Dover Quartet recital offers unusual program, including works by “forgotten composers” Viktor Ullmann and Szymon Laks

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A recent recital in New York City by the Dover Quartet offered an unusual program. It included wonderful renditions of Romantic works by Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann, but what made it special was the presence on the program of quartets by Viktor Ullmann and Szymon Laks. Ullmann and Laks are among the “forgotten composers” whose careers were ended or derailed by the Nazi Holocaust, and who are too slowly being rediscovered today.

It is an indication of the growing interest in these composers that the relatively youthful but highly successful Dover Quartet, consisting of violinists Joel Link and Bryan Lee, violist Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt and cellist Camden Shaw, chose to play them at the People’s Symphony Concerts series at Washington Irving High School auditorium in Manhattan on November 18.

The Dover Quartet won the top prize at the 2013 International String Quartet Competition in Banff, Alberta. The young quartet has since won numerous other awards and prizes, has performed at New York’s Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, and has toured around the world.

The Czech-born Ullmann (1898-1944) spent two years at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, located in the northern part of what is now the Czech Republic. The Nazis attempted to use the camp as a propaganda tool by pointing to some cultural activities that were allowed to continue there, despite the brutal and murderous conditions for the vast majority of prisoners.

More than two-thirds of the 41 works completed by Ullmann before his transfer from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz in 1944, where he was gassed to death two days later, were lost in the war. One of those which remains, the String Quartet No. 3, was composed in Theresienstadt and was on the Dover Quartet’s program last month. Ullmann was already known for his musical gifts, and it is impossible to say what other important compositions he would have created had his life not been cut short.

Szymon Laks (1901-1983) spent more than two years at Auschwitz, but was one of the few who survived the death camp. Polish-born, he lived in Paris for most of the 15 years before the Second World War. It was there that he was arrested after the Nazis occupied France. He survived Auschwitz only because he became the conductor of the camp orchestra. His String Quartet No. 3, also on the Dover program, was composed just after the end of the war, several months after the liberation of Auschwitz.

Although Laks, who became a French citizen, continued to compose after the war, there were periods when he left composition aside. His works include one opera, other vocal music and chamber music. His works after the war often dealt with Jewish themes. He is also well known for his powerful memoir of life at Auschwitz, *Music of Another Time* (1948).

The Ullmann and Laks compositions comprise, along with Dmitri Shostakovich’s better-known String Quartet No. 2, the contents of a new Dover Quartet CD entitled “Voices of Defiance.” As cellist Camden Shaw explains, the Laks quartet was the last of these three to come to their attention. When the musicians made its acquaintance a few years ago, they knew the Ullmann work, and already had hopes of recording the Shostakovich. These three works, composed in 1943 (Ullmann), 1944 (Shostakovich) and 1945 (Laks), and linked by the common experience of the war and the fight against fascism, “fell into place almost inevitably,” Shaw writes.

The Ullmann quartet is in just two movements, and only 15 minutes long. The influence of Arnold Schoenberg, the modernist inventor of the 12-tone system of composition, is present. In the early 1920s Ullmann studied with Schoenberg and also with Alexander von Zemlinsky.

Like a more famous Schoenberg pupil, Alban Berg, Ullmann did not follow his teacher’s methods slavishly. He found a path to his own style. He combined tonal music with elements of atonality. The impression left by the Third Quartet is one of extreme tension and shifts in mood, as elaborated in some detail by Shaw in his informative and thoughtful liner notes. There are abrupt changes in dynamics and tempo, frequent moments when one cannot help thinking of the fact that this work was composed inside of a concentration camp where thousands lost their lives and from which an even greater number, including Ullmann himself, were deported to Auschwitz and killed.

The work closes, as Shaw points out, with “a thundering fortissimo, now unambiguously triumphant.” It would not be

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overstating it to see this as the composer's affirmation of life in the midst of barbarism.

The Laks quartet, more traditional in some ways, is in the usual four movements. The work uses Polish folk song themes, an expression of relief and freedom following the liberation of Auschwitz. The overall mood of this work is one of a return to life, and it is even celebratory at some moments.

The opening theme of the first movement evokes "an ecstatic train ride," according to Shaw. There are a number of intrusions of menace and tragedy, however, clearly reflecting memories that were all too fresh.

The slow movement uses folk song, projecting a peaceful, somber yet optimistic mood at times, although it is interrupted midway by a kind of anguished cry. The third movement, more relaxed, contains an unusual lengthy section of unison pizzicato for all four instruments, followed by a delightful dance-like interlude, and then the return of the opening. And the final movement, in Shaw's very persuasive account, "sounds like Laks walking into his hometown for the first time after the war."

Both the Ullmann and Laks compositions can stand comparison with the wonderful quartet by Shostakovich on the Dover Quartet's new CD. Their music, while not derivative, calls to mind the best of 20th century chamber music, including works of Bela Bartok, Benjamin Britten and Olivier Messiaen.

Whether by design or not, the November 18 concert program at Washington Irving also included two works, the Mendelssohn Four Pieces for String Quartet, Opus 81, and the Schumann Opus 41 #2 quartet, that were composed in the early to mid-1840s, almost exactly 100 years before the other half of the program, the Ullmann and Laks quartets. One cannot help but consider the conditions of this part of the 19th century, when the ideas of the Enlightenment in the aftermath of the French Revolution animated so much literature, art and music, and compare them with the period of world war and fascism out of which Ullmann's and Laks's music arose.

Camden Shaw quotes from Laks's memoir, in a passage that painfully juxtaposes the beauty of music with the reality of Auschwitz: "He played as though inspired, so absorbed in phrasing the showy melody that he did not perceive the long line of trucks, packed with women, creeping toward the crematoria. With a smile, Doctor Menasche, proud of his performance, placed the instrument on his knees. The trucks disappeared around the bend. In one of them was the doctor's daughter."

The Dover Quartet's CD comprises the work of one composer who fell victim to fascism, one who survived, and a third, Shostakovich, who composed his quartet soon after the horrific siege of Leningrad. This was a year before the end of a war that would claim the lives of more than 20 million Soviet soldiers and civilians. The name of the CD, "Voices of Defiance," conveys what the liner notes refer to as "the tremendous resilience of the human spirit."

The Dover Quartet is in residence at the Peoples Symphony Concerts, the first ensemble-in-residence in the history of this important cultural treasure, which was founded in New York City in 1900. The Quartet's activities during its residency include outreach to the city's public schools.

The Peoples Symphony Concerts originated during the peak years of immigration to the US, when millions of East European Jews, Italians and others streamed into major US cities, especially New York. Many of these immigrant workers were hungry for musical and other cultural activities.

These concerts, consisting of 12 Saturday evening recitals in lower Manhattan between September and May and another six Sunday afternoon concerts at midtown Manhattan's Town Hall, remain one of the most affordable classical music opportunities. The performances feature both excellent young performers and world-famous soloists and ensembles such as the Juilliard String Quartet and pianists Garrick Ohlsson, Peter Serkin, Emmanuel Ax and Yefim Bronfman. While even the cheapest seats at Carnegie Hall or the Metropolitan Opera cost $25 or more, a series of six of these chamber music concerts is priced at only $42, or $7 for each recital.

It is a somewhat hopeful sign that this series, whose programs in the past sometimes leaned more heavily toward music of the 19th century, is more and more including works such as those by Ullmann and Laks, along with Shostakovich, Bartok and other 20th century masters. New audiences should be exposed to the whole range of music in the classical tradition, stretching from the 18th century through the 20th and into the 21st, including efforts by contemporary composers to continue and develop this tradition today.

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