshima, to Nanjing, to Pearl Harbor, to the killing fields of the eastern front, the Second World War was a global catastrophe—and a tear in the fabric of humanity. Somewhere near the center of this darkness was the Holocaust itself, an event that continues to haunt Western society’s historical memory just as experiences of trauma may haunt individual memory. It has

been likened to an earthquake that shattered all the instruments designed to record it.

One of those instruments was art, and in the postwar years it lay shattered too. Theodor Adorno, the German-Jewish philosopher, critic, and musical sage, famously pronounced that to write poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric. Yet Adorno returned many times to the question of art in the wake of atrocity, ultimately revising his opinion to honor art's powers of witness. In 1962 he wrote, "The concept of a resurrection of culture after Auschwitz is illusory and senseless, and for that reason every work of art that does come into being is forced to pay a bitter price. But because the world has outlived its own demise, *it needs art as its unconscious chronicle.*"

The role of music in particular as an "unconscious chronicle"—as a witness to history and as a carrier of memory for a post-Holocaust world—is the subject of this book.

It is a book of stories, of sounds, and of places. The principal dramatis personae are four towering twentieth-century composers: Arnold Schoenberg, Richard Strauss, Benjamin Britten, and Dmitri Shostakovich. During the war years, they stood at four very different windows looking out onto the same catastrophe. Each responded to the rupture through intensely charged memorials in sound—pieces that, especially when considered alongside the remarkable history surrounding their creation and reception, endure as some of the defining ethical and aesthetic statements of the twentieth century. Among them are Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw*, Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, Shostakovich's "Babi Yar" Symphony, and Britten's *War Requiem*. This book attempts to open up new perspectives on the wartime past through these particular works of music, through the lives of their creators, and through individual moments in music's social and cultural history.

I approach these memorial works on their own terms, but also in a broader sense as *spaces of encounter*, shifting constellations of sound and meaning that reach across time. Their histories are linked to some of the century's darkest moments of war, genocide, exile, and cultural destruction. But their prehistories, which this book will explore, open onto worlds of possibility, fantasies of emancipation, genealogies of hope. Think of the winged hosannas

of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or the cosmos-embracing euphoria of Mahler's Eighth Symphony. Only after grasping something of the unbounded optimism crystallized in these great musical statements—the dreams and prayers of music's long nineteenth century—can we properly attempt to fathom music's postwar requiems of profoundest mourning. This book seeks to reinscribe all of these musical works with some of the histories, lives, and landscapes they are capable of illuminating. My hope is that these stories—moments drawn from the cultural history and memory of music—will then become part of what we come to *hear* in the works themselves. In this sense, music can preserve for the future an extraordinary gateway to the past, and I believe it does so differently than other art forms.

Ever since the mythical poet Orpheus retrieved his beloved Eurydice from the underworld through the magical power of his song, music has been summoning souls, bridging time, and raising the dead. In his *Complete Dictionary of Music* of 1768, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau attested to these “greatest effects of sounds on the human heart.” To demonstrate the sheer potency of certain sounds, he offered the example of a Swiss folk tune, a “Ranz des Vaches” melody so beloved by the Swiss people that, according to Rousseau, it was forbidden “under pain of death” to play this tune for Swiss soldiers on assignment far from home. Why? Because “so great a desire did [the music] excite in them of returning to their country” that upon hearing it, the soldiers were known to “burst into tears, desert or die.” Rousseau's account may sound exaggerated, but music's ability to trigger flights of memory is a phenomenon many people still experience: think, for instance, of the song that pops up on the car radio and, like Proust's madeleine, instantly calls to mind a moment or experience that took place years or even decades earlier.

Yet it is not just we who remember music. *Music also remembers us*. Music reflects the individuals and the societies that create it, capturing something essential about the era of its birth. When a composer in 1823 consciously or unconsciously distills worlds of thought, fantasy, and emotion into a series of notes on a page, and then we hear those same notes realized in a performance more than a century later, we are hearing the past literally speaking in the present. In this sense, music can fleetingly reorder the past, bring closer that

which is distant, and confound the one-way linearity of time. In these very ways, music shares a profound affinity with *memory itself*. For memory by definition also challenges the pastness of the past and the objective distance of history; it also reorders time and flouts the forward march of the years. An event seared in memory from decades ago may haunt the mind with a power far greater than events that took place only yesterday. Indeed, while Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, was said to be mother of all the Muses, this book contends that one daughter was the first among equals. Memory resonates with the cadences, the revelations, the opacities, and the poignancies of music.

Those very resonances, sensed over time, also have a way of exposing a certain void in the present. We have at our fingertips today more terabytes of information about the past than ever before, and it is almost surreally effortless to access. Without leaving one's sofa, anyone with an internet connection can sift through the contents of the Cairo Geniza or tour the ruins of Pompeii. Yet as the streams of data multiply, and our access to that data becomes ever faster and more convenient, something else appears to be on the wane: our ability to experience an authentic connection to the past, to view our own world as its inheritor, to practice active remembrance or commemoration. As the philosopher Hans Meyerhoff once observed, "Previous generations *knew* much less about the past than we do, but perhaps *felt* a much greater sense of identity and continuity with it." This book has therefore been inspired by two questions. First, at this late date, and on this side of the moral and existential rupture represented by Auschwitz, in a world addled by all manner of digital distractions, at a time when knowledge of history has been replaced by information about history, how might we still come to know, honor, commemorate, feel a connection to, or most simply *live* with the presence of the past?

The second question is very much related. In a world in which works of art and music are often either marginalized or placed on pedestals, how might we return these works to history, not for their sake but for ours, so that they may become, among other things, a prism through which we "remember" what was lost; a gateway to empathy for those who came before; a means of excavating,

recovering, and in some small way redeeming older hopes and prayers, the Enlightenment dreams that are no less precious for having been buried in the rubble? More than shedding new light on any particular musical score or any single moment in history, this book hopes to deepen these questions, to animate them from within, and to enact, to embody, one listener's search for answers.

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Arnold Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* was among the very first significant pieces to memorialize the attempted extermination of European Jewry. Composed in Los Angeles in 1947, this work predates not only the broader public understanding of the events we identify today as the Holocaust or the Shoah but also any established conventions about how such an event should be represented in art. In a particularly bold statement, however, Schoenberg addressed the matter head-on by staging, *within* his memorial, an act of recollection. His work features a narrator, the "survivor" of its title, who confesses he cannot remember everything yet proceeds to baldly recount what was, for its time, a shocking scene from an extermination camp: the camp's prisoners are awoken with a reveille; a German sergeant orders them to assemble, beats them viciously, and demands they count off for the gas chamber. The narrator's sharply etched words pierce the surface of the churning orchestra, which seems to remember everything the narrator himself has forgotten. We hear the shards of a trumpet fanfare, a military drumroll, strings that enter forcefully, then trail off in disorientation. The counting of the prisoners builds to a kind of wild stampede until, suddenly, the piece reaches beyond the spoken narration to claim the mythic mantle of song: a male chorus enters and defiantly sings Judaism's central prayer, the *Shema Yisrael*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This prayer is traditionally recited every morning and night, yet it has also served as the final words uttered by the faithful before death. The piece ends with a huge orchestral crash, leaving the prisoners' fate darkly foreshadowed yet ultimately unknown.

For Adorno, *A Survivor from Warsaw* was the great exemplar of postwar memorial music—a score akin to Picasso’s *Guernica*—because it forced the barbarism of the Holocaust directly into the frame of the work of art itself. In his view, it was precisely the music’s incorporation of horror and suffering—and its rejection of false consolation—that made this work of art “true” and, from the time of its first encounter with audiences, ferocious in its power. After years of Schoenberg’s often thorny music eliciting responses of apprehension or outright disdain, suddenly, with *A Survivor from Warsaw*, the jarring dissonances of the composer’s high-modernist style made sense to a wider audience. What’s more, not only was *this* work newly legible, but new tropes of meaning were now retrospectively conferred on Schoenberg’s art as a whole. All along, it was now argued, the musical dissonances formerly dismissed as noise had in fact been like X-rays revealing the profound social dissonance lying beneath the surface, the violent impulses latent in modern society itself. The Holocaust had laid bare these murderous contradictions for all to see, and now, as Adorno put it, Schoenberg’s music had finally met the world it had always prophesied. In a similar spirit, the composer Luigi Nono hailed Schoenberg’s piece as “the musical aesthetic manifesto of our epoch.” The conductor Robert Craft called its ending “one of the most moving moments of twentieth-century music.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, over the years *A Survivor from Warsaw* has also been a lightning rod for controversy. At first, its shocking nature was deemed inappropriate for early postwar audiences; later, its music was derided as kitsch and its entire artistic worth contested. Yet regardless of where *A Survivor from Warsaw* ranks as a work of art, the score also stands as a profound work of memory, a deeply personal memorial in sound. The story of its creation illuminates Schoenberg’s own enigmatic identity while also linking Europe and America, Judaism and German culture, the early idealism of modernism’s founding vision and the darkness of its wartime exile. And the story of the piece’s 1948 world premiere in a university gymnasium in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with a participating chorus of cowboys—one of the strangest premieres in all of music history—sheds fascinating light on the history of Holocaust commemoration in the United States and beyond. Before

a single stone monument to the Holocaust had been built anywhere in the United States, Schoenberg's music became the *sound* of public memory. What did its first listeners make of it? How did its meaning shift over time? The piece in fact catalyzed new ethical questions: Was it possible to place the victims at the center of a work of memorial art without somehow violating their memory by aestheticizing their deaths? Should genocide really be the stuff of a night out at Carnegie Hall?

In exploring these questions and searching for the elusive truths disclosed by these memorials in sound, this book moves beyond what, in a narrow sense, their composers "meant to say." It proceeds from the premise that works of music can accumulate layers of meaning over time, through the history of their performances but also through the other texts, other lives, and other stories they illuminate. So while this is a book about the *music of memory*, it also necessarily becomes a book about the *memory of music* and the deeper social memory of art—its ability to recall the catastrophes of war but also the optimistic promise and gleam of earlier eras, or what the critic Walter Benjamin called, with touching simplicity, "hope in the past." This book in fact draws inspiration from Benjamin's vision of the true purpose of history: to sort through the rubble of earlier eras in order to recover these buried shards of unrealized hope, to reclaim them, to redeem them. They are, as he saw it, nothing more or less than the moral and spiritual building blocks of an alternate future.

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Of course, the era of the Second World War and the Holocaust is hardly terra incognita. The literature on these events is vast enough to fill entire libraries. But what does it mean to have so much information silently accumulated on shelves? The survivor Jean Améry once bitterly attacked his own era's tendency to publish books on the horrors of the Shoah in order to forget those horrors with a clean conscience, to relegate a shocking and morally unassimilable past to "the cold storage of history." This book, however, contends that the art of music possesses a unique and often underappreciated

power to burn through history's cold storage. Its power may originate in the visceral immediacy of sound itself: sound surrounds us, penetrates our bodies, vibrates within us. Listening to a song, the critic John Berger once wrote, "we find ourselves *inside* a message." But music's potency as a medium of cultural memory also flows from its mysterious capacity to bridge intellect and emotion; its ability to short-circuit the centuries by yoking "then" and "now" within a single performance; and its haunting way of expressing deep yet untranslatable truths that lie beyond the province of language. Thomas Mann called this last quality the "spoken unspokenness" that belongs to music alone. Searching for the unspoken messages of these musical works, and reflecting on how music as such carries forward these messages, is a primary task of this book.

Along the way, it may be natural to wonder if the meaning—the memory—is *in* the music or does it reside in us, the listeners? The pages ahead suggest it is located in the relationship between the two. The composers had their own intentions in creating these scores. But even if we could know those intentions fully, they would in no way exhaust the music's range of contemporary meanings. Once a work enters the world, it becomes like a palimpsest, those medieval writing tablets on which each performance, each musician, each listener, inscribes another layer of text, another layer of significance. Over time, great works of music themselves become like vast archives of public memory.

As any historian will confess, however, the same archive can be used to tell many different stories about the past, and so can any individual work of music. These accounts therefore add up to what is in some ways a very personal book. I am not attempting to deduce or assign new fixed or universal meanings for this music. Nor do I offer a comprehensive history of the musical memorialization of the Second World War, or a wide survey of musical responses to the Holocaust. Instead, this book summons the remarkable lives of four composers central to the mainstream repertoire of Western classical music and follows their paths through the darkness at the heart of the twentieth century. The war-haunted memorials each of them created are extraordinary on their own terms, but also for the considerable

light they still cast, one that simultaneously shines backward into the past, forward toward our own era, and sideways to give us flashes of the worlds into which the music was born. This book attempts to discover where that light has fallen, to recover, to recollect and to re-collect, some of the lives and legacies, the losses and the moments of hope that these works are capable of illuminating.

These tasks have been approached with the ears of a critic and the tools of a historian. I have also journeyed to many of the sites central to the history and the music described in these pages. These include the location of the Babi Yar massacre outside Kyiv, the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, Strauss's stately *Landhaus* in southern Bavaria, and the deeply furrowed, weather-beaten stump of Goethe's oak inside the gates of Buchenwald. The music may no longer be in these places, but these places are forever in the music. Unearthing the layers of the past requires, in the words of the scholar and artist Svetlana Boym, "a dual archeology of memory and of place."

This book's excavation will also draw from acts of literary witness, the testimony of writers whose own lives were riven—and sometimes ended—by the murderous contradictions of the world they sought to describe. Theodor Adorno was forced into exile. Walter Benjamin took his own life while trying to flee Nazi-occupied Europe, as did the writer Stefan Zweig while living as an exile in Brazil. The Russian poet Anna Akhmatova suffered through war and revolution. The novelist Vasily Grossman died with his crowning masterwork unpublished and, as he put it, under permanent "arrest" by the KGB. The sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who invented the entire concept of collective memory, perished at Buchenwald.

One later German writer from whose work I have drawn particularly deep inspiration is W. G. Sebald (1944–2001). Through his novels *Austerlitz*, *The Emigrants*, and *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald distinguished himself as the German postwar generation's great poet of memory and a master guide to the ways in which landscape, art, and architecture can serve as portals to the past. The Holocaust, exile, colonialism, and the history of human-engineered destruction are ubiquitous themes in his work, but their memory is filtered through Sebald's own elliptical prose as if through a series of scrims, so that

the once-blinding light of these catastrophes can be perceived only as a diffuse glow. And while Sebald rarely wrote about music, his approach to the ever-vanishing remnants of the past, the traces of earlier loss, resonates deeply with music's own ghostly play of presence and absence, its fleeting moments of contact with another era's wordless truths.

As anyone acquainted with Sebald's work will note, I have also been inspired by his convention of embedding uncaptioned photographs within the body of the text. In his books, these embedded images deepen and poetically inflect the melancholy spell cast by his prose. In this book, they serve a far more humble purpose as a kind of counterpoint of visual memory that I hope will nonetheless contribute, from its own oblique angle, to the reader's experience. When glancing back at the past, Sebald has written, "we are always looking and looking away."

This is not the standard approach to these subjects. Typically history is written without much regard for music, and music is often heard as residing outside history. This book instead asks what might happen when we peer at each through the prism of the other—that is, when sounds are entwined with stories and we listen to the past through music's ears. I have taken this approach not for the sake of "filling in some gaps" but in the hope of illuminating and activating the possibilities that open when we attempt to hear music *as* culture's memory. And because these goals are fundamentally generative, because they relate to how we live today and how we experience art in the here and now, I do not consider this book primarily a work of elegy. Instead, among many other things, it becomes an experiment in the reciprocal enchantment of music and history. That experiment will have succeeded only if each one becomes fuller, and more luminous, in the presence of the other.

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It is an experiment that arrives at a particular cultural and historical moment. More than seventy-five years after the end of the war, the last generation that lived through the era directly and remains capable of telling its own stories is rapidly disappearing. Soon our contact with those works of art that outlived

their times will be among the few ways left to encounter this increasingly distant past, to grapple with its legacies, to find new ways of living *with* its ghosts. In this context, these musical works may be seen as vital repositories of cultural memory, objects in which the living past still resides. They become, borrowing an image from the French historian Pierre Nora, “like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”

Ultimately, it is my hope that this present collection of shells and sounds and stories can gesture toward new ways of knowing the past, new ways of *hearing* history. This is not a passive process on the part of the listener, or as the composer Paul Hindemith once observed, “music...remains meaningless noise unless it touches a receiving mind.” In this sense, this book is also implicitly an argument for what I call deep listening—that is, listening with an understanding of music as time’s echo. Deep listening is to the memory of music what a performance is to a score: Without a musician to realize a score, it is nothing but a collection of lines and dots lying mute on a page. Similarly, without deep listening there is no memory in music’s history. Instead, we have the disconnected sounds of a Schubert symphony streaming into an empty room. We have “classics for relaxing.” Without deep listening, the voices of the past are whispering into the void.

Music does have its own special way of enunciating those voices, and what is memory if not the enactment of the presence of the past? Central to this book, however, is also the conviction that memory’s gaze should not remain exclusively retrospective. What we choose to remember is also what we preserve, and what we preserve can be built upon. In this sense, every memorial also points forward. The poet Friedrich Schlegel once famously noted that “the historian is a prophet facing backwards.” In these same terms, the memorialist is a historian, angled toward the future.

Not to be lost in these journeys at the intersection of sound and memory is the crucial fact that the Second World War and the Holocaust were inextricably linked yet also critically distinct events. While they overlapped in time and space, the former was a worldwide geopolitical conflict, the latter a moral, ideological, existential cataclysm that played out mostly on the continent of Europe. While the war was waged with brutal modern-day