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Surviving the Holocaust: Catharsis Through Music

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Music provides an emotional outlet for any situation. It does not matter if one is musically inclined or not, any form of playing or listening to music affects people in some way. Music has a more significant meaning depending on the situation. Obviously, someone who listens to elevator music going to work will have a different experience than a professional musician, who has been studying a specific instrument for decades. Each person has a unique soundtrack to his or her life different than every other person. Music shapes the world around us depending on the emotion and situation.

Throughout World War II, many minorities experienced atrocious persecutions by the National Socialist Party in Germany and throughout most of Europe. Those who suffered in the hundreds of thousands of ghettos, death camps, and work camps used music in a way that was far more powerful than how most people think of music today. For them, music was a way to eradicate built up emotion in a creative manner. The extreme situations led to tremendous amounts of emotional pieces written by professional composers; even inexperienced musicians picked up a simple harmonica to put their hearts and souls into this emotional expression. From suffering, hunger, and despair to optimism and longing for release, every deep emotion imaginable was expressed through song. It is a lofty and frankly unfair comparison to make when discussing the horrible circumstances the individuals affected by the Holocaust, but the man in the elevator may use music in a similar way. If he catches on to the smooth jazz tune and it lightens his mood, it is essentially the same way music touches everyone else and evokes certain emotions.

In terms of expression, music is a way for people to say things that cannot be expressed in any other way. While trapped in concentration camps and ghettos throughout Europe leading up to and during World War II, an entire style of art and music called Expressionism was used to do just that. Expressionism was a type of art or music in which the creator focused mainly on the inner-self and emotional state rather than physical appearance. Agonizing drawings with distorted faces and inverted or harsh coloring characterize art from this time. This countered every style of art that had come before. Musical compositions of this style were dissonant and broke many, if not all, of the rules regarding musical elements such as tempo, length, instrumentation and dynamics. The documentary *Degenerate Art* explains the extreme measures in which the Nazi party went to in order to regulate all forms of individualism. Expressionism was said to be a way for creators to have “secret parts of [themselves] exposed to the world” (Degenenerate). It also promoted thought, something the Nazi party feared. The National Socialists valued ignorance in their people, this way any controversial actions being taken were either not seen or overlooked. The Nazis also planted their own ideas into unknowing citizens like parasites, entering and controlling their hosts. Independent thinking was forbidden under the Nazi’s rule. Because of this, all works of art and music that were deemed to be a part of the Expressionist movement were banned.

Despite all of the rules regulating the manner in which people were able to express themselves, many people held on to the arts to survive mentally while they were physically dying. One story from the Theresienstadt ghetto demonstrates how many

individuals, along with conductor and prisoner Raphael Schechter, used music to pay respects to those shipped off to Auschwitz and to cope with the many losses they continued to face. Schechter trained a handful of the imprisoned Jewish workers to perform the “Requiem Mass for the Dead” composed by Giuseppe Verdi in order to “tell the people with the unmarked graves that [they] heard them” (Defiant). After extremely long days, the group would meet in a frigid basement, hidden from guards to learn the intricate piece from only rote techniques with only an out-of-tune and run-down piano. Regardless of difficulty, those involved in this performance believed that the importance of respecting and grieving those who had lost their lives was more important than breaking any unjustified rule against the arts. Although the piece was written for a Christian mass, the unique power evoked by its composition was a way for people to express their sorrow, which otherwise would have been difficult to portray in any other form.

While music kept those in the Theresienstadt ghetto alive mentally, all across Europe in other ghettos, music allowed people to stay alive physically as well. One of the main ways in which people in the Warsaw ghetto survived was begging on the streets, many times by playing music. In some cases, entire families would take to the streets to beg because there was no other place for the children to go (Gilbert). This music acted as a comfort and lifeline for those starving and living in ditches or alleyways. Music was like their home when a physical place of dwelling was not obtainable. Because of this

nourishing sense of community present in their lives through music, people were able to hold on and relieve themselves of the harsh burden of reality, if only for a moment.

A similar time of oppression in human society was during the civil rights movement in the United States, when those of color were separated from the self-proclaimed superior race of white males. The Augustana College Symposium Day for Winter Term 2015 speech entitled “Singing for Courage” given by Dr. Deborah Dakin discussed how individuals that are placed in harsh situations use music to muster up the courage to fight back against prejudice. Most situations discussed during the presentation gained hope from the music and through the unification of forces, were able to rebel against the injustice. A specific song played during the lecture was preformed by three high school age girls from Montgomery, Alabama at a meeting for the movement of equality for all races in America. This use of song was to create a communal bond and express unity that words or actions alone would not achieve. Another situation mentioned by Dr. Dakin was the songs sung during the Labor Movement strikes between 1931 and 1939. The specific song referenced was from Harlem, Kentucky. Harlem was a mining town where workers were not given their rights and the entire community was affected by the inequality. Singing was a way for individuals and families to find the strength within him or herself to survive and fight the conditions in which they had been placed (Dakin). The topic of the presentation demonstrated the importance of music as an emotional means in which to convey one’s inner-self and desire to survive despite the ruthless situations. The universality of music’s emotional purpose can be seen in the wide variety

of situations. The average human in harsh conditions such as the Holocaust, Civil Rights or Labor Movements, and even in every day situations uses music as a way to express emotions not readily available.

Just as those in the ghettos and concentration camps used music to purge themselves of emotions weighing heavy on their souls, many people today use music as an outlet when life gets too stressful. I include myself in this category of individuals and cannot picture myself without the comfort of music. When life gets too stressful or new situations make me uncomfortable, I am able to use music as a familiar crutch to lean on and to remind myself who I am and who I am supposed to be. I am blessed with the opportunities to grow and mature into a well-rounded woman at Augustana, but no matter the years or experiences that are in store for me, playing violin will always comfort me just as it did when I was learning at the age of eight. My surroundings and relationships with others may shift throughout my life, but the connection I have with music will only grow stronger as I develop musical eloquence through the continuation of my orchestral participation.

In many situations, the real value of the arts is overlooked because its omnipresence is taken for granted. Because of music's ability to evoke so many emotions that would otherwise be difficult to convey, the arts are essential for the mental health of many. I, too, underestimated the importance of art and music in society until I reflected on how different my life would have been had I not picked up a violin ten years ago. Music is a way to express emotions that some people are not even consciously aware of.

Many of those who were unfairly forced to endure the barbaric treatment of the Jews and other minorities in Europe before and during World War II, along with many others throughout the history of prejudice around the world used the composition and performance of music, along with other art forms, as a catharsis of emotions provoked by the unforgiving situations.

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