

Musical Memorials and the Ethics of Memory

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Arnold Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw* opens with an apology and an explanation: "I cannot remember everything. I must have been unconscious most of the time." In the work that follows, Schoenberg's narrator will attempt to recapture experiences that have been erased from conscious memory by situating them in the context of the one thing that has escaped forgetting: "the *grandiose moment* when they all started to sing, as if *prearranged*, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the *forgotten* creed!"

The problems with which the narrator wrestles at the start of *Survivor from Warsaw* are familiar themes in the literature tracing the passage of historical experiences into cultural memory. For is not just Schoenberg's narrator who "cannot remember ev'rything": none of us can. At the close of *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell cites the experience of a Second World War RAF flyer who, upon reviewing his diary entries, found that, "There's nothing you could really get hold of if you were trying to write a proper historical account of it. ... No wonder it is those artists who re-create life rather than try to recapture it who, in one way, prove the good historians in the end."¹

A Survivor from Warsaw seeks both to invest an historical event with a particular meaning and, at the same time, to offer a glimpse of the torturous process by which memories are shaped into narratives. It might be helpful to think of it as a peculiar sort of memorial, fabricated from notes rather than stone. And for all of its novelty and audaciousness, it is only one example of a broader category of works that address the question of how to memorialize the victims of political violence.

Compositions of this sort occupy a peculiar place in the repertoire. They fulfill no liturgical function, but their performances often take on the trappings of rituals. They fit uneasily into concert programs: consideration has to be given as to where exactly they are to be placed and what works are supposed to be performed before and after them (a problem that plagues performances of *Survivor from Warsaw*). Some of them vanish from the repertoire with the passage of time – reflect, for example, on the peculiar fate of John Foulds' massive *World Requiem* – a "Cenotaph in sound" written to honor the dead of the World War I that was performed every year on the anniversary of the armistice between 1923 and 1926, but which would not be performed again until 2007. Yet others manage to escape the particular circumstances that gave rise to them and come to take on a more universal aspect: consider, for example, the career of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Sometimes their link to the event they memorialize is explicit – Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*, for example, proclaims its connection in its title (though, as it turns out, the title was an afterthought). In other cases, the tie is more covert. Karl Amadeus Hartmann's dedication of his *Miserae* – dated "Dachau 1933/34" – to "my friends, who had to die in the hundreds and who are sleeping in eternity, we shall not forget you" was, at the time of its premiere, apparent only to the conductor Hermann Scherchen – for understandable reasons, the words appeared only on the conductor's score.²

Despite these differences, all these works share a claim to have a connection to events beyond the concert hall. On this claim rests both their ability to carry out the task of mourning and remembrance and their liability to lines of questioning from which other compositions are exempt. For it is not inappropriate to ask *what* it is that these works are remembering or to examine *how* they carry out this work. Posing such concerns take us from the normal concerns of aesthetics and involves us in matters of ethics and history.

Speech and Sound

In a note on the top of the page of the score containing his text, Schoenberg offers the staggeringly evasive explanation that, "This text is based partly upon reports which I have received directly or indirectly."³ It has proven difficult to square the narrative that unfolds in this work with any of the reports that Schoenberg could have received – either "directly or indirectly" – of the catastrophe that had engulfed Europe. The idea that the work depicts the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto – a conclusion that flows almost inescapably from its title – does not jibe with the images that fill the work, which point to extermination camps rather than to Warsaw.⁴ Indeed, Camille Crittenden's closely argued study of Schoenberg's alleged influences concludes that what the text resembles most closely is not a survivor's

report but instead a screenplay about Warsaw Ghetto that his wife Gertrud had circulated, without success, among contacts in Hollywood.⁵

Even before Crittenden's study appeared, the notion that *Survivor* might owe more to Hollywood than to history had already been tossed out in an article that had a very different agenda. In a discussion of Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, the critic Richard Taruskin took a passing swipe at Schoenberg's "B-movie clichés – the Erich von Stroheim Nazi barking 'Achtung,' the kitsch-triumphalism of the climactic, suddenly tonal singing of the Jewish credo." Taruskin argued that *Different Trains*, in contrast, "has no villains and no heroes" and "no bathetic glory to comfort you with a trumped-up Triumph of the Human Spirit."⁶ Yet in his desire to praise Reich and damn Schoenberg, Taruskin overlooks what these two attempts at memorialization share.

The search for historical referents for Schoenberg's work tends to shift attention away from an aspect that is of greater importance in comprehending the intersection of historical fact and artistic artifice that marks this peculiar composition. As Amy Lynn Wlodarski has recently noted, Schoenberg's drafts show that, from the outset, he was "less concerned with mapping the textual narrative than with probing or attempting to articulate the sonic possibilities of the narrator's experience."⁷ The orchestra serves an "unconscious memory for the narrator," recalling those events that the narrator is unable to remember and, by doing so, allowing him to bring them to speech. For example, Wlodarski notes that when the opening trumpet figure reappears at measure 25 – the point at which survivor begins to tell his story – the narrator "names it as a textual component of his narrative ('Reveille')." ⁸ The words of the narrator lag behind music, assembling the orchestral fragments into a narrative that – delivered in *Sprechstimme* – hovers between speech and music. Words and music join only with the entry of the chorus at the close of the work, at the "grandiose moment" (Schoenberg's English failed him rather badly here) when those who are about to be executed begin to sing – "as if prearranged" – the Shema Yisroel. As Wlodarski notes, this moment has, indeed, been "prearranged": the chorus' singing of the hymn represents the first time the 12-tone row, which has provided the musical material for the composition, appears in its prime form.⁹ What Taruskin dismisses as "suddenly tonal singing" is, in fact, neither "tonal" nor "sudden" – the row has been there all along.

Different Trains opens with a string quartet racing to keep up both with a recording of a clanging bell at a railroad crossing and a recording of a quartet (which, in turn, had been playing along with still another recording of a quartet). The din subsides, a brief melodic fragment is tossed out by the cello and then repeated by a recorded voice that traces the same pattern: "from Chicago." As in *Survivor from Warsaw*, music is doubled by a narrative: in the first part of *Different Trains*, an account of the trains that carried the young Steve Reich across the North American continent and in the second part, an account of trains in occupied Europe making their way to destinations from which few would return. What happens is no less "pre-arranged" than what occurs in Schoenberg's work. The cello prefigures the voice of the Pullman porter only because the notes that Reich gives to it are drawn from the vocal inflections on the recordings.

The relationship of speech and music in Reich's work is, however, more complex than these opening moments suggest.¹⁰ The work explores the duality of speech: we can hear spoken words as conveying meanings or simply as sound, rhythm, and pitch. At first, the voices on the tape repeat the melodic fragments of the quartet, in effect reprising the leap that we have all made when, as infants, we first came to find meanings in the sounds that our parents were making. But as the work proceeds, things start to run in the other direction: words dissolve into pitch and rhythm as they are echoed by the string quartet. As a result, *Different Trains* offers something more complex than the "stony invitation to reflect" on the fact that "while this happened here, that happened there," which Taruskin praises in the work. For something significant is taking place, here and now, in the hall where the work is being performed: its listeners are being presented with a moral dilemma of sorts.

To the extent that we listen to what is unfolding simply as music, we hear the words of the Pullman porters and survivors as pitch and rhythm and their significance as testimony is lost: the almost irresistible appeal of *Different Trains* is that it offers us the chance to become infants again. But if we recognize that something important is being uttered and focus not on the music but instead on what the words are telling us, we find ourselves struggling to isolate the text fragments in the swirling maelstrom of sounds that are being thrown at us and to assemble them into a coherent testimony. In taking this stance,

we find ourselves in a position that resembles that of the narrator at the start of *A Survivor from Warsaw* as he struggles to recall what has been forgotten.

At the end of *A Survivor from Warsaw* the narrator's recollections give way to a re-enactment of the critical event: first the narrator drops from English *Sprechstimme* into German speech and, in a Berlin dialect, mimics the words of the German officer. Then the chorus enters, singing the Shema. But as *Different Trains* moves from the America of Part I to the Europe of Part II it becomes more difficult to determine what is being said. As the words become more weighted with horrible revelations, they are increasingly submerged in the music. And when the European trains arrive at their destinations at the close of Part II, the music (like the trains) slowly grinds to a halt and we are left, in Naomi Cumming's words, with an "abject voice, obsessed with the image of flames, and the sounds of hoots and sirens, slow and strangely empty without the motion of the train."¹¹ The silence is finally broken by the cello, playing a fragment that is echoed by the words "The war was over," Part III begins, and soon the trains are running again, this time to American cities.

Yet in its closing minutes, *Different Trains*, like *A Survivor from Warsaw*, recalls the singing of a song. About two thirds of the way through its final part, the train sounds break off for the last time and the voice of the Pullman porter (supported by the quartet) intones the words, "But today, they're all gone." Voice and quartet tarry over the phrase for a while (allowing the recognition to sink in that just as the trains have passed away, so too will the survivors) and then the strings launch into an almost voluptuous melody and, soon afterwards, a final testimony begins. It is a memory of a singer and an audience: "There was one girl who had a beautiful voice and they loved to listen to her singing, the Germans, and when she stopped singing they said, 'More, more,' and they applauded." After these words, this music stops, and it is time for the audience in the hall to give the performers the applause that recognizes the performance *as a* performance and frees the audience to leave the world that the work has created.¹²

Taruskin assumes that *Survivor from Warsaw* was the sort of artwork that Theodor Adorno had in mind when he issued – with "famous and flatulent self-importance" – his dictate that "after Auschwitz, poetry was impossible." Yet Adorno, in fact, had reservations about *Survivor* (and he never said it was "impossible" to write poetry after Auschwitz, but rather that it would be "barbaric" to continue to go on writing a poetry that ignored what had happened). What troubled him was the prospect that works like *Survivor from Warsaw* – however honorable their intentions – might wind up transforming the victims they memorialize into "works of art, tossed out to be gobbled up by the world that did them in." To put it another way: the more successful such composition are as works of art, the more questionable they are as aids to memory. Not the least of the virtues of *Different Trains* is that it leaves the listener wrestling with the moral question of what it means to find oneself enthralled (and *Different Trains* is nothing if not entralling) by a work that testifies to inconceivable agonies.

Words Set Free

The close of John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*, a work commissioned by the New York Philharmonic to mark the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, confronts its listeners with a challenge that similar to the one posed by *Different Trains*. Against a sonic landscape that recalls the closing moments of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony (and includes a descending figure in the strings that is, in fact, taken from Ives' *Unanswered Question*) we hear the words "I see water and buildings" uttered, without affect, by the recorded voice of one woman and then repeated, almost like a mantra, by another woman. These words, like all the words in this composition – whether spoken and sung – come from texts linked to the attacks of September 11. The origin of these words is duly noted in the program booklet: "AA #11 flight attendant Madeline Amy Sweeny." But it is left to listeners to remember, or not to remember, who Madeline Amy Sweeny was and what her words once meant.

Shortly after American Airlines flight 11 was hijacked, Sweeny established contact with the flight services manager in Boston. She informed him that the plane had been taken over and that two flight attendants had been stabbed. She went on to relay a good deal of information about the high-jacking, including the seat numbers of the hijackers (which allowed them to be identified). She remained in contact as the airliner turned from its planned route and headed towards New York. As the plane approached lower Manhattan, she notified Boston that it had begun a rapid descent. Asked if she could identify her location,

she looked out the window and reported “I see water and buildings. Oh my God! Oh my God!” At this point her transmissions ended. A listener who connects the words spoken at the close of *On the Transmigration of Souls* to the historical context from which they have come may find Adams’ use of them unsettling. For these words carry a particular weight: Madeline Amy Sweeny was the first person, outside the small circle of hijackers, to understand what was taking place that morning. These words, her last, carry that horrible recognition. If listeners are to take them as a benediction, they will have to forget a few things.

Adams avoided terms like “requiem” and “memorial” in describing the composition. His preferred designation was “memory space.” His intent “to achieve in musical terms the same sort of feeling one gets upon entering one of those old, majestic cathedrals in France or Italy.” The analogy to architecture is not without some difficulties. On the one hand, he characterized his memory space as “a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions,” but what he found compelling about European cathedrals was the sense they give of one’s *not* being alone: they convey the feeling of being “in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them.” Further, the memory space that Adams is constructing is inescapably public: his cathedral is built in a concert hall where the act of remembering can only be performed with others. Yet one aspect of Adams’ metaphor is quite apt. The space he creates is filled with relics. The texts that it sets are the remnants of the event that the work memorializes: words from the signs posted in lower Manhattan by those who searched for loved ones, memorial notices drawn from the *New York Times*, and the final words of Madeline Amy Sweeny.

Adams begins to construct this memory space by dismantling the auditory space in which the audience is seated: the first sounds heard are those of a city street (traffic, footsteps, distant sirens, laughter), in effect returning them to the world the audience left behind upon entering the hall. A single, repeated spoken word begins to establish a rhythmic pulse, and it is charged with meaning: “Missing, Missing.” A wordless chorus enters. A list of names begins to be read. It is not until three minutes into the piece that words and music unite as the chorus sings the word “Remember.” That choice is significant: like the other works we have been discussing, the task of this music will be to move its listeners to recall what took place, at another time, beyond the walls of the concert hall.

Strict rules govern the treatment of the disparate texts that populate this memory space. The names of the missing are spoken, not sung. Some of the words of those who have lost loved ones are set to music, but often in ways that thwart their comprehension. For example, at about five minutes into the piece the words “You will never be forgotten” are fragmented, repeated, and extended to a point where it is almost impossible, unless one is starting at the score, to realize that they fit together as an utterance: the listener has lost the key as to how to assemble these sounds into a sentence. These opening moments present listeners with a puzzle: the names of the missing are clear, but everything else has broken free from anything resembling the speech of human beings.

The work is punctuated by two great orchestra crescendos: the first at about eleven minutes, the second at about sixteen minutes. In the interval between them music and text suddenly cohere with settings of sentences taken from remembrances published in the *New York Times* in the months after the attacks in a section entitled *Portraits of Grief*. It is as if that first crescendo forced the process of mourning and remembrance onto a different plateau. The list of the missing and the scattered descriptions of them that had been separated in the first section of this memory space begin to move towards each other: we now hear accounts of lost brothers, children, and lovers. Yet though we learn of attributes and relationships within this space, we hear no names. The words that the chorus sings are easily comprehended, but both the speakers and those they mourn are now anonymous: “The sister says: ‘He was the apple of my father’s eye.’ The father says: ‘I am so full of grief. My heart is completely shattered.’” We go on to hear from a “young man” (a friend, it seems), another sister, a mother, a lover, a man’s wife. The names are recorded in the footnotes to the text in the program notes, but they are not what the composition wants us to remember. It is the anonymity of these friends, children, and lovers that leads us to understand what was lost in the attacks: namely, friends, children, and lovers. But we are soon driven out this space by the setting of words that lead directly into the second great crescendo. It is as if *this* memory has triggered a grief so great that it shatters the walls of this cathedral of sound: “The man’s wife said: ‘I loved him from the start . . . I want to dig him out. I know just where he is.’” The chorus prolongs those last two words *he is*, just as – a few moments before – it had prolonged the last two words of the friends’ reminiscence “girls never talked to me when he *was around*.” These words record the losses: the friend is no longer around

and though the woman may think that she knows where her husband is within the vast rubble pile, *he* no longer *is*: all that she would be able to dig out would be a relic.

This second crescendo, beginning with bells, driven forward by agitated basses (which convey the first sense of insistent forward momentum in the piece), reaches its climax with the entry of the chorus repeating the words “light ... day ... sky” and then collapses back into music that recalls the texture of the opening. But speakers now recite the names of relationships, not individuals, “my sister,” “my mother,” “my brother,” “my son” (22:54) and the composition moves towards its close with Madeline Amy Sweeney’s words alternating with the words: “I love you.” Gradually both the words and Ivesian sonic landscape that sustains them fade into silence and the street noise returns. Then silence. (And, at the New York premiere, an intermission, after which the audience heard the Beethoven Ninth, pressed into service, yet again, as a sort of all-purpose purgative).¹³

“Music,” as Arnold Schoenberg tells, “uses time.” The same is true of musical memorials. Adams’ memory space differs from those cathedrals that inspired it in that its listeners proceed through it at a pace they have not chosen. The same is true of mourning: it too uses time and its progress is not something that those who mourn can control. In an interview given at the time of the premiere of *On the Transmigration of Souls*, Adams rejected the notion that a work of art could bring about “healing.”

The event will always be there in memory, and the lives of those who suffered will forever remain burdened by the violence and the pain. Time might make the emotions and the grief gradually less acute, but nothing, least of all a work of art, is going to heal a wound of this sort. Instead, the best I can hope for is to create something that has both serenity and the kind of “gravitas” that those old cathedrals possess.

Gravitas – the virtue that Hannah Arendt characterized as a capacity to stand up under the weight of history – enters this memory space, in large part, thanks to Charles Ives. At the very start of the piece, about a minute after the chorus has begun to chant “remember, remember,” the audience hears a trumpet tracing a melody that some of its members will perhaps remember from another composition: it is a quotation from *The Unanswered Question*. In the program Ives wrote for his so-called “cosmic drama,” the trumpet repeatedly poses “the perennial question of existence” against the background of a slowly moving string chorale that represents “the silence of the Druids.” Responses to the trumpet’s question come in the form of the “fighting answers” of an ever more insistent wind quartet. Only two of Ives’ protagonists enter Adams’ “memory space”: the trumpet at the start and the string chorale, which comes to dominate the work’s last moments [21:00].

The Ives quotation brings with it echoes of an older New York, that of the early 20th century, the New York in which Charles Ives worked by day as an insurance salesman and as night as a composer. In the notes to his 1991 recording of the *Unanswered Question*, Adams spoke of how he was struck by “the unmistakably American quality of the ‘elegiac strain’” that the work expresses and by “the extent to which our musical heritage is described by it.” In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the graphic artist Art Spiegelman found himself drawn to another artifact from the same New York that Ives inhabited: newspaper comics from the dawn of the twentieth century. In these comics Spiegelman a style in which he could cast his response to the events of September 11: the graphic work *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Ives does the same for Adams: it gave him a language that carried the requisite *gravitas* to deal with demands of history.

Explaining the title of his work, Adams defined “transmigration” as “‘the movement from one place to another’ or ‘the transition from one state to another.’” He saw his work as concerned with both the movement of souls from “living to dead” and “the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind.” Music, of course, traces the migration of souls only by means of sounds and words. *On the Transmigration of Souls* traces a path through a space where names and descriptions float apart from one another, finds a way of combining them with music, and, in its final minutes, sets a few words free. In *The Ethics of Memory*, Avishai Margalit argues that one function of the moral witness is to deliver a testimony to an imagined future.¹⁴ Perhaps we can understand what Adams is doing here as a work of moral witnessing that, in recalling these words, also anticipates a future in which the words of Madeline Amy Sweeney will no longer carry the weight that they have for those of us who recall what those words meant at one particular moment, in one particular place. What Adams has crafted is a peculiar sort of memorial:

one that preserves the memory of an event while, at the same time, recognizing that there will come a day when, inevitably, we will find that we cannot remember everything.

¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 311

² Michael H Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era: Eight Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89, 93

³ A Survivor from Warsaw viii.

⁴ For a discussion, see Michael Strasser, "A Survivor from Warsaw' as Personal Parable," *Music & Letters* 76, no. 1 (February 1995): 58-59 and David Isadore Lieberman, "Schoenberg Rewrites his Will: A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46," in *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 214.

⁵ Camille Crittenden, "Texts and Contexts of A Survivor from Warsaw, Op. 46," in *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, ed. Charlotte M. Cross and Russell A. Berman (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 232-241

⁶ Richard Taruskin, "A Sturdy Musical Bridge to the 21st Century," *New York Times*, August 24, 1997, sec. Arts and Leisure.

⁷ Amy Lyn Wlodarski, "'An Idea Can Never Perish': Memory, the Musical Idea, and Schoenberg's A Survivor From Warsaw (1947)," *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 4 (2007): 587

⁸ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 590.

¹⁰ What follows owes much to the discussion in Naomi Cumming, "The Horrors of Identification: Reich's 'Different Trains'," *Perspectives of New Music* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 129-152

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹² For a discussion of this moment, see Christopher Fox, "Steve Reich's 'Different Trains,'" *Tempo*, no. 172, 2 (March 1990): 2-8

¹³ For a survey of the various uses to which the Ninth has been put, see my "'Not These Sounds': Beethoven at Mauthausen," *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 146-163

¹⁴ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 158-9.