

ORCHESTRA: Prisoners in striped uniforms play instruments in a concert at Auschwitz concentration camp during the Second World War

IT IS HARD to imagine anything beautiful could ever come from the death camps of the Holocaust. Yet, at an astonishing concert to be held in Israel next month, people will, for the first time, hear music composed more than 70 years ago by prisoners in concentration camps, forced labour and prisoner of war camps – both civilian and military – around the world.

Italian composer Professor Francesco Lotoro is the man at the heart of this project, having spent 30 years tracking down scores written in coal, carved into cutlery and wood, written on toilet roll, notebooks, and scribbled on walls. He has sought out orchestral and oral pieces composed by prisoners between 1933 and 1953, salvaging more than 8,000 scores in total, 50 per cent of which, he says, were written by Jewish people. “Remembrance is not an option, it is a duty,” he says.

“Created in camps including Auschwitz, Theresienstadt and Westerbork, you have to reconstruct the music,” explains Lotoro, who says his project aims to give the music back to the Jewish people and takes no ownership for it himself. “Usually the music belongs to the composer but I rescued this music for the people. It is not mine.”

Born in Hungary and brought up in southern Italy, Lotoro, 58, studied at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest before becoming a concert pianist. His search for what he calls “the great treasure” began in 1988 and has taken him all over the world to museums, memorials,

libraries and into the homes of survivors who remember the music being played, as well as tracking down relatives of those who are no longer around. Incredibly, 15 per cent of the music comes from the survivors’ memories while the rest has been notated.

“That is the beauty of this music,” says Lotoro. “It is a universal language. We have created some very strange instruments because they had to use the limited options they had there.”

“We asked the survivors to remember the flute parts, the piano parts, the brass, so we can try to perform the music as it would have been heard in the camps.”

As well as four operas and symphonies composed by professionals who were imprisoned, there is music by bakers, actors and other amateurs.

Lotoro found meeting the Holocaust survivor, actor and director Jack Garfein, in 2012 particularly moving. Garfein had tracked down the composer after reading about his research. A Ruthenian Jew who grew up in Czechoslovakia, his entire family was killed but incredibly he managed to survive 11 concentration camps. His link to music is what he says kept him alive. “He was 13 when he

‘He was being moved to a camp and heard a Polish Jew singing a beautiful melody and memorised it’

went to his first camp but lied and told them he was 16,” says Lotoro. “If they knew you were a child it was very dangerous. Later, when he was being moved to another camp he heard a Polish Jew singing a beautiful melody and memorised it. Seventy years later he tracked me down and sang it for the first time since the day he first heard it. He told me he saved himself to remember this song.”

In 1946 Garfein was one of the first five Holocaust survivors to arrive in the United States where he still lives, aged 86. In 2017, Lotoro came across another inspirational story.

“In 1939 to be a Jewish person in Prague was very dangerous. One woman, Ilse Weber, managed to save her oldest son Hanuš, who was transported to Sweden with the help of the Red Cross charity. The rest of the family – Ilse, her husband Will and youngest son Tommy – were transported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1942.”

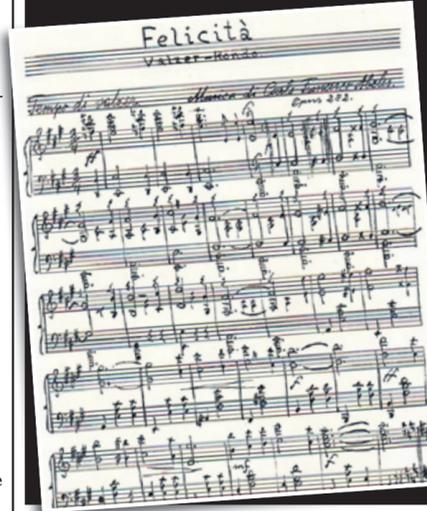
Ilse was put to work as a night nurse in the children’s infirmary. There she wrote around 60 poems, setting many to guitar music. “She was a great woman – a poet, writer, singer, pianist, violinist and guitarist,” says Lotoro.

After Ilse’s husband Will was sent to Auschwitz in 1944, Ilse transferred to the camp with Tommy in order to keep the family together. Tragically the pair were gassed upon arrival.

Miraculously, Will survived the death camp, outliving his family by 30 years. “After the war Will came back to Theresienstadt and saved many of Ilse’s songs and poems,” says Lotoro. One of these songs will be performed at the concert by another survivor, Aviva Bar-On, who as a nine-year-old shared a block

I rescue sublime music of hope and inspiration created in hell of the Holocaust

CONSTANCE KNOX talks to an Italian composer who has made it his life’s work to salvage music composed more than 70 years ago in concentration and prison camps



TREASURE: A sheet of music written in a camp by Charles Abeles, which will be one of the compositions to be played publicly for the first time at the concert; and Professor Lotoro, who inspired the project



with Ilse in Theresienstadt. “She could remember two of Ilse’s songs that were lost,” says Lotoro. “She is 83 now and has a beautiful voice. I will accompany her with the piano.”

TWO YEARS ago Dr Michael Sinclair, vice-chairman of the Jewish National Fund UK, approached Lotoro about showcasing the music in a concert to mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. He had heard of Lotoro’s years of research and his 48-volume CD encyclopaedia *KZ Musik*, which contains music composed in concentration camps in Europe, North Africa and Asia. On April 15, a selection of these pieces will be played to the public for the first time in Jerusalem in a concert called *Notes Of Hope*, with songs performed in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, Czech and Romani.

Attendees will include Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, world dignitaries and Holocaust survivors.

The concert will fall, symbolically, on the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. “The idea was to take the music to Israel because technically it belongs to all humankind but it mainly belongs to the Jewish people,” says Lotoro. “Almost all the composers who performed this music were Jewish

people who died in concentration camps.” Initially Lotoro was only looking for music written by Jewish people but four years into the project he decided to expand his search to include gypsies, Spaniards, survivors from Japanese war camps, French, British and Germans. “All music written by everybody in captivity at this time,” he says.

Today the composer lives in Barletta with his wife in a home they share with 10,000 items stored in his archives, including interviews, videos, cassettes, music and diaries. And his work is nowhere near finished.

“It’s impossible to stop in 1945, because the war continued in Eastern Europe. Some Jewish people were liberated from German camps and deported to Soviet camps. For me it finished with the death of Stalin.

“I want to gather all the music written in camps and extend this to before the war, when camps were set

up, until 1953. But I cannot do it on my own.” The project has become his life’s work. “Music is one of the most important historical documents,” he explains. “It is a great act of resistance; what people remember in a tragedy. On the Titanic, the last thing people recalled was not the iceberg, it was the orchestra that played until the end.

“When Jews were transferred to camps after Kristallnacht in 1938 they rebelled, not by fighting but by singing German hymns to the soldiers. The deportees were punished in the camp, some beaten to death, but thousands of them carried on singing. We have a lot of songs created because of and in spite of this tragic situation. That is why the music must be remembered.”

● To find out more go to jnf.co.uk/event/notes-of-hope/

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