

Music of Remembrance marks 80th anniversary of liberation of Auschwitz

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String players in the Music of Remembrance chamber ensemble, which will perform at the Art From Ashes concert Jan. 27. (Nick Klein)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

On Jan. 27, exactly 80 years will have passed since the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Remembrance of the millions who died under Nazi genocide remains both important and timely, as [antisemitism is rising](#) in the United States, [even locally](#). For Mina Miller, artistic director of Seattle-based Music of Remembrance, a key way of honoring those who lost their lives is with their own music.

Music of Remembrance presents [Art From Ashes](#), a free concert at Seattle's Benaroya Hall on Jan. 27, focusing on music written and performed inside Nazi concentration camps. The ensemble will be joined by the Northwest Boychoir and Seattle Girls Choir and will feature local teen violinist Khaos Kook, recipient of MOR's David Tonkonogui Memorial Award for young artists.

"It is important to remember that this music that was created in the camps and played in the camps comes from a time of genocidal cruelty," Miller said. "But the music itself is uplifting and beautiful. It's not a funeral, it is a celebration of life and that is why the music is so powerful. This music is how people survived, it was a way of preserving their identity and keeping them human."

Miller founded Music of Remembrance in 1998 with a mission of Holocaust remembrance that has since grown to include all persecuted people. But MOR's annual January concert, Art From Ashes, still honors International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

"In this case, it also is the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, 80 years to the exact date. So it feels extra special because there's a confluence of history at that moment," said Miller. The program opens with music by David Beigelman, who worked in the Lodz Ghetto theater before he was killed at Auschwitz. Kook will perform Beigelman's "Dybbuk Dances."

"This is the first time that they're being performed at Music of Remembrance the way they were intended for solo violin, and I think it's a wonderful opportunity for this young, serious student to present this music," said Miller.

The concert will also include works by Erwin Schulhoff, a jazz-influenced composer who died in a concentration camp in Bavaria whose works are often performed by MOR, and music that was created in the Terezin concentration camp, where some of Europe's top musicians were prisoners.

“Terezin, as you might know, was set up by the Nazis as kind of a model ghetto to deceive the world that they were treating Jews humanely. But it actually was a transit camp. Terezin prisoners were there for a time before they were sent to Auschwitz or other death camps,” Miller said.

“We’re doing several cabaret songs from the Terezin camp, and with really daring humor they mock their Nazi captors. They were done in this so-called cafe where the Nazis cynically allowed prisoners to apply for a ticket. After they’ve completed several weeks of slave labor, they could apply to go to a cabaret show for two hours, in this mock coffeehouse where you didn’t find coffee, food or spirits. But you could sit there and listen to music for a short period of time and it transported you to another world. Some of the cabaret songs are really so touching because they give voice to hope, they give voice to nostalgia. They also give voice to dread because they all knew that death was lurking behind the curtain.”

In Auschwitz, Jewish musicians created music under even more grotesque conditions.

“There was actually a band that was formed, the Auschwitz Men’s Orchestra, and they were forced to play German popular hit tunes of the day for the SS members and their families on Sunday,” said Miller.

Last summer, Miller was contacted by University of Michigan professor Patricia Hall. Working in the archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Hall had discovered manuscripts of music played by the Auschwitz Men’s Orchestra with arrangements for strings, trombone and saxophone.

“I could have tried to replicate the actual sounds, but I chose to just feature our core ensemble, which is strings and clarinet,” said Miller. That ensemble comprises original members violinist Mikhail Shmidt and clarinetist Laura DeLuca, together with longtime members Natasha Bazhanov on violin, Susan Gulkis Assadi on viola, Walter Gray on cello and Jonathan Green on double bass. For this concert, lyrics will be sung by tenor Brendan Tuohy and sopranos Megan Parker and Karen Early Evans.

The show concludes with “Farewell, Auschwitz” by [Jake Heggie](#). Commissioned by Music of Remembrance in 2013 as part of a larger song cycle, the music accompanies a poem that survivor Krystyna Zywulska wrote in Auschwitz.

“We’re bringing in the Northwest Boychoir and the Seattle Girls Choir to join us and to bridge generations in remembrance. That song is so powerful, and such a message of

strength and courage,” Miller said. “That’s what we want to leave people with, remembering the Holocaust and the musicians who had the courage, under the most dire circumstances, to create music.”

Art from Ashes

5:30 p.m. Jan. 27; Benaroya Hall, 200 University St., Seattle; approximately 90 minutes with no intermission; accessibility info: [st.news/benaroya-accessibility](https://www.stnews.com/benaroya-accessibility); free with reservation; 206-215-4800, musicofremembrance.org

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