FACULTY FOCUS

Music

Remembering the Holocaust

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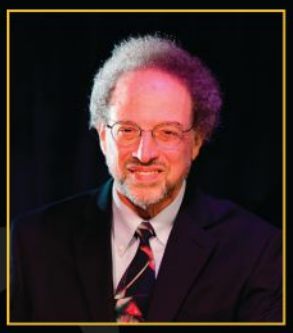

Laurence Sherr is an internationally recognized composer and scholar, most notably for his work on the musical history of the Holocaust. His research encompasses his compositional work, Holocaust music scholarship, and the pedagogy he developed for teaching about the Holocaust through music. He is recognized for the unique ways in which he blends all of these together.

Sherr has pursued Holocaust music research at archives, libraries and museums in Europe, Israel and the U.S., especially at site visits to the Auschwitz and Theresienstadt concentration camps. He disseminates his research at invited appearances for concerts and lectures internationally.

In addition, Sherr engages Kennesaw State University students with his scholarship through teaching, most especially via his global-learning course called Music and the Holocaust. His emphasis on the connection between culture and music in all his courses is a reflection of his personal, professional, and pedagogical interests. Those interests ultimately led him to compose his Holocaust remembrance works.

"My first composition credited as a Holocaust remembrance work was actually unintentional," Sherr said, "as it was initially intended to be a memorial piece for my younger brother, Neal."

Written on commission for the Jimmy Carter Center in 1993, Sherr's solo cello work *Elegy and Vision* was soon chosen for Holocaust memorial concert programs, particularly for the Jewish cantorial sounds that Sherr attributes to memories from his childhood synagogue. As a first-generation American, the creation of *Elegy and Vision* was a pivotal moment that led him to more deeply explore his own ancestry along with its cultural expression in his music.

The first two works Sherr created as intentional Holocaust remembrance compositions were *Fugitive Footsteps*, for baritone voice and chorus, and *Flame Language*, for voice and chamber orchestra or chamber ensemble.

Written in 2002 and 2007 respectively, these pieces were set to the poetry of Nobel laureate Nelly Sachs, known for her poems witnessing the Holocaust.

Sherr's largest composition, *Sonata for Cello and Piano – Mir zaynen do!* (We are here!), was created in 2014 with the support of a KSU grant. In its three movements, Sherr integrated Holocaust sources–four songs from the partisans, ghettos, and camps–with his original compositional work.

An estimated 600,000 people heard this composition, along with information about Sherr and his influences, when it was featured several times on Performance Today, the classical music program broadcast on nearly 300 public radio stations across the U.S.

Sonata for Cello and Piano – Mir zaynen do! was incorporated into his 2015 Music of Resistance and Survival project that brings his music to audiences in a multi-media format, blending art and pedagogy.

The individual Holocaust songs are performed separately, framed by Sherr's lectures on the historical significance and biographical details of their creators. The program culminates with his cello sonata that weaves them all together. Music of Resistance and Survival concerts have been produced in the Czech Republic, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, Israel and across the U.S., earning prestigious recognition for Sherr and the University's School of Music. The concerts were performed in early 2019 in Italy and the Republic of San Marino.

"The goal was to have more than a concert piece," Sherr explained. "I wanted to create something that would reach audiences in a different way, to let them experience this historical era in the same immersive way my students were learning about the Holocaust in my classroom."

"Essentially, it was a pedagogical piece intended to raise awareness of the songwriters and lyricists, and to strengthen their Jewish legacy as being more than mere victims, but rather remembered as resilient, courageous, bold artistic heroes," said Sherr, adding that he hoped people left Music of Resistance and Survival events with a greater sense of understanding, acceptance, and tolerance.

Sherr, currently professor of music and composer-in-residence, started teaching at Kennesaw State University in 1996. After earning a master's degree in music theory and a D.M.A. (Doctor of Musical Arts) in musical composition at the University of Illinois, he returned to his native Atlanta to work as a freelance composer and musician before joining academia.

He has been recognized with a broad array of external prizes, grants, and fellowships as well as awards for his his teaching and scholarship, most recently the 2018 University Distinguished Professor Award.