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Playing for our lives

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GERALD COHEN

Playing for our lives

for String Quartet
(2012)

Score

Playing for our lives for string quartet

Note by composer Gerald Cohen:

Playing for our lives was composed for the Cassatt String Quartet, who gave the premiere of the piece at Symphony Space, New York City in February 2012. The Cassatts were planning a program of music of the composers who were interned in the Nazi concentration camp Terezin (Theresienstadt), and asked me to compose a piece which would be a contemporary memorial and tribute to the musical life of that place. Terezin, near Prague, was in essence a transit camp, where Jews and some other prisoners were kept until transport to the death camps such as Auschwitz. The Nazis allowed a certain amount of art and education to take place at Terezin, both as a way of occupying the prisoners, and also since it served their purpose of deceiving the world as to the nature of concentration camps in general. And there were a great number of excellent artists of all sorts in the camp, among those many excellent performers and several excellent composers—and so musical life flourished with a passion in these very strange surroundings.

In my string quartet, I have used several musical essences of the life at Terezin. One is the Yiddish folk song “Beryozkele” (Little birch tree), a poignant song that was arranged there by the composer Viktor Ullmann (I use the melody, not his arrangement). Folk songs—Czech, Hebrew and Yiddish—were important parts of the lives especially of the children at Terezin, who sang them in choirs formed in their barracks. The second is a lullaby from Hans Krasa’s opera *Brundibar*, which was one of the most important musical experiences of Terezin—an opera performed entirely by children as the singers, and which was so popular there that it was performed more than 50 times. Finally, I use excerpts from Verdi’s *Requiem*, a piece that was championed at Terezin by the dynamic conductor Rafael Schachter, and was also performed many times, but by three different choruses—as after each of the first two performances, virtually the entire chorus was transported to their deaths at Auschwitz.

With all of these pieces, but especially the *Requiem*, the layers of paradox and poignancy are extraordinarily powerful: for the prisoners, music was something that gave them deep joy; at the same time, the Nazis used the concerts as a propaganda tool to fool the world as to the nature of the camp. The *Requiem* spoke to people of their own deaths, but at the same time, in speaking of a *Dies Irae*—a day of wrath—was a defiant stab at the Nazis.

In my quartet, these various feelings and musical elements are woven together to create a memorial to the musical and emotional life of the camp. “Beryozkele” and its tender lament dominate the early part of the piece; the middle section is a set of variations on the lullaby from *Brundibar*, as the music attempts to bring the joy of that piece to the fore; and the final section is dominated by elements of the *Requiem*, with its passion, anger, and also quiet mourning.

The title of the piece is inspired by a quote from Paul Rabinowitz, who at the age of 14, was the trumpet player in *Brundibar*, and was one of the few in that opera to survive the war: “When the SS was present, I always had this shadowy feeling at the back of my head. I knew I could not play wrong, and you can hear every wrong note very clearly on a trumpet. Rahm [the commandant of Terezin] would notice, I thought to myself, and be mad at me, and put me on a transport. And in those moments it was as if I were playing for my life.”¹

1. Quote from *The Girls of Room 28* by Hannelore Brenner (Schocken Books, 2009)

The composition is in three movements, played without pause:

1. Beryozkele	page 3
2. Brundibar	15
3. Dies Irae	31

Duration: approx. 24 mins.

Playing for our lives

1. Beryozkele

Gerald Cohen

Violently ♩ = 80

G.P.

rit.

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

Very slow, as if in shock, "frozen" ♩ = 40

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

Sad, expressive, but with more motion ♩ = 58

13

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Cello

20

24

29

Scherzando, graceful, starting at $\text{♩}=152$ and then accel. *accel.*

35

A waltz (in one), scherzando, carefree $\text{♩}=192$

42

50

58

mf

mf

mf

mp cresc.

mf

64

mp cresc.

pizz.

mp cresc.

70

mf cresc.

f joyous

f joyous

f joyous

arco

f joyous

Musical score for page 7, measures 76-81. The score consists of four staves: Treble, Alto, Bass, and Cello/Bassoon. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). Measure 76 starts with a melodic line in the Treble staff. Measures 77-79 show rhythmic patterns in the Alto and Bass staves. Measure 80 features a bassoon line in the Bass staff. Measure 81 concludes the section.

Musical score for page 7, measures 82-87. The score continues with four staves. Measure 82 shows a melodic line in the Treble staff. Measures 83-85 feature rhythmic patterns in the Alto and Bass staves. Measure 86 concludes the section.

Musical score for page 7, measures 88-93. The score continues with four staves. Measures 88-90 show a melodic line in the Treble staff. Measures 91-93 feature rhythmic patterns in the Bass staff. The word "dim." appears three times in the score, once in each measure of the bass line.

rit.

A little slower, cantabile at first $\text{d} = 176$

94

102

G.P.

111

p malicious, insidious

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

<img alt="Musical score page 111 showing four staves of music. The top staff has a treble clef, the second has a treble clef, the third has a bass clef, and the bottom has a bass clef. The key signature changes frequently. Measure 111 starts with rests. Measures 112-113 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. Measures 114-115 show changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. Measures 116-117 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. Measures 118-119 show changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. Measures 120-121 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. Measures 122-123 show changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. Measures 124-125 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. Measures 126-127 show changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. Measures 128-129 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. Measures 130-131 show changes between 3/4 and 2/4 time signatures. Measures 132-133 show changes between 2/4 and 3/4 time signatures. 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117

mf

mf

mf

126 Steadily growing in agitation,
but same tempo

subito p

mf

mf

131

cresc.

subito p

cresc.

cresc.

Musical score for orchestra and piano, page 141, measures 3-7. The score consists of four staves. The top staff is treble clef, 3/4 time, dynamic mp. The second staff is treble clef, 3/4 time, dynamic mp. The third staff is bass clef, 3/4 time, dynamic f. The bottom staff is bass clef, 3/4 time, dynamic f. Measure 3: Treble staff has eighth-note pairs. Bass staff has eighth-note pairs. Measure 4: Treble staff has eighth-note pairs. Bass staff has eighth-note pairs. Measure 5: Treble staff has eighth-note pairs. Bass staff has eighth-note pairs. Measure 6: Treble staff has eighth-note pairs. Bass staff has eighth-note pairs. Measure 7: Treble staff has eighth-note pairs. Bass staff has eighth-note pairs.

A musical score page showing four staves of music. The top staff is for the first violin, the second for the second violin, the third for the cello, and the bottom staff for the bassoon. The score is in common time, with measure 3 ending at the beginning of the fourth measure. Measure 3 consists of six measures of music, each with a '3' above it indicating a triplets grouping. Measure 4 begins with a single measure of music. The music includes various note heads, stems, and rests, with some notes having grace marks or slurs. Measure 4 ends with a single measure of music.

150

154

159

163

 $\text{♩} = 66$

Rather slowly, with anguish

168

>) are placed under the notes in each measure. Dynamics 'sfz' and 'dim.' are indicated at the end of each section."/>

173

poco sul ponticello

p

Somewhat more broadly $\text{♩} = 60$

178

somewhat freely

183

quasi cadenza—start under tempo
($\text{♩} = 50$) accel.

187

189 (♩ = 50) With more motion ♩ = 76

194

200

attacca:

2. Brundibar

THEME: Lullaby from *Brundibár*

Gentle, warm $\text{♩} = 69$

1
2
3
4
5

poco rit. a tempo

6
7
8
9
10

Var. 1

Starting slowly ($\text{♩} = 69$, $\text{♩} = 104$)

accel. poco a poco

11
12
13
14
15

This movement uses portions of the "Lullaby" from *Brundibár*, a children's opera by Hans Krásá and Adolf Hoffmeister.

Very lively (♩ = 108, ♪ = 160)

17

mf

p subito

p subito

mf

25

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

mf

32

f

f

mp subito

mp subito

f

mp subito

39

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

f

f

f

f

Var. 2

Fast, grazioso $\text{♩} = 144$

G.P.

46

p

f

f

p

f

p

f

50

p *leggiero*

p *leggiero*

p *leggiero*

p *leggiero*

53

55

58

61

rit.

Gently, cantabile $d = 72$
Var. 3

64

66

p

p

p

68

bring out as main melody

mf espress.

bring out as countermelody to Vn.2

mp espress.

mp

70

72

74

rit.

a tempo

77

79

Var. 4

Fast, vigorous $\text{♩} = 152$

81

Treble Staff: Measure 81: Rest. Measures 82-83: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 84-85: $f \text{ pesante, boorish}$, $pizz.$, f , p .

Alto Staff: Measure 81: Rest. Measures 82-83: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 84-85: $p \text{ leggiero}$.

Bass Staff: Measure 81: Rest. Measures 82-83: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 84-85: $f \text{ pesante, boorish}$, $p \text{ leggiero}$.

Bassoon Staff: Measures 82-83: Slurs, $p \text{ leggiero}$. Measures 84-85: Slurs, f , $arco$, $pizz.$.

86

Treble Staff: Measures 86-87: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 88-89: $f \text{ pesante, boorish}$, $pizz.$, $p \text{ leggiero}$. Measure 90: f , $p \text{ leggiero}$.

Alto Staff: Measures 86-87: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 88-89: $p \text{ leggiero}$. Measure 90: $p \text{ leggiero}$.

Bass Staff: Measures 86-87: $p \text{ leggiero}$, 3. Measures 88-89: $f \text{ pesante, boorish}$, $arco$, $pizz.$. Measure 90: f , $p \text{ leggiero}$.

Bassoon Staff: Measures 86-87: Slurs, $p \text{ leggiero}$. Measures 88-89: Slurs, $p \text{ leggiero}$. Measure 90: $p \text{ leggiero}$.

91

Treble Staff: Measures 91-92: p , 3. Measures 93-94: f , $pizz.$. Measure 95: f , p .

Alto Staff: Measures 91-92: p , 3. Measures 93-94: p . Measure 95: p .

Bass Staff: Measures 91-92: p , 3. Measures 93-94: p . Measure 95: p .

Bassoon Staff: Measures 91-92: Slurs, p . Measures 93-94: Slurs, $pizz.$. Measure 95: f , b .

107

111

113

Var. 5

117 Agitated $\bullet = 108$

Musical score for orchestra and piano, showing three staves of music with various dynamics and performance instructions.

Top Staff: Treble clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: p , p . Measure number: 8.

Middle Staff: Bass clef, 6/8 time. Dynamics: p . Measure number: 8.

Bottom Staff: Bass clef, 6/8 time. Dynamics: p . Measure number: 8.

Second System (Measure 121):

- Staff 1:** Treble clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: f , *subito p*, $>$.
- Staff 2:** Treble clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: f , *subito p*, $>$.
- Staff 3:** Bass clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: *subito f*, *subito p*, $>$.
- Staff 4:** Bass clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: *subito f*, *subito p*, $>$.

Third System (Measure 125):

- Staff 1:** Treble clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: mf , *subito p*, p cresc.
- Staff 2:** Treble clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: mf , *subito p*, p cresc.
- Staff 3:** Bass clef, 6/8 time. Dynamics: p .
- Staff 4:** Bass clef, 8/8 time. Dynamics: mf .

128

132

136

<img alt="Musical score page 136 showing four staves of music. Measure 1 starts with dynamic 'f'. Measures 2-4 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 5-7 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 8-10 start with dynamic 'g'. Measure 11 starts with dynamic 'g'. Measures 12-14 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 15-17 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 18-20 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 21-23 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 24-26 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 27-29 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 30-32 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 33-35 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 36-38 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 39-41 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 42-44 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 45-47 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 48-50 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 51-53 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 54-56 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 57-59 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 60-62 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 63-65 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 66-68 start with dynamic 'g'. 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Measures 990-991 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 992-993 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 994-995 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 996-997 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 998-999 start with dynamic 'g'. Measures 999-1000 start with dynamic 'g'.</p>

139

mf

mf

mf

rit.

dim.

dim.

dim.

dim.

Var. 6

Broad, but with some anxiety $\text{♩} = 72$

p

cresc.

p (unmeasured tremolos)

cresc.

p

cresc.

(♩ = 96) (♩ = 84 *subito*)

151

rit.

156 (♩ = 60)

f (unmeasured tremolos)

Var. 7 Gracious, flowing, with pleasure ♩ = 108

dim.

mf

dim. (unmeasured tremolos)

p

mf

mf dim.

(scales rather lightly)

161

mf

poco cresc.

mf

poco cresc.

mf

mf

(scales rather lightly)

poco cresc.

165

169

173

$\text{♩} = 120$

Somewhat faster, becoming ecstatic

176

f

f

f

f

accel.

Turning into agitation

180

p subito

cresc.

p subito

cresc.

cresc.

185

($\text{♩} = 144$)

bring out prominently

ff

mf cresc.

attacca:

3. Dies Irae

Quite fast, agitated $\text{♩} = 144$

Musical score for measures 1-2 of 'Dies Irae'. The score consists of four staves: Treble, Alto, Bass, and Bass (continuation). The key signature changes between G major (no sharps or flats), F# minor (one sharp), and E minor (two sharps). The time signature alternates between 4/4 and 3/4. Dynamics include *f* (fortissimo) and *p* (pianissimo). Measure 1 starts with a forte dynamic in 4/4. Measure 2 begins with a forte dynamic in 3/4.

3

G.P.

Musical score for measures 3-4 of 'Dies Irae'. The score continues with the same four staves and key signature changes. Measure 3 starts with a forte dynamic in 4/4. Measure 4 begins with a forte dynamic in 3/4. The section is labeled 'G.P.' (General Punctuation).

6

Musical score for measures 5-6 of 'Dies Irae'. The score continues with the same four staves and key signature changes. Measure 5 starts with a forte dynamic in 3/4. Measure 6 begins with a forte dynamic in 4/4. The section ends with a forte dynamic in 4/4.

9

5 5

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

G.P.

sfz

sfz

sfz

sfz

15

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

3 4

fff

fff

fff 3

fff 3

Musical score for piano, featuring three staves of music. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ff*, *sempre ff*, *f*, *mf*, *dim.*, *p subito*, and *ff*. The music consists of measures 19 through 26, with each measure containing four measures of music. The staves are arranged vertically, with the top staff in treble clef, the middle staff in bass clef, and the bottom staff in bass clef. The score uses a variety of time signatures, including 3/4, 4/4, and 5/4. The music is highly rhythmic, with many eighth and sixteenth note patterns. The score is written in black ink on white paper.

29

32

35

37

40 *accel.*

44 Faster $\text{♩} = 184$

49

sul ponticello

sfz

sfz

sfz

sfz

sfz

sfz

sul ponticello

sfz > ppp

sul ponticello

sfz > ppp

very lonely

p

54

mf aggressive

sempre ppp

sempre ppp

60

p

68 *ord.*

74 *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *cresc.* *allarg.* (♩ = 132)

79 *Tempo I, pesante* ♩ = 144

82

85

mp *cresc.*

subito mp

cresc.

subito mp *cresc.*

88

3

cresc. *3*

3

Wildly

91

93

96

99

dim.

dim.

dim.

104

Much slower, mournful $\text{♩} = 50$

p (unmeasured tremolo stay at same speed)

con sord.

p

con sord.

p

con sord.

p

111

ppp

p

pp

ppp

pp

pp

ppp

116

121 *freely, rhapsodic*

126

mf ³ *with passion*
senza sord.

mf *with passion*
senza sord.

mf *with passion*
senza sord.

f *with passion*

Elegaic ♩ = 44

132

p simply

pp

ppp

p

137

p

(4+3+2)

p

p

145

gentle crescendi

150

155