
A Survivor from Warsaw, op. 46



Title	A Survivor from Warsaw for Narrator, Men's Chorus and Orchestra, op. 46
Time of origin	1947
Premiere	4 November 1948, Albuquerque/New Mexico, Carlisle Gymnasium, University Campus
Duration	ca. 7 min.

"This masterpiece is, because of the creative necessity of the relationship between text and music as well as music and listener, the aesthetic musical manifesto of our epoch."
(Luigi Nono)

The impetus for Arnold Schönberg's "A Survivor from Warsaw," op. 46, came in late March/early April 1947 from the Russian dancer, dance teacher and choreographer Corinne Chochem (1907–1990). On April 2, 1947, Chochem sent the melody and English translation of a partisan song, which was to be used in a commissioned composition by Schönberg in either its original Yiddish version or a Hebrew translation. On 20 April 1947, following a conversation with Corinne Chochem about a composition commission, Schönberg named his price "for a composition of 6-9 minutes for small orchestra and chorus, perhaps also one or more soloists on the melodie [sic] you gave me," and added: "I plan to make it this scene – which you described – in the Warsaw Ghetto, how the doomed jews started singing, before gooing [sic] to die." Chochem immediately replied that she could not meet his fee expectations, which meant that the project could not be realized in this constellation even after a concession by Schönberg ("If you can arrange this, then I would like to have as soon as possible the story and the translation of the text," 23 April 1947).

At the beginning of July 1947, Schönberg received a commission from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, which he accepted, mentioning that he had already started work on an orchestral work that could be completed within about six weeks: "My original plan was to write it for a small group of about 24 musicians, one or two 'speakers' and a mens choir of an adequate size" (letter to Margaret Grant, Koussevitzky Music Foundation, 7 July 1947). Due to an eye ailment, Schönberg initially notated composition and text – of which he was also the author – in a short (condensed) score of large format, which under the composer's supervision was transferred by René Leibowitz into a full score that would serve as the engraver's copy for printing in December 1947 in Los Angeles.

The narrative of the "Survivor from Warsaw," which Schönberg wrote himself, describes a scene, typical of national socialism's organized terror, of roll-call selection, where the human inventory is inspected, and those sentenced to death are pulled from the prisoners' ranks; in doing so, it picks up on significant schemata of everyday life in the Nazi camps. Schönberg's literary procedure of obscuring the Warsaw Ghetto – the symbolic location – by focusing on a spatially indefinite episode along the continuum of a

larger historical process, entails that it remains factually undefined. Not the authenticity but rather the understanding of the occurrence is important when reading and interpreting of the terror of extermination as a characteristic of modern social history: "Now, what the text of the Survivor means to me: it means at first a warning to all Jews, never to forget what has been done to us, never to forget that even people who did not do it themselves, agreed with them and many of them found it necessary to treat us this way. We should never forget this, even such things have not been done in the manner in which I describe in the Survivor. This does not matter. The main thing is, that I saw it in my imagination." (Letter to Kurt List, 1 November 1948)

The tone-row structure of "Survivor from Warsaw" is, like most of Schönberg's twelve-tone compositions, based on a specific organization of the two six-tone halves of the tone-row (hexachords). For Opus 46, this means, concretely, the relationship between the tonal qualities of the prime row, and its inversion, transposed down a fifth; the first half of PI and the second row-half of IVI complement one another to form a chromatic whole, while the second half from PI corresponds with the first half of IVI, but in diverging order. Using the first row-halves of PI and PV horizontally, it is possible to have a simultaneous combination of the first halves of IVI or IX as a vertically arranged chordal field, without the repetition of any single note. Hexachord complementarity in the case of the inversion's being transposed down a fifth is evident in the majority of Schönberg's twelve-tone pieces; for instance, in the chronological neighbors, the string trio op. 45, or the violin phantasy op. 47. A further significant row characteristic in op. 46 consists in the fact that the tones 3, 4 and 5 of the prime, or its inversion, form a major third, which also appears identically when the row is transposed upward or downward by a major third. Since the major third belongs to three forms each of the prime, inversion, retrograde and retrograde-inversion, 48 transpositions of the four modes form four groups of twelve row-structures each. A special harmonic constellation arises in the last section of the narrative before the beginning of the closing prayer (mm. 72–80), in which the sound, shifting in steps of semitones, attains, in its intense concentration, significance both formally and in terms of content.

The textual semantics of the cantata are reflected on the musical level by a number of equivalent motifs as "hermeneutically significant elements of the narrative discourse" that compositionally refer to the perspective of the narrative. The discontinuity between objective (chronological) time over the course of the narrative, and subjective (cognitive) time in the psychology of the narrator finds a formal and motivic equivalent in the design of the musical texture.

In the closing chorale, Schönberg refers back to the Jewish statement of faith, the "Shema Yisroel," which plays a central role in the life of the believing Jew. The "Shema" is recited as the central confession of Judaism in times of joy and sorrow, as an expression of praise, hope and confidence as well as a strengthening for those in doubt and the last word of the dying. In Schönberg's interpretation, the creed ends with Deuteronomy 6,7 ("when thou liest down, and when thou risest up"). Apart from being a possible allusion to the position of the Reformed Prayer Book, it is also an accentuation of the metaphorical moment:

rising up against the oppression of tyranny and the “rebirth of the Jewish nation” (Timothy L. Jackson).

In Schönberg’s interpretation of the confession of faith, there are three coordinates which interrelate: the commitment to monotheism, the meaning of religion for the assimilated Jew, and the thematization of Jewish identity: “The Shema Jisroel at the end has a special meaning to me. I think, the Shema Jisroel is the ‘Glaubensbekenntnis,’ the confession of the Jew. It is our thinking of the one, eternal, God who is invisible, who forbids imitation, who forbids to make a picture and all these things, which you perhaps have realised when you read my Moses und Aron und Der biblische Weg [Moses and Aaron and the Biblical Way]. The miracle is, to me, that all these people who might have forgotten, for years, that they are Jews, suddenly facing death, remember who they are.” (Arnold Schönberg to Kurt List, 1 November 1948).

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