

Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Thread and Pull [2022, rev. 2024]

BRITTANY GREEN

Born 1991 in Raleigh, North Carolina
Currently resides in Louisville, Kentucky

As part of her residency with the Louisville Orchestra Creator Corps, Brittany Green has created a new version of *Thread and Pull*, originally composed as a quintet in 2022 for the Fifth House Ensemble and Fresh Inc Festival. The expanded version uses a small but highly colorful chamber orchestra with four winds (including alto saxophone, which is featured in an extended cadenza), trumpet, piano, toy piano, percussion (complete with an array of tuned glass bottles), strings, and five vocal soloists, who are first heard in a murmur of offstage whispers. The text comes from Ghazal 1419 by the 13th-century Persian mystic Rumi, as translated by the Iranian-American architect and writer Nader Khalili.

Green write that the piece “explores concepts of restraint, constraint, dissension, and freedom,” which plays out in textures ranging from tightly controlled layers of interlocking rhythms to aleatoric sections that leave the interactions between cyclical cells of music to chance. Other than one contemplative tenor solo supported by the metallic shimmer of glockenspiel and vibraphone, the vocalists’ entangled words and extended vowel sounds melt into the enigmatic ensemble textures.

Der Kaiser von Atlantis [1943]

VIKTOR ULLMANN

Born January 1, 1898 in Teschen, Czech Republic
Died October 18, 1944 in Auschwitz, Poland

After studying with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna, the Czech musician Viktor Ullmann spent the 1920s and -30s establishing himself as a respected composer and conductor in the cultural capitals of Europe. A first sign of trouble for him came with the rise of the Nazi party in 1933, when Ullmann had to leave Germany and return to Prague. Performances of Ullmann’s music dried up in 1938, and in 1942 he was among the more than 100,000 Jews deported that year to Theresienstadt, a self-contained ghetto built on the site of an old fortress north of Prague.

The Nazis used Theresienstadt as a propaganda tool, sprucing it up for a visit from the International Committee of the Red Cross and using prisoners to film a documentary showing off the seemingly happy residents. Within that ruse, a cultural life was able to take root, including an improbably vibrant musical scene, with Ullmann at the center of

it. He played piano, organized concerts, and even wrote reviews, all while composing some of the best music of his life.

His most ambitious project was the one-act opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, using a libretto written by a fellow prisoner, the 24-year-old poet and artist Peter Kien. Ullmann was able to complete the music and stage rehearsals, but the satirical fable of a power-hungry emperor determined to cheat death was more than the SS was willing to tolerate, and no performance was ever allowed in Theresienstadt. Ullmann left the score with a friend before was transferred to Auschwitz in 1944, where he was killed in the gas chambers two days after he arrived. (Kien was sent to Auschwitz at the same time and died soon after from illness.)

Ullmann's working score, complete with revisions made during rehearsals, was safeguarded by friends who survived the Holocaust. It was only in 1975 that *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* was staged publicly for the first time.

SYNOPSIS

After a prologue in which a loudspeaker announces the characters, we meet Death, who is fed up with the speed and technology with which people are killing each other, and Harlequin (a clown character from old Italian comedies, known for being a trickster), who sings of how the "world is all topsy-turvy and it's whirling like a carousel." Death laments that he is "too tired to follow the motorized legions of fighters." The Drummer, making a proclamation on behalf of Emperor Overall, declares that there shall be a "God-inspired war" that will leave "no survivors." In a rage, Death breaks his sword, making it so that nobody can die.

The scene shifts to the Emperor's palace, where he is monitoring his war's progress. He learns that the executions he ordered have failed, and that thousands of people who are mortally wounded cannot die. The Emperor makes an announcement claiming credit for a new "secret formula for life everlasting."

Next the action moves to a battlefield, where a soldier and a girl on opposite sides of the fight learn that "Death is dead." They drop their weapons and embrace, over the protestations of the Drummer. Back in the palace, the Emperor (joined by Harlequin and the Drummer) becomes distraught. He faces a mirror and sees Death, who declares, "I'll come back if you'll be the first one to die." The Emperor allows Death to take him by the hand. A final chorale welcomes the return of Death and the lifting of life's burdens, with a reminder to "prize all human worth."