



Restaging *Brundibár*: an Exercise in Resistance and an Antidote to Intolerance

Reorganizando *Brundibár*: um exercício de resistência e um antídoto para a intolerância

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Abstract: In 2007 I had the chance to direct *Brundibár*, a children's opera by the Czech composer Hans Krása, as part of a project carried out at the Juiz de Fora Military College (CMJF) in Brazil. At face value, it seems trivial: one more school music project. However, the context within which the opera acquired renown – that of the Holocaust – broadens the project's reach. This context produced profound reflections on the links between ethics and aesthetics, particularly when it came to remember – with children – traumatic events that themselves involved so many youngsters. This article reports on that experience.

Keywords: Hans Krása. Holocaust. Music.

Resumo: Este texto reporta o que foi o projeto 'Projeto *Brundibár* – Porque intolerância não é coisa do passado', realizado no CMJF em 2007, que culminou com a produção da ópera homônima de Hans Krasa. pelos alunos do colégio. Considerando-se o contexto em que esta obra se tornou mais conhecida, o Holocausto, o texto reflete sobre as relações entre estética e ética, especialmente no que diz respeito à memória de eventos traumáticos para e com crianças. O entendimento que norteou todo o projeto, o de que as artes em geral, e a música em particular, podem funcionar como um verdadeiro antídoto contra a intolerância e a violência dela decorrente.

Palavras-chave: Hans Krása. Holocausto. Música.

In 2007 I had the chance to direct *Brundibár*, a children's opera by the Czech composer Hans Krása, as part of a project carried out at the Juiz de Fora Military College (CMJF) in Brazil. At face value, it seems trivial: one more school music project. However, the context within which the opera acquired renown – that of the Holocaust – broadens the project's reach. This context produced profound reflections on the links between

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ethics and aesthetics, particularly when it came to remember – with children – traumatic events that themselves involved so many youngsters.

This essay has two purposes. One is to describe the project '*Brundibár*: why intolerance is not a thing of the past', which we carried out at CMJF, culminating in a student production of the opera. The other is to reflect on the profound ethical implications of the pedagogical treatment we gave to the project. Guiding the whole project was the belief that the arts, and particularly music, can be a true antidote both to intolerance and to the violence that flows from it. The idea was that by putting on a children's opera linked to the Holocaust, we would be able to look with the children at those historical realities of intolerance (and particularly those caused by the opera), also bringing them to the minds of the audience. Thus, we hoped that both audience and children would be brought to understand that intolerance is not merely a thing of the past, but that it is at the core of all violence experienced today.

Brundibár is a children's opera by the Czech composer Hans Krása (1899-1944), always described as a grand allegory of the triumph of good over evil. The opera tells the story of two brothers, Pepiček and Aninka, that manage – with the help of three animals and many other children – to defeat Brundibár, an evil organ grinder, who will not let them sing. With Brundibár defeated the children can finally sing, and with their songs earn the money to buy milk for their sick mother. The opera comes close to be a simple allegory of good defeating evil, though not authoritarian violence, but rather solidarity and perseverance. The opera is divided into two short acts and does not last more than 40 minutes.

The opera was composed in 1938 and first staged in Prague, but where it was most successful was at the Terezín Concentration Camp (or, in German, Theresienstadt), in the Czech Republic. In 1939, the Nazi forces began their occupation of Czechoslovakia by laying claim to the Sudeten region, annexed from Germany in the First World War, in 1939. In November 1941, the Nazis turned Terezín – originally a fortification belonging to a small walled city – into a transportation camp and ghetto. In that same month, *Brundibár* was staged in secret at a Jewish orphanage in Prague. In 1942, the Nazis sent some of that orphanage's directors and children to Terezín, and, coincidentally, the opera's composer himself, Hans Krása. It is not however until 1943 that *Brundibár* arrives at Terezín, with Rudolf Freudenfeld who managed to smuggle a piano arrangement in with him when he was deported there. Hans Krása then orchestrated the opera for the instruments available in the camp, and rehearsal began in secret. Theatre director Frantisek Zelenka built the scenery with stolen wood, Kamila Rosenbaum, a famous dancer from Vienna, choreographed it, and on the 23rd of September 1943 *Brundibár* opened in the Magdeburg shack, at the Terezín camp,



going on to be the camp's greatest musical success, completing 55 performances before closing in 1945.¹

Between January and October 1942, the non-Jews residing in Terezín were transferred to other areas under German control. During the same period, the number of prisoners in the city increased almost tenfold, leading to all the problems of hygiene, malnutrition and well-being that one would expect. As well as the Jews from Bohemia and Moravia, more and more were coming in from Austria, Germany, Hungary and other Western European countries. The camp's population grew to 140,000. 11,000 children lived at the camp. Amongst the 87,000 Terezín prisoners that were sent to extermination camps, more than 83,000 were killed, including Hans Krása.

Despite so much suffering, there were nevertheless some concessions and freedoms in Terezín, deliberately so that the camp could be used as an example to show the world good care and attention for the Jews. The most important concession was the allowance of some cultural and community life at the camp. What was done in Terezín, however, went far beyond what the Germans permitted: there was a school that taught history, literature, languages and science; painting studios were set up throughout the camp, as well as jazz bands, orchestras and theatre groups.

Musicians, actors, artists, poets and writers – among them Krása – staged a variety of performances, inadvertently helping the Nazis use Terezín as a model camp to show the world the humanity and good will with which they treated the Jews. Red Cross commissions passed through the area and the reports they made were based on Terezín. It was also at the camp that the Nazi propaganda film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* was filmed, using *Brundibár* to exemplify its children's activities.

There was a lot of artistic creation at the camp, and many poems and works of art went on to survive destruction in a great variety of ways. All this artistic production – musical productions, four thousand paintings by the children, fifty comics and so on – functioned as a way to transcend reality. It bore witness to the day-to-day life of the prisoners, and in the midst of suffering, violence and death, provided some hope and encouragement – particularly for the children. *Brundibár* was performed 55 times in the camp – one of Terezín's greatest successes. In his book about Terezín's music, Joža Karas says:

Amongst all the activities going on in Terezín, *Brundibár* was the largest attraction. Though the show was free, admission was only achieved with a ticket that it was extremely hard to get hold of, as demand was very high. There are numerous anecdotes about bartering for tickets, and blatant bribery attempts to get in. The reason is obvious. Krása music is very agreeable, tuneful,

¹ Cf. TOLTZ, 2004.



easily accessible, even allowing for some more “modern” elements. The children represent the future, which through singing will turn out well, while at the same time the very plot takes on more and more political meaning. The villainous Brundibár personifies Evil. When the children’s final chorus tells the audience that “Brundibár is defeated, we defeated him...”, it left no room for doubt: the children were singing loud and clear about Hitler. To make the allusion clearer still, the poet Emil Saudek changed the text’s final lines to better express resistance, and an unshakeable belief in justice. Where the original text said “he who truly loves his mother, father and nation, is our friend, and has the right to play games with us”, Saudek’s new version says “he who loves justice, is faithful to it and has no fear, is our friend, and has the right to play games with us. What more is there to say?”²

This citation shines a clear light on the way that *Brundibár*’s ethical effects did justice to its aesthetic effects. In the final months of 1944, almost all the Jewish artists and intellectuals were transferred to extermination camps like Auschwitz, including Krása. Others had died in Terezín. Most of the prisoners that passed through the city did not see the end of the war. After the Autumn of 1944, musical and theatrical events became rare, though some activity did continue till April 1945, shortly before the end of the war.

As I mentioned in the introduction, project ‘*Brundibár: why intolerance is not a thing of the past*’ began in 2007 at the CMJF. It was initially only intended to be a musical activity for the 5th years (11 years old). As project coordinator, responsible for all musical aspects, I was aware of the challenges ahead – not the music, but rather the context in which the work had emerged and gained renown: the Holocaust.

The question of the context became more relevant when I came across Joseph Toltz’ ‘*Music: An Active Tool of Deception? The case of *Brundibár* in Terezín*’ during my preparation. In the article, Toltz asks: “Does our culture now have enough perspective from the actual events of the Holocaust to be able to stage *Brundibár* divorced from its context?”³ The answer, for me, was obvious. Not only was it impossible to divorce *Brundibár* from its context and present it as a purely aesthetic experience – it was necessary to go beyond merely staging the opera so as to give the students a wider understanding of its history, the Holocaust’s history, and the significance of this restaging. I convinced the CMJF’s directors that the production was a unique didactic

² KARAS, 1993. p. 112-113.

³ TOLTZ, 2004, p. 49.



opportunity to discuss Europe's Nationalist-Socialist period with the students – particularly the Holocaust, Brazil part in World War Two, with the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (Força Expedicionária Brasileira, FEB).

It became clear that ethical issues were arising from our aesthetic experience of preparing a work of art. It is important to note that it was children and teenagers who were involved, and they were actually experiencing and embodying these ethical questions. Many of the CJMF's departments got involved with these issues through a variety of activities. Each year group took part in a series of activities across their history, art, philosophy, Portuguese language and literature lessons. They read literature that looked at the Holocaust, for example, and studied the drawings made by the children from Terezín. They watched films and documentaries from the time, received a visit and talk from a survivor of the Holocaust (Aleksander Laks), and much more.

The real aim of all these activities, and indeed the reasoning behind the whole project, was to promote ethical-aesthetic reflection on intolerance. Hence the name: 'why intolerance is not a thing of the past'.

One of the greatest challenges for educational establishments, (and particularly primary and middle schools) is how to reflect with the students on the alarming rise in violence and intolerance in society as a whole – a rise which is accelerating. Every day, news of unchecked violence – and even by the students' own experiences of violent situations – challenge schools to respond with activities that allow the students to find how to respond humanely to the intolerance around them. In staging the opera, there was an opportunity to bring to the table not only its own aesthetic and ethical contents, but also that of the here and now. In staging a children's opera that was performed many times in a Nazi concentration camp, made us – more than 60 years after the Holocaust – experience how an aesthetic experience provokes a contemporary ethical response. It showed us how an aesthetic experience can play an unparalleled role in education for tolerance and difference.

In our research we discovered that the opera had been translated into Portuguese by Eva Klinger, a Terezín survivor that had sung the opera while imprisoned there. We immediately contacted her, and she kindly allowed us to use her Portuguese version of the text. What is more, however, she gave her support to our staging the opera, her testimony as one of the children that first defeated Brundibár, and her moral integrity in the face of the intolerance of our times: she gave the project its living meaning.

As rehearsals and production progressed, dozens of people joined the initial group and the project extended beyond the CMJF, coming to involve two children's choirs from Juiz de Fora and the Centro Cultural Pró-Música (one of the city's music schools). The project concluded with a performance at the Centro Cultural Pró-Música's theatre on the 27 November 2007, with more than 150 people taking part in its production.



From the beginning, the project '*Brundibár*: why intolerance is not a thing of the past' provoked a lot of debate amongst those involved in its production, including the children. It was obvious that the main question was: how to speak of the Holocaust through a lively opera filled with joyful happiness, like *Brundibár*? Was it not frivolous to stage the opera in a light-hearted way, when its original performers almost all died in Auschwitz' ovens, if not before then from deprivation, hunger and illness in Terezín? As for those children that helped stage *Brundibár* in Terezín and went on to survive, such as Eva Klinger, what moral relationship could we establish with her, her story and her experiences? And then the children now involved in the project – what meanings would they construct from this experience of embodying a memorial to the Holocaust? Altogether, our moral and ethical questions were much more pressing than our aesthetic ones, in this production of a children's opera.

What first showed us that combining the opera's historical context – the Holocaust – and its contemporary context – the intolerance of today – would, at the very least, be challenging from an ethical point of view, was the preface that James P. Grant wrote for a book published by UNICEF in 1994, *I Dream of Peace*. The book is a collection of works of art and pieces of writing by children that lived through the conflicts that tore apart the old Yugoslavia. Grant says, very literally:

The children know. They have always known. But we choose to think otherwise; it hurts to know the children know. The children see. If we obfuscate, they will not see. Thus we conspire to keep them from knowing and seeing. And if we insist, then the children, to please us, will make believe they do not know, they do not see. Children make that sacrifice for our sake – to keep us pacified. They are remarkably patient, loving, and all-forgiving. It is a sad comedy: the children knowing and pretending they don't know to protect us from knowing they know.⁴

This extract led us to understand that, in fact, the children with whom we were working could easily see the links between the memorial behind *Brundibár*'s historical context, and the intolerances of today. What is more, the feeling of solidarity with the children that died in the Holocaust, germinated in the process of staging the opera, extended to a wider sense of human solidarity, an understanding of otherness and the development of an ethics of tolerance.

It may seem strange for children and adults to come together to produce an opera in a concentration camp; for prisoners, with death all around and much more urgent needs, to haggle for tickets to see it, even in some cases *because* the opera was cynically

⁴ GRANT, 1994, p. 5.



used by the Nazis for propaganda. Stranger still that, 60 years later, someone should again choose to stage this work, a signifier that in its history holds the signified of what childhood in a concentration camp is. Taking into account the testimony of the survivors, however, we found that it is precisely in this signifier that moral meanings reside. Toltz, in his above cited text, says the following about the survivors that sung the opera in Terezín:

[...] they were sustained and nourished by these performances and value the memory, even sixty years later. ... These survivors argue that *Brundibár* in Terezín was part of the subversive and powerful Czech-Jewish cultural life in the camp. The Czech libretto of *Brundibár* [...] created a language barrier against any German objections, and invested the work with a special power of resistance, especially for the children who performed in it or saw it. This resistance is mostly strongly embodied in the words of the final song of the opera: 'He who loves his father, mother and native land, who wants the tyrant's end, join us hand in hand and be our welcome friend'.⁵

Brundibár therefore subverts the logic of the concentration camp, allowing audience and participants alike to feel righteously uplifted in contempt of the violence, intolerance and death that surrounds them.

Another testimony that is extremely relevant to our proposed production was Eva Klinger's. In the book that narrates her and her husband's memories we found another echo of *Brundibár*'s spirit and, in a way, a justification for our staging of it:

When, in the final chorus, the children sing out "Brundibár has been defeated, we've vanquished him...", there is no room for doubt for the audience: the children are singing loud and clear about Hitler. *Brundibár* looks at the battle that Good and Evil fight inside the soul and ends with words of hope and trust in solidarity. When Eva was singing the opera's happy ending, she felt herself transported to a world where Good defeated Evil. It seems probable that the other children felt the same.⁶

Returning to the quote from Grant above – children see, and they know. The children of Terezín saw their reality for what it was, one of intolerance and brutality. Each performance of *Brundibár* transcended its own aesthetic value and acquired an ethical dimension both for itself and for the prisoners' reality. Reading these testimonies through Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' (a phrase coined by the philosopher after

⁵ TOLTZ, 2004, p. 44-45.

⁶ KLINGER; KLINGER, 2008. p. 39.



watching the trial, judgement and execution of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem), one can see that the moral aspect revealed by Brundibár's reincorporation is precisely the opposite of that of the 'banality of evil'. When Arendt analysed Eichmann's behaviour and his answers regarding the part he played in the Holocaust, she emphasised how superficial his moral behaviour was, showing as it did an incapacity to reflect on or think about his actions. He was not merely protecting himself or exempting himself of guilt. Eichmann rather represents the banality of evil of his time, a banality that leads to moral insanity, to a lack of self-reflection, to laziness and selfishness and, principally, to a lack of imagination – withdrawing from one of the most human of characteristics. The banality of evil is both cause and final effect of a loss of human capacity, be it of thought, or of indignation. This banality of evil, that leads to intolerance, and then to violence and death, does not belong exclusively to Europe's National Socialism.

In this sense, staging *Brundibár* anew in Brazil in 2007 with children from a variety of backgrounds, showed itself to be an ethical exercise in projecting the human beyond day-to-day banality, giving a historical-existential dimension to an aesthetic production.

The opera in itself, as an aesthetic object, has no meaning linked to the Holocaust, and it could very well be presented merely as a work of art. However, knowledge of the context of its presentation in Terezín engages audience and players ethically in a way that brings memories of the Holocaust into the here and now, reminding us of similar situations of outrageous violence and genocide going on today.

Restaging *Brundibár* goes beyond simply bringing back traumatic memories, because in the process it also brings a spirit of moral resistance and strength in times of fear. Restaging *Brundibár* provokes a dialogue necessary to the search to comprehend the incomprehensible. Its music is a common language of celebration, which is why it functions as a point of resistance and support in traumatic times. Restaging *Brundibár* is an exercise in understanding how human identity constructs and reconstructs its traumatic events.

During the project, we learnt a lot about the Holocaust, with the children, and also about how they understood it. As we heard the testimony of those that survived it as children and sung an opera that was so significant both to Terezín's history and to each individual that passed through there, we noticed the solidarity in the 2007 children's learning and comprehension. From this arose ethical reflections about modern day intolerance. Singing the Victory chorus that ends *Brundibár* therefore gained a moral signified for the work's aesthetic signifier:

We won a victory
Over the tyrant mean,
Sound trumpets, beat your drums,



And show us your esteem!
We won a victory,
Since we were not fearful,
Since we were not tearful,
Because we marched along
Singing our happy song,
Bright, joyful, and cheerful.

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