HISTORICAL NOTES

Professor teaches Holocaust remembrance through music

Laurence Sherr acknowledges that students often are puzzled that he teaches a class called Music in the Holocaust. "They know what the Holocaust is," Sherr said, "and they wonder, 'when there are concentration camps, genocide, persecution, why are we talking about music?' How can there even be a connection?"

But by the end of the course, he said, students realize the essential role music had during the Holocaust. Music offered a reprieve from life's daily horrors in the deadliest genocide in history.

For example, singing a song of their native country could remind prisoners of the identity that had been stripped from them. Or a soothing lullaby could be the only comfort to a child deprived of medicine.

"In America, in our society of abundance, we often think of music as a form of entertainment," Sherr said. "For people living amid filth and disease and death, music was something that still tied them to the world where there was some beauty. It provided people with some hope that they could go forward."

Along with being a professor of music at Kennesaw State University, Sherr composes Holocaust remembrance music and produces remembrance events and lectures on Holocaust music topics around the world.

In 2015, Sherr launched the Music of Resistance and Survival Project, a combination of music and educational material to engage audiences in Holocaust remembrance. He has been awarded several grants to help fund his efforts around the world.

"I don't think of this in terms of being rewarding; I think of it as being necessary," he said. "It's my contribution to society to bring this to people so that we can counter the forces of hate and division and denial in our own culture, and we can continue to advocate for tolerance and mutual respect and understanding."

Sherr was well into his career before Holocaust remembrance music became his passion. About 25 years ago, Sherr was asked to compose a piece for a presentation at the Carter Presidential Center. Unconsciously drawing on Jewish influences, he wrote a cello solo in memory of his late brother. "It started to connect me with my own culture," Sherr said.

Other people started to perform his piece at Holocaust remembrance concerts. Sherr then was asked to speak about it at a concert in New York.

"That concert led me to a life-changing realization, that if my music was going to be used for Holocaust remembrance, then I should set out and do that intentionally," he said.

Sherr was inspired to learn more about music during the Holocaust and the history of Jewish music, and about his own ancestry.

"My work ties together all these facets of what I do with Holocaust music – as a concert producer, a composer, a researcher, a lecturer – and as someone who has a personal connection to the material as well," Sherr said. "I think that gives me the ability to provide some unique perspective."