Naxos 8.559379

HEGGIE: For a Look or a Touch / SCHWARZ: In Memoriam / LAITMAN: The Seed of Dream (Music of Remembrance)

FOR A LOOK OR A TOUCH
Music by JAKE HEGGIE
Libretto by GENE SCHEER

Commissioned by Music of Remembrance
Mina Miller, Artistic Director

Lyrics and texts based on entries from Manfred Lewin’s journal in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC; and interviews from the film Paragraph 175, directed by Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman, copyright Reflective Image, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Characters

MANFRED (lyric baritone), 19 years old. A ghost.
Once Gad’s lover in Berlin, he was murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz in 1942.

GAD (actor), 80 years old.
Once imprisoned as a homosexual by the Nazis, he is a gay survivor of the Holocaust.

The present. It is late at night. GAD sits alone trying to nod off, but he cannot sleep. Suddenly he senses another presence in the room. MANFRED enters.

[1] Prelude: Do You Remember?

GAD
Who’s there?

MANFRED
Do you remember?
Do you remember when night was for more than sleep?
Oh, my love.

GAD
You? Manfred! A ghost! Why are you here? What do you want?

MANFRED
Remember?
Remember when night was for more than sleep?
Oh, my love. Oh my love, my love,
We stayed awake so often!

GAD
Look at you, Manfred. My God. It’s been 60 years. You’re as handsome as the day when. That day when. (Pause) You’ll always be 19 and beautiful, won’t you? Look at me. Alive. Falling apart. The world is a different place, I guess. Maybe we’d be okay now. Who knows? So much is slipping away. It’s so late. You should go away. I need to sleep.

MANFRED
Remember?
Remember when night was for more than sleep?
Oh, my love. Oh my love, my love,
We stayed awake so often!

GAD
You’re not going away, are you?

MANFRED
Remember! Remember!

GAD
You want me to remember. Darling, I have done everything I can to forget. It’s too hard, Manfred. I survived the Holocaust. I had to
find a way to live. There was so much shame after the war and I had nothing. Nothing but your journal: the poetry of the beautiful, 19-year-old boy I loved. Fragments. Sometimes, I look through it and cry and curse and smile. Oh, but go now, Manfred. Let me forget.

[2] The Voice

MANFRED
A void consumes me.
My spirit and body are suddenly lame.
Terror fills the time that follows.
Will each new day be the same?

Often I feel utterly abandoned.
See myself on the edge of an abyss.
And I become dizzy as I look down.
With blood-drained cheeks that you would kiss.

Suddenly from the darkest depths,
A loving voice echoes and seeks me out.
I look down and ask: “Who is calling?”
And I hear a voice that ends all doubt.

It is the voice of a sanctified power,
The sacred place where fears dissolve.
The unyielding blessing, the generous heart
The voice of souls in perfect resolve.

GAD
A sanctified power? Souls in perfect resolve? Hm. I don’t know. Nice poetry. I used to think that was possible, but I’m old now. Really old. I’ve seen such horror and cruelty. After the war, we men who wore the pink triangle and survived – we returned to a world that did not want to hear of our suffering. But how can speak to you of suffering? A sanctified power? Such a lovely, hopeful, naïve thought. But then, you were 19. So was I, once. Everything seemed possible then.

That’s how it felt when I met you. Those golden years in Berlin. Die Goldenen Jahre.

[3] Golden Years

MANFRED
Wild. Free.
We are wild! We are free!
Topsy turvy, joyful Berlin.

You are free! You are wild!
Topsy turvy child of Berlin.
Golden years. Golden years.

Give me a look or a touch and I’ll know.
A wink or a nod or a glance – mm mm –
We don’t need words. Just stand very close.
Let’s not miss out on a chance for love tonight.

A look or a touch and I’ll know you’re the one. A grin or a smile – mm mm Just for a while, tonight or a lifetime, Let’s not miss out on a chance for love right now.

(musical break)

Dance with me.
This is the Schwanenbergr, hottest spot in Berlin.
Meet and greet and eat and cheat and swing.

(music builds)

What a band! What a crowd at Schwanenberg!
Take my hand, dance all night at Schwanenberg!
Let’s have a laugh now. Let’s have some fun.
Shout: “Police!”
Then watch ‘em pull their skirts up and run!

Everybody’s running around.
Screaming! Laughing!
Giddy from the joy of this town
And these golden years. Golden years

While we are young, wild and free let’s keep dancing.
Let’s not miss out on a thing.
And if we should find we’re of the same mind,
A look or a touch could lead to a precious night of love.

(The band starts swinging again)

“Police!”

(Laughter)

GAD
(Laughing) We had so much fun! Crazy boys. Crazy queens. What a wonderful family. It would never end! Then the police did come. The clubs were closed and the Nazis
trampled the joy. You could be arrested for a
look or a touch. And yet most of our stories
have been lost because we were too afraid
and ashamed. Nobody to talk to. Nobody to
tell. Oh Manfred, I’ll never know what you
witnessed. What horrors you must have
experienced.


MANFRED
Horror and savagery are the law.
I am a silent, obedient shadow.
Dead to myself. Dead to the world.
A silent, obedient shadow.

Lined up for roll call,
They pull out Joe,
A loving friend, 18 years old.
Good boy. He’s a good boy, Joe.

What has he done?
What is his crime?
His jacket bears a pink triangle.
Be still. Just keep in line.
Be a good boy, Joe. Be obedient, Joe.

They strip him naked,
Put a bucket on his head,
Then sic their dogs on him.
They bite his body,
Tear at his thighs,
Blood everywhere.
His screams and cries
Amplified by the bucket on his head.
Ah! Ah!

Goodbye, Joe.

And on the speakers
They play a waltz.
Back to work.
Silent, obedient shadows.

[5] Silence

(MANFRED sings a wordless melody while
GAD speaks the following)

GAD
It was so long ago. After my father died, I
went on a trip. I left the hotel one night and a
woman was following me. Down by the river,
a hustler approached me. He pulled me into
the bushes. “We’re being watched,” I said.
“No one is there,” he said. And that’s when it
happened, perfectly planned. “You are
under arrest.” I did not understand. I was
sent away to the camp. Why? Paragraph
175 was written in large letters on our
jackets. Later, it was the pink triangle. A
yellow star for Jews; a red star for political
prisoners; a black star for the mentally
retarded; a purple star for Jehovah’s
witnesses; a pink triangle for homosexuals.
Hard labor – backbreaking labor – brutality –
torture – starvation – death. Death and
have I done?

When I returned, I never spoke of it to
anyone. My mother? Not a single word.
Nobody wanted to hear. One word and
they’d say: “Leave it alone”. It’s over and
done with. Would I have wanted to speak?
Perhaps… Perhaps… Perhaps with my
father.

What happened to you, Manfred?

[6] Der Singende Wald (The Singing
Forest)

MANFRED
Der Singende Wald.
What is it?
Der Singende Wald.

There are holes in the ground,
In each, a tall pole with a hook on top.
Your hands tied behind your back
Your wrists slung over the hook
You are lifted up, posted high.
Your shoulders snap and break
And you swing and hang and scream.

Der Singende Wald!
Der Singende Wald!

They swing and hang.
All can hear their cries. 
Inexplicable. 
Beyond comprehension.

[7] Remember

GAD
I went to spend the night at your house. 
Your brother told me that you and most of 
your family had been arrested that day. I 
got to your boss. I was desperate. He 
asked me, “Do you have courage?” “Yes, I 
have courage.” “My son is your size. He has 
a Hitler Youth uniform. Put it on and get 
Manfred out.” My heart was pounding as I 
got in and saluted. “Heil Hitler! I must 
speak with the Obersturmbannführer.” He 
came at once.

“Manfred Lewin was brought here yesterday. 
He worked for us and is a saboteur! He has 
keys to several of the apartments we are 
renovating. My father sent me here to get 
him so we can go back to work.” Within 
moments, you and I were free, walking down 
the street. I said, “Go to Uncle Wobbi’s. I’ll 
call and meet you there.” You looked at me:

MANFRED & GAD
“No, I can’t go with you, Gad. If I leave my 
family now, I’ll never be free again. I have to 
go with them. I am the strong one.”

[MANFRED turns away]

GAD
We never said goodbye. You turned and 
walked away, and I walked in the other 
direction. I wasn’t able to think. But, I knew 
something was forever broken.

MANFRED
Oh my love, my love…

GAD
I’m so tired. Manfred. So old. And I want so 
much to believe in what you believed. The 
sacred place where fears dissolve. The 
generous heart. Your journal is so full of 
hope – but I feel so hopeless.

MANFRED
Do you remember when… 
Night was for more than sleep? 
Oh my love, my love 
We stayed awake so often.
THE SEED OF DREAM

Music by LORI LAITMAN

Commissioned by Music of Remembrance
Mina Miller, Artistic Director

Poetry by Abraham Sutzkever. Reprinted from Literature of Destruction,
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[9] I Lie in This Coffin

I lie in this coffin
the way I would lie
in a suit made of wood,
a bark
tossed on treacherous waves,
a cradle, an ark.

From here, where all
flesh is taken to eternity,
I call
to you, sister*, and you
in your distance
still hear me.

Something stirs
in my coffin,
a presence; you're here:
I know you by the stars
of your eyes, your light, your
breath, your tear.

This is the order of things,
and the plot:
today here, tomorrow not.
But now, in my coffin,
my suit made of wood,
my speech lifts,
my speech sings.

Vilna ghetto, 30th August, 1941
(*The reference is to his sister, who died in
Siberia during Sutzkever’s childhood.)

[10] A Load of Shoes

The cartwheels rush,
quivering.
What is their burden?

Shoes, shivering.
The cart is like
a great hall:
the shoes crushed together
as though at a ball.

A wedding? A party?
Have I gone blind?
Who have these shoes
left behind?

The heels clatter
with a fearsome din,
transported from Vilna
to Berlin.

I should be still,
my tongue is like meat,
but the truth, shoes,
where are your feet?

The feet from these boots
with buttons outside
or these, with no body,
or these, with no bride?

Where is the child
who fit in these?
Is the maiden barefoot
who bought these?

Slippers and pumps,
look, there are my mother’s:
her Sabbath pair,
in with the others.
Vilna ghetto, 1st January, 1943


Because of hunger
or because of great love —
your mother will bear witness
I wanted to swallow you, child,
when I felt your tiny body
cool in my hands
like a glass
of warm tea.

Neither stranger were you, nor guest.
On our earth, one births
only oneself, one links
oneself into rings and the rings into chains.

Child, the word for you would be love
but without words you are love,
the seed of dream,
unbidden third,

who from the limits of the world
swept two of us
into consummate pleasure.

How can you shut your eyes,
leaving me here
in the dark world of snow
you've shrugged off?

You never even had your own cradle
to learn the dances
of the stars.
The shameful sun, who never shone
on you, should shatter like glass.
Your faith burned away
in the drop of poison
you drank down
as simply as milk.

I wanted to swallow you, child,
to taste
the future waiting for me.
Maybe you will blossom again
in my veins.

I’m not worthy of you, though.
I can’t be your grave.
I leave you
to the summoning snow,
this first respite.
You’ll descend now

like a splinter of dusk
into the stillness,
bringing greetings from me
to the slim shoots
under the cold.

Vilna ghetto, 18th January, 1943

[12] Beneath the Whiteness of Your Stars

Beneath the whiteness of your stars,
Stretch out toward me your white hand;
All my words are turned to tears —
They long to rest within your hand.

See, their brilliant light goes darker
In my eyes, grown cellar-dim;
And I lack a quiet corner
From which to send them back again.

Yet, O Lord, all my desire
To leave you with my wealth of tears.
In me, there burns an urgent fire,
And in the fire, there burn my days.

Rest, in every hole and cellar
Weeps, as might a murderer.
I run the rooftops, even higher,
And I search — where are you? Where?

Past stairs and courtyard I go running,
Chased by howling enemies.
I hang, at last, a broken bowstring,
And I sing to you — like this:

Beneath the whiteness of your stars,
Stretch out toward me your white hand;
All my words are turned to tears —
They long to rest within your hand.

Vilna ghetto, 22nd May, 1943

[13] No Sad Songs Please

No sad songs please:
Sad songs just tease
At sorrow.
Words, too, betray,
And names,
Forever,
And tomorrow.

Look out at the snow:
In memory’s art
Is unexpected
Radiance, and in
The speeches of the heart
You yourself are
Resurrected.

Stretch your hand out
To that whiteness:
In its cold and burning
Veins
You'll feel returning
The redeeming life
It contains.

Narocz forests, 5th February, 1944