

Black Oak Ensemble: Silenced Voices

WEDNESDAY | JULY 6 | 8 PM
THE BREAKERS



This concert is dedicated to the **Bazarsky Family Foundation** in recognition of their generous support of Newport Classical.

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Desirée Ruhstrat, violin | **Aurélien Fort Pederzoli**, viola | **David Cunliffe**, cello

J.S. BACH Goldberg Variations, BWV 988: Aria
(Approximate duration 2 minutes)

DICK KATTENBURG Trio à cordes, Op. 1
(Approximate duration 5 minutes)

SÁNDOR KUTI Serenade No. 3 for String Trio
I. Allegro giocoso
II. Scherzando
III. Adagio ma non troppo
(Approximate duration 10 minutes)

HANS KRÁSA Passacaglia and Fuga for String Trio
(Approximate duration 9 minutes)

INTERMISSION

GIDEON KLEIN Trio for violin, viola, and cello
I. Allegro
II. Lento
III. Molto vivace
(Approximate duration 14 minutes)

GÉZA FRID Trio à cordes, Op. 1
I. Allegretto
II. Andante cantabile
III. Allegro giocoso all'ungherese
(Approximate duration 16 minutes)

PAUL HERMANN *Strijktrio*
(Approximate duration 8 minutes)

J.S. BACH Goldberg Variations, BWV 988: Aria
(Approximate duration 2 minutes)

J.S. Bach (1686-1750): Goldberg Variations, BWV 988: Aria

Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* have become an iconic monument in Western music. In 1741, Bach published a complex, intricate, and mesmerizing keyboard piece that was named after one of his pupils, who (at least apocryphally) played the variations to lull his noble employer to sleep. The *Goldberg Variations* begin with a simple, delicately ornamented aria, a Sarabande, that gives rise to thirty inventive melodic, harmonic, and contrapuntal variations.

As an "In memoriam" to the pianist Glenn Gould, who made a specialty of Bach performance, Dmitry Sitkovetsky arranged the work for string trio.

The opening Aria is repeated at the end of the variations, and the performers will "echo" this by performing the Aria before and after the works by the Silenced Voices composers.

SILENCED VOICES

What do we hear when we listen to works that have a fraught history? Do we hear only the music or, given the compelling and tragic back stories of each of the composers featured here, do we hear more than that?

Whenever we attend a concert or listen to a recording, we hear the music through the aural prisms of our own musical experiences and our personal histories. Is music enhanced, diminished, or something else entirely when we first hear works that were written by composers murdered by the Nazi regime (as was the case for all but one of the pieces on this recording)?

The composers featured on this recording would likely prefer that the listener find their pieces interesting, appealing, perhaps moving, not because of the circumstances of their deaths, but because the music itself evokes these feelings through their compositional mastery. Yet we cannot fail to recognize and take into account that were it not for the crimes perpetrated against them, the music of these composers would surely be more plentiful and better known than it is today.

These larger questions notwithstanding, what is certain is that these works receive committed, brilliant performances by the Black Oak Ensemble, and such performances are a gift to any composer. These works "spoke" to these musicians in ways that compelled them to devote many hours to their study, rehearsal, and repeated performances.

The works by Kattenburg, Kuti, Krasa, Klein and Frid are all featured on the Black Oak Ensemble's debut, album, "*Silenced Voices*," on the Cedille label. The Kattenburg is the world premiere recording. The album was released in 2019 to great critical acclaim. "*Silenced Voices* is played with fierce eloquence by Chicago's Black Oak Ensemble." — *The Times* (London)

Aurelien Pederzoli's mother, a history teacher who comes from a Sephardic family, has devoted her life to bringing awareness to the Holocaust. One of her proudest endeavors was taking her students every year on an educational journey to Prague, Budapest, Krakow, Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Teresín.

In the spring of 2016, Desirée and David returned from Budapest, Hungary with some string trios they had found in a local shop, these pieces amongst them. These works are fantastic works of art and, through their darkness, are incredibly human and ultimately uplifting. That such music could be written in these conditions is a testament to the resilience and faith of these artists.

Dick Kattenburg (1919-1944): Trio à cordes, Op. 1

Dick Kattenburg was a Dutch Jewish composer who was murdered by the Nazis.

Kattenburg managed to survive most of the war and the German occupation of the Netherlands by changing his location often. In the spring of 1944, however, his luck ran out, possibly as a result of an informant, and he was sent to the Dutch concentration camp at Westerbork, where he is presumed to have perished.

Written when the composer had just turned 19-years-old (and perhaps experiencing the flush of first love), Dick Kattenburg's String Trio is a five-minute burst of youthful exuberance. In 1938, a Dutch critic praised the String Trio's "remarkable mastery and very personal style." After the war, the manuscript ended up with Dick's sister Daisy, who had survived in hiding. It was thought that this was the only composition by him that was preserved, however a family member found a box in the attic with more compositions in 2004.

Sándor Kuti (1908-1945): Serenade No. 3 for String Trio

As in other cities that fell under Nazi control, the musical community of Budapest was devastated by the persecution and murder of the Jewish creative class. Composers that had emerged from the famed Franz Liszt Academy were particularly hard-hit, including the very promising Sándor Kuti. Sir Georg Solti, one of Kuti's Academy classmates, later called him "exceptionally gifted" and wrote: "I used to visit him at his family's desperately poor little catacomb of a home. I am convinced that, had he lived, he would have become one of Hungary's greatest composers."

Kuti died in 1944 in a forced labor camp where he continued to compose (using scraps of paper that he painstakingly lined with musical staves). With the help of a sympathetic guard, he even managed to send to his pregnant wife his final work, a sonata for Solo Violin.

Kuti wrote Serenade for String Trio in 1934. In the first movement, as with the works by Géza Frid and Pál Hermann, the spirit of Hungarian folk music can be clearly discerned. The machine-like drive of the second movement may suggest the sounds of some of Kuti's Russian contemporaries such as Shostakovich or Prokofiev — although it is impossible to know if Kuti had encountered their music or whether these aural "memes" were simply floating in the Eastern European air. The final movement is a stark contrast to the preceding movements: an unresolved lament, evoking memories of his teachers Laszlo Weiner and, perhaps most strikingly, Béla Bartók.

—Robert Elias

Hans Krása (1899-1944): Passacaglia and Fuga for String Trio

Hans Krása was 20 years older than Gideon Klein and had established himself as a substantial composer when he too was interned in Theresienstadt for approximately the same two-year period prior to October 1944, when he was sent to Auschwitz and murdered two days after his arrival.

Krásá is best known for his children's opera *Brundibár*, which was performed more than 50 times in Theresienstadt. This work deserves its many revivals and productions, although it is a bit unfair to Krásá's musical legacy that, for many people, *Brundibar* is their only experience of his work. (It is as if the only Prokofiev composition we ever heard was Peter and the Wolf.) The works on this program — *Tánc* and *Passacaglia and Fugue* — were written in Theresienstadt during the final year of his life and provide a fuller view of a composer who wrote vocal works, orchestral works, cantatas, chamber music, and a

major opera that premiered in Prague in 1933 with the young George Szell conducting.

Although titled *Tánc* ("Dance"), this five-minute romp does not in the least suggest a dance but is rather an aural depiction of trains in motion — approaching and receding, perhaps even stopping for water in a provincial town. The *Passacaglia* is a more somber exercise, with episodes of florid interactions and, once again, the now ominous-sounding train motifs. The *Fugue* takes flight immediately with the appearance of the theme in the viola and charges onward, with shades of Germanic and Czech influences and the occasional grotesque touches that gave Krása's music an extra sonic bite.

Gideon Klein (1919-1945): Trio for violin, viola, and cello

Gideon Klein was a promising pianist and composer when, in December 1941, he was sent to the infamous ghetto-concentration camp within the fortress walls of the Czech garrison town of Terezín (called Theresienstadt during the German occupation). The Nazis went as far as producing a propaganda film entitled "The Fuhrer Presents the Jews with a City." For this film, the inmates were forced to perform, and the camp fitted out with fake building facades, à la Disneyland, to portray Theresienstadt as a paradise ghetto. This farce took place in 1944. However, when the camp opened in 1941, instruments were smuggled into the camp, and performances were given in secret.

The two outer movements of Klein's *Trio for Strings*, jaunty and propulsive, frame a deeply moving Theme and Variations middle movement. So dominant is the middle movement of the work—its length is greater than the first and third movements combined—that much has been written about its musical and philosophical significance. The work appears to have been completed shortly before Klein and most of the other artists and intellectuals held in Terezín were transported to Auschwitz in October 1944. Klein was sent on to a camp at Fürstengrube, where he perished just days before the camp's liberation in 1945.

Géza Frid (1904-1989): Trio à cordes, Op. 1

Géza Frid was born and spent his early years in the border region of Hungary and Romania, an area rich in folk music traditions (its melodies were among the earliest catalogued by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in their ethnographic research in the early 20th century). Frid spent his formative musical years at the Franz Liszt Academy, and left Hungary and its proto-Fascist anti-Semitic policies in the late 1920s, settling in the Netherlands, where he managed to avoid detection as a "stateless Jew," and eventually became a citizen and celebrated composer.

Considering the pedagogical influence of Bartók and Kodály, it is not surprising that Frid's early String Trio exhibits Hungarian folk music influences. The first movement is underpinned by the rhythmic qualities of the Hungarian hurdy-gurdy (*tekerő*) and bagpipe (*duda*). In these instruments a drone pitch tends to dominate the harmonic landscape, and this infuses the work with the spirit of regional folk melodies. In the middle movement, a cantabile in 9/8 sets the mood, although the pull of Hungarian duple meter returns in a surprising *agitato* episode that intrudes on the peaceful scene. The third movement, marked *Allegro giocoso all' ungherese*, draws us once again into the provincial musical scene of eastern Hungary in ways both varied and surprising in their invention.

Paul Hermann (1902-1944): Strijktrio

Pál (Paul) Hermann, also a product of Budapest's Franz Liszt Academy, drew less directly from folk music sources, leaning instead toward a more cosmopolitan style that exhibited signs of what Bartók celebrated as freedom from the "tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys."

In this work from the 1920s, Hermann demonstrates a particular mastery of stringed instruments and, while he was a cello virtuoso of the first rank, in this trio he is careful to share the melodic wealth with the violin and viola, each instrument performing in the foreground as well as in accompaniment throughout this one-movement gem. The structure is episodic, a mix of rondo and variation form, in which two main melodies, modal in character, are passed among the players.

Hermann too sought refuge from Hungary's Fascist policies in the Netherlands. When the Nazis arrived in that country, he fled to France, where he managed to hide near Toulouse, before being swept up in an April 1944 raid. He was sent to the infamous Drancy concentration camp outside Paris, and then sent eastward toward Lithuania, never to be heard from again.

Thanks to the composer's grandson, Paul van Gastel, all of Hermann's extant works can be found on the website of the IMSLP (International Music Score Library Project). Through sampling other Hermann works, the composer's distinctive compositional voice is easily discerned.

Black Oak Ensemble

Praised for its "insightful, committed and masterful performances" (*Classics Today* 10/10) and "fierce eloquence" (*London Times*), the Black Oak Ensemble is one of the most innovative and exciting chamber ensembles on the international stage.

Violinist Desirée Ruhstrat and cellist David Cunliffe are members of the acclaimed, Grammy-nominated Lincoln Trio, and violist Aurélien Fort Pederzoli was a founding member of the ground-breaking Grammy-nominated Spektral Quartet.

Black Oak's début album on Cedille Records, *Silenced Voices*, is dedicated to Jewish composers, most of whom lost their lives during the Holocaust. It has been featured in *Gramophone* and *Strings* magazines, and on BBC Radio 3, The Violin Channel, and Sirius XM.

Recent tours have taken the Black Oak Ensemble to Amsterdam, Athens, Geneva (a special performance dedicated to human rights for the opening exhibition of "A Sanctuary in the Storm"), Grenoble, Lyon, Paris, Prague, Rennes, Corsica, and Theresienstadt.

In the U.S. they have appeared at the Ravinia Festival, Chicago Cultural Center, Art Institute of Chicago, Latino Music Festival, University of Oregon, Grand Rapids Museum of Art, and many other venues. They make their début at the Newport Music Festival in 2022.

Passionate advocates of new works, Black Oak has commissioned and premiered string trios from renowned composers such as Michael Nyman, Conrad Tao and others. Black Oak is Ensemble-in-Residence at New Music School in Chicago and the Ravinia Festival's El Sistema program. The ensemble is named for the black oak, one of which stands in Desirée and David's front yard. The Black Oak Ensemble appears by arrangement with Lisa Sapinkopf Artists, www.chambermuse.com.