

Introduction

Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation is a study of the Holocaust as a historicized and aestheticized subject, with specific attention to its musical depiction by composers working in the second half of the twentieth century. Through a series of case studies, I pursue two musicological goals: (1) to provide models for the interpretation of musical witness and (2) to consider how its cultural receptions in specific moments serve as loci for important questions about history, memory, imagination, and ethics. The book explores how secondary musical witness developed during the early postwar historiography of the Holocaust, with special attention paid to how musical compositions and their reception histories participated in the developing philosophical critique over the limits of artistic Holocaust representation. My intent is to respond productively to Theodor W. Adorno's well-known dictum – “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” – by reading it not as an imperative or artistic injunction but as an invitation to explore individual aesthetics (“to write poetry”), interpretive contexts of history (“after Auschwitz”), and ethical and political intents (“is barbaric”).¹ As such, *Musical Witness* understands the Holocaust not only as a real historical event, but also more abstractly as a “radical problem for understanding” and an artistic subject that requires a “focused account of the psychic, intellectual, and cultural aftermath of the Holocaust and a broad theoretical intervention into post–World War II thought.”²

Secondary musical witness of the Holocaust emerged in the immediate postwar period and quickly became a genre of musical expression, one with its own set of aesthetic criteria and cultural consequences. Among its earliest examples is Arnold Schoenberg's cantata, *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), for which Schoenberg explicitly notes that the inspiration for the piece was “reports which [he had] received directly or indirectly,” thus highlighting a key aspect of the genre.³ Unlike general figurative representation, musical witness infers this “possibility of immediate contact” with historical materials or voices from the Holocaust.⁴ It promotes the perception that a “sense of the real” lays buried somewhere beneath the veneer of language and thus imbues the work with a sense of moral, ethical, and historical agency lacking from a purely fictionalized account. Its artistic voice is as varied and diversified as historical witness itself, as both are conditioned by the same qualities of individual voice and experience,

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cultural context, and language that critics have observed in other memorial accounts. The works therefore communicate less about the Holocaust as a historical event and more about the “memory-artists’ time, their place in aesthetic discourse, their media and material.”⁵ Musical witness embodies this dialogical relationship between art, history, and memory, in which “memory and its meanings depend not just on the forms and figures in the [work] itself, but on the viewer’s response to the [work], how it is used politically, . . . who sees it under what circumstances, how its figures enter other media and are recast in new surroundings.”⁶

One impetus behind the writing of *Musical Witness* was the need to address a lacuna in the broader field of Holocaust studies, which has examined and evaluated similar aesthetic and ethical questions with regard to other artistic mediums – architecture, film, literature and poetry, monuments, theater, visual arts – but has generally excluded musical compositions from analytical treatment. This study therefore aims to contribute valuable information to musical and cultural historiographies of the mid-century, with the intersection of aesthetic movements such as modernism, realism, and postmodernism reflecting a “complex system of [aesthetic] understanding” in the postwar period.⁷ As Michael Rothberg notes, the phrase “after Auschwitz” signals to readers “the invasion of modernism by trauma and illustrates how progressive history’s fundamental chronological articulation . . . runs aground at the site of murder.”⁸ Specific analytical examinations of the musical case studies themselves provide concrete examples of the cultural benefits and consequences that accompany works that employ musical witness as a generic style. Intellectual engagement of the repertory thus leads to a productive discourse about the tropes and traps of musical Holocaust representation, an instructive discussion for scholars, composers, and performers alike.

Defining musical witness

Within this study, I interpret witness as an intellectual concept that has the potential to inform and guide analytical considerations of secondary musical representations, rather than its more accepted usage of an eyewitness to or a testimonial account of a historical event. In that regard, the composers that I engage in this study, while at times personally affected by the political circumstances of World War II and the Holocaust, are not posited as primary witnesses of the genocide; their memorial narratives must not be misconstrued as historical documents but understood as secondary imaginative accounts of the Holocaust and markers of its cultural meanings.⁹ Cultural historians such as Ernst van Alphen,

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Lawrence L. Langer, and Geoffrey Hartman have come to characterize secondary witnesses as intellectual or adoptive narrators of the Holocaust, individuals who “make us feel like close and empathic observers” but who are not necessarily bound to “testify by a moral as well as an intellectual engagement.”¹⁰ Such artists and scholars are removed from the trauma of the genocide itself, and thus their “imaginative discourses of art and language” are, as van Alphen argues, “secondary; that is, they can only work upon the historical discourse, which is primary.”¹¹ Implied in the relationship of secondary witness is a perceived distance from the historical event itself, a remove that allows the artist to focus on interpreting the Holocaust according to the artist’s understanding of its meaning within a present-day (or even personal) context, be that social, cultural, or aesthetic.

Importantly, this study makes no such claims for direct transference between primary and secondary witness; the two are posited here as related but discrete expressive phenomena.¹² It does contend, however, that the analysis of secondary musical witness can benefit directly from the important reconsiderations of primary witness taking place in the humanities today. In his discussions of primary Holocaust witness, scholar Henry Greenspan acknowledges that the term “witness” must be critically recognized as both a noun *and* a transitive verb, as a site and act of translation and transformation generated by the various actors involved in testimonial expression.¹³ Historian Berel Lang goes one step further, recognizing that because “the motivations and abilities of [witnesses] as writers [make] a difference in their reports as witnesses . . . it would be a mistake to analyze witness-narratives as if they had nothing to do with the act (or art) of seeing.”¹⁴ Lang’s reference to witness as an “art of seeing” suggests that witness might also be more creatively construed as descriptive of certain generic conventions, forms, and idioms associated with the testimonial act – what musicologist Kerstin Sicking refers to as the modes and medias of memory.¹⁵ Witness thus becomes a rich interpretive term, a constellation signifying its simultaneous status as a noun, verb, and genre.

Noun: Psychologist Dori Laub recognizes Holocaust witness as comprised of three distinct levels: the “level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.”¹⁶ Similarly, one might posit three central agents within the expression of musical witness: the composer as imaginative witness, the artwork as an expression of that witness, and the audience as the receiving body for the witness performance.¹⁷ In the case of the first, the composer acts as an interpretive but belated witness to the historical record.¹⁸ His witness is defined by

experiential distance from the historical event as well as by the conditions of his unique aesthetic voice. The resulting testimonial voice established within the composition comprises a second level of witness. Through this imagined first-person voice, the fictional witness portrayed in the artwork asserts testimonial sway over the audience, a quality that Lang argues is the most powerful (and thus most political) aspect of witness.¹⁹ Completing the triumvirate are the audiences that receive and interpret musical witness as part of their own “thinking-about-the-Holocaust.”²⁰ Their discourses comprise the tertiary realm of reception history, documenting the impact of an artwork within a specific interpretive and memorial moment.²¹ More abstractly, Lang characterizes witness as an “encounter with a presence,” which suggests that musical witness might also be conceived of as a “three-place relation” that involves the composer and listener as interpretive agents and identifies the composition as the site of exchange onto which they inscribe their understanding of the Holocaust.²²

As a site of expression, musical witness is neither rigid nor monolithic but rather malleable and multivalent with regard to its memorial potentials and sociocultural meanings. Inherently, it requires multiple agents to realize its expressive and memorial potential. The challenge for musicologists lies in disentangling the various threads that converge within the site of musical witness, for these sites are multivocal – expressive of various agendas and viewpoints – and therefore complicate and compete for direct narration of the Holocaust. Moreover, musical witness ultimately requires both the composer and another discursive agent – the listener, whose interaction with the work contributes to the aggregation (and aggravation) of competing discourses. Musical witness therefore reveals itself as “never merely individual and never merely social, but rather [an art form] that operates at – or *as* – the jointure of the two.”²³ As a negotiated and often contested *lieu de mémoire*, it necessarily accrues cultural meanings without seeking to collectivize them, simultaneously engaging past and present – the historical and the interpretive – through a medium that secretes the intimate encounter associated with first-person testimonies.²⁴

Verb: Holocaust witnesses ultimately testify to the historical record through the sharing of their testimony, demonstrating that witness is not only a site of memory but also an act of memory – a narrative impulse that is multidirectional and self-reflexive. The dynamic nature of witness – its interpretational movement, so to speak – also suggests an action, the moving of the past into the present.²⁵ As Lang contends in his discussion of philosophical witnessing, the philosopher (and one could substitute the musical witness here) “brings the past into the present, much in the way that personal eye-witnesses of the events of everyday life bring and sustain

their pasts into the present.”²⁶ It is a move from the realm of experience and history into that of criticism and memory, an act that author Lore Segal argues is not always benign: “Recollection is . . . a collision between two images, [with] memory [made] of a different material . . . [from that] of the real.”²⁷

Put another way, musical witness speaks not of the event itself but of the subjective recollection of the event from a different, often belated, and unsettled vantage point; its voice is both reflective and reflexive, revealing aspects of both the event and the witness him- or herself. As James E. Young explains, “narrative testimony documents *not* the experiences it relates, but rather the conceptual presuppositions through which the narrator has apprehended experience . . . [It] cannot document events, or constitute perfect *factuality*, [but] it can document the *actuality* of writer and text.”²⁸ Young strategically problematizes the simplistic conflation of factuality and actuality in witness testimony, but his italics also stress how narrative reveals the interpretive *actions* of a given witness via the contours of the texts he creates. “Narrative strategy, structure, and style,” he contends, “all become forms of commentary on the writing act itself, now evident by the text it has produced,” a statement that supports the view that “tradition undoubtedly exerts influence [in witness narratives] as elsewhere in the history of ideas and culture.”²⁹

Genre: Aleida Assmann describes witness as presenting a “fragile verbal frame for what remains untold. Instead of arbitrary signs written on paper, there is the (indexical) tone of an individual human voice, changing its pace, pitch, and timbre; . . . [it is] expressive and concrete, individual and memorable.”³⁰ This performative aspect of witness contributes to its aesthetic articulation, in that witnesses “go beyond reportage” to present memories through the “focalizing power of poetics.”³¹ And when witness transfers from the realm of immediate oral expression to written or artistic mediums, the role of aesthetics becomes even more crucial to its testimonial expressions. As literary scholar Sandra Alfers asserts, any form of Holocaust writing actively generates and shapes our knowledge of the world through the employment of generic considerations that structure and shape the expression of trauma. She argues that witness ultimately functions “‘in the adjectival sense’ as ‘a thematic or tonal qualification’ of genre. Thus ‘testimonial’ . . . could be recognized as [a particular mode] of the genre of [Holocaust] poetry.”³²

As a genre, musical witness ultimately borrows from an established and expansive lexicon of primary Holocaust witness, with individual composers selecting aesthetic styles and texts that complement their own musical proclivities. It generally manifests itself as an “intimate

expression,” meaning that it does not “operate at a level of generality or within a structure that creates a distance between the speaker and the feelings or actions described.”³³ Central to this intimate aesthetic is the appropriation of a witness voice that speaks directly to the audience. This first-person voice promotes what Young refers to as “a sense of doubleness” within musical witness, with the appropriation of a survivor’s voice serving as a “move by which [the composer] would impute to his fiction the authority of testimony, without the authenticity of actual testimony.”³⁴ Such an aesthetic often has a powerful rhetorical effect, one that obscures, but never entirely erases, the compositional hand. It provides the illusion of a direct and connective thread between listener, witness, and event – often driven by the personal intent to remember the Holocaust and engender empathy for its victims.

Musical witness also seeks to transmit a “texture of fact” to the listener, usually through reference to or employment of documentary sources designed to persuade the audience of a work’s historical accuracy and memorial authority.³⁵ It seeks to suffuse the “surrounding text with the privilege and authority of witness” and generally manifests itself in a close binding of the composer’s voice with that of the witness-figure and an explicit reference to historical sources.³⁶ The perceived unity of discrete subjective voices is critical to the genre of musical witness, and within this study composers employ various techniques to achieve its effect. In some cases, the composers fabricate a fictionalized witness, working hard to accommodate features of a testimonial style within the boundaries of their own expressive means. This integrative effect creates the illusion that the musical witness is speaking directly to the audience, albeit through the proxy-voice of the composer, and attempts to establish a closely aligned subject position between composer and fictional witness. The merger of testimonial voices within mixed media formats – such as documentary film scores – is another means by which composers engage with a texture of fact. Documentary images provide historical landscapes and subjects for the composer to animate; he provides their figures with an additional layer of emotional intent and embodiment via the musical score. A final method of documentary realism relies on textural interjection of recorded source materials – the integration of actual witness voices or sound clips into a narrative via technological sampling.

Complementing this “texture of fact” are the aesthetic “textures of memory” created by a composer to reflect the traumatic impact of the Holocaust on the witness’s psyche. Because psychological reactions to the genocide are wide and varied, the cataloguing of traumatic aesthetics within testimonial witness becomes an impossible task due to the

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exhaustive range of expressive possibilities and psychological responses. Within musical witness, the aesthetic modes of representation are similarly diverse, as composers contend with both the signs of trauma they observe within a testimonial source as well as their own stylistic proclivities. As such, musical witness does not promote a single or shared texture of memory. Rather, it calls for a more individualized analytical approach, one that derives from the issues raised by the compositional subject and work itself, rather than arbitrary models imposed on the subject from without.

Despite these disparate aesthetics of individual witness, one particular aesthetic trope does emerge in most cases of musical witness, in part due to the temporal (and often abstract) nature of the medium. It is the interjection of sonic disjunctions into an overarching musical structure or language, often designed to mirror the nonsequential interjections of traumatic memories, that produce disorientation or narrative disruption within a testimony.³⁷ Within primary testimonial accounts, these signals often adopt aesthetic contours, resulting in various linguistic traumata such as “pauses, periods of silence, uncompleted sentences, innuendo.”³⁸ Young observes that authors who seek to promote a “traumatic voice” in their imaginative work are similarly tasked with “represent[ing] the sense of discontinuity and disorientation in catastrophic events . . . all in a medium that necessarily ‘orients’ the reader.”³⁹ Within musical witness, these textures of discontinuity usually manifest themselves in the form of recognized topoi associated with textual dissociation, structural breaks and gaps, and surface musical fragmentation, or in compositional decisions that disrupt the conventions of the genre chosen to structure the narrative. And yet composers will generally seek to balance these musical disruptions by satisfying some of the conventional expectations inherent in their choice of a musical genre or style, in order to aid the comprehension of the listener. The result is a “peculiar combination of ordinary and extreme elements” that often manifests itself in a standardized lexicon of linguistic and sound effects.⁴⁰

Interpreting musical witness

The tradition of interpreting musical witness along both aesthetic and ethical lines also emerged in the immediate postwar period, notably within journalistic accounts of its performances and Adorno’s philosophical critiques of *A Survivor from Warsaw*. It developed concurrently with an increasing consciousness about the horrific scope of the Holocaust and the nascent debate over the benefits and consequences of traumatic

representation. Within musicology, two interpretive strands have gained currency within the scholarly literature in the past few decades: one argues for musical witness as an important cultural vehicle for memory and empathy, while the other questions whether musical witness enacts a form of aesthetic trauma against historical memory and the actual victims. The impulse to bear imaginative witness to trauma leads to what Young describes as “a parallel and contradictory impulse on the part of [artists] to preserve in narrative the very *discontinuity* that lends events their violent character, the same discontinuity that is so effectively neutralized by its narrative rendering.”⁴¹ The translation of real human suffering into recognizable, consumable, and redemptive musical narratives, in this context, might be read as traumatic in its own right – whether accused of overcoding “accounts of the Holocaust with a discourse of healing analysis or therapy” or of consciously or unconsciously expunging “the traces of the trauma or loss that called the narrative into being in the first place.”⁴² And yet, as musicologist Maria Cizmic recognizes, “aesthetic works that foreground such fragmentation and disruption can [also] engage complicated issues around suffering and historical memory and prompt audiences to experience empathy that widens their understanding of the world.”⁴³ The result is a double-edged sword, a genre that can both engender and promote memory while potentially prompting a certain quality of historical forgetting or revision.

The development of this philosophical debate is well established within the literature of Holocaust studies, but few studies have considered the crucial role that music played in the formulation of the central paradox, let alone how the debate has played out in musical spheres. This study seeks to rectify these omissions by telling the narrative of musical Holocaust representation in the Western art music tradition through a series of selected episodes that illustrate important milestones in the development of the genre. This historiography unfolds chronologically and traces the maturation of the genre from one of its earliest examples, Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947), to Chaya Czernowin’s *Pnima . . . ins Innere* (2000), written at the close of the twentieth century. The intervening chapters engage key figures and compositions whose critiques and methods shed further light on the ability of musical techniques to represent traumatic memory as well as the developing state of Holocaust criticism within the field of music. What emerges is an account of musical Holocaust representation that seeks to assert the repertory’s importance to broader historiographies of Holocaust art while also providing analytical models for musicologists working with compositions that engage traumatic events and documentary sources as their subject.

The repertory of Holocaust-themed compositions is wide ranging, multi-generic, and international, which was both a blessing and a curse when it came to selecting case studies. To provide a sense of transition and connectivity between the chapters, I purposefully selected compositions that were well recognized, had already been engaged in musicological scholarship, and were representative of a key development within the historical narrative. As one of the earliest examples of musical witness, *A Survivor from Warsaw* sets the stage by exploring how Schoenberg responded to the fact of the Holocaust through a personalized theory of musical memory. Adorno then directly engages Schoenberg's portrayal in his philosophical criticism, laying the philosophical foundation for the aforementioned (and unresolved) debate over the aesthetic limits of representation. Hanns Eisler's film score for *Nuit et Brouillard* suggests that musical witness can productively dispel denial and forgetfulness by directly engaging the audience in historically based memorial work and empathy. The postmemorial adoption of the Holocaust cantata *Jüdische Chronik* in the German Democratic Republic then provides a critique of such public memorialization by examining how musical Holocaust memory can become coopted for ideological and political agendas that are disingenuous. Steve Reich's *Different Trains* moves the narrative forward into the decades of postmodernism, introducing new methods and concerns regarding the use of recorded survivor testimony as the basis for musical composition. In the Epilogue, I consider how the developing debate over the limits of representation has impacted musicological discourse as well as compositional approaches, with Chaya Czernowin's *Pnima ... ins Innere* offering a potential vision for a more self-conscious meditation on musical witness in the new century.

The decision to explore the broader chronology through individual case studies is also a deliberate choice, for as Kay Kaufman Shelemay notes, "most studies of memory in the Jewish cultural arena ... necessarily focus on its collective aspects."⁴⁴ As a notable exception, she cites Lawrence L. Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, which "plumbs oral testimonies to construct a taxonomy of the intensely personal remembering of trauma ... [and] provides a welcome counterpoint" to more collective accounts.⁴⁵ I, too, have been influenced by Langer's study – the first scholarly source on traumatic Holocaust memory that I read in conjunction with this project – and hope that my case studies might also provide an opportunity to delve into the rich and complex compositional and historical contexts of musical witness by allowing the reader to gain a sense of each individual composer, work, and performance context. Each chapter therefore examines the compositional context for a given work,

assesses its representational contours and agendas, and then details the circumstances behind its reception. While each case study contends with both compositional techniques and reception history, the specific balance between these two poles varies. Some works are noteworthy for their structural attempt to represent Holocaust memory and trauma, whereas others gain their significance through the cultural debates and performances that they provoke. In each case, I have attempted to determine those moments in a work's history when its musical witness became part of a wider cultural discussion about Holocaust memory, often stretching beyond musical circles of criticism to influence the public sphere. All of the compositions utilize historical materials as part of their creative process, and as such the book also offers insight into how composers build both "textures of fact" as well as "textures of memory" into their representational creations.