

KPFK Film Club Review: SYMPHONY OF THE HOLOCAUST

Out floating on the net is a newspaper review of the first performance of Symphony of the Holocaust. In 1988 violinist/composer Shony Braun (1924-2002) premiered his emotionally charged, and exceptionally virtuosic, violin concerto, in a Garden Grove concert. The reviewer, unfortunately, was less than enthusiastic. He conceded that Braun's "gypsy flavored violin solos" were skillfully played, though the score "rarely rose above competent Hollywood film music." Worse, he found that the timing and juxtaposition of visual slides of the Nazi death camps, projected above the orchestra, were terribly mismatched with the emotions portrayed in the music.

If that same critic now had the chance to experience director Greg DeHart's heart breaking but life affirming documentary, SYMPHONY OF THE HOLOCAUST, he might have to change his tune. Although the violin concerto is again the backbone of the presentation, it is now intricately intertwined with Braun's story of surviving the holocaust, and is therefore tremendously more impactful.

True, from his lofty perch as a classical music critic (presumably accustomed to reviewing opera), the writer might not change his mind about the pop-classical nature of Braun's work. For those of us that love movie music, Braun's "Symphony" actually sounds pretty great. The thing is, DeHart's film makes for an altogether different experience of the work, focusing on the concerto's ability to dramatize Braun's life story. In fact, DeHart's film feels like a kind of storytelling fugue, interweaving three remarkable tales, building up to a powerful climax and ultimately providing resolution that's brimming with hope.

The first story thread comes from the words of Braun himself, through interviews from archival footage kept by the USC Shoah Foundation. We see that, among the man's other incredible talents (prodigy violinist, composer, film actor), was his riveting ability to tell engaging tales).

Braun starts with how he discovered the violin. At the age of four, he got lost in the Transylvanian forest, and, while a guest of the gypsies who rescued and took care of him for three days, he became entranced by the music that they played. This spurred him on to become a well-known violin prodigy, though he had to stick to the classical "B's"—playing gypsy music in school would have gotten him into trouble. His success was cruelly cut short when, at the age of 13, his entire Hungarian Jewish family was sent to Nazi work and death camps.

The stories of what he had to do to survive in four succeeding camps, starting with his encounter with the "Angel of Death" at Auschwitz, are horrific. It is heartbreaking to hear how he lost his family members. Even the riveting tale of how the violin saved his life at Dachau is traumatic. And at the war's end, the fact that he survived the mass executions is a miracle. We learn that Braun risked his life for the war effort, and later, under bizarre circumstances, discovered that he had actually saved lives.

More tender, but no less incredible, is the tale of how he met Shari Mendelovitz, another camp survivor, and the love of his life. This led to their eventual marriage and emigration to Los Angeles. With his wife as manager, and his prized Giuseppe Galiano fiddle (made in the 1700's),

together they were able to make a living (11 albums, live performances, composing over 200 songs, and roles on TV and films) and raise a close-knit family.

Family stories are the second strand woven into Shony's tale. Intertwined with his recollections, we also hear from his children and grandchildren, assisted by home movies and family photos. They fondly recall his life as a doting and loving father and husband. Dinah, his daughter, and Bob Griffin, her husband, are still amazed at how someone who had witnessed so much horror, and lost so many beloved family members, could go on to live such a well-adjusted, loving life. Music, religious faith, generosity towards others, and the ability to forgive, all seem to have played a big role.

Central to the film are the efforts that his family took to honor their father's biggest unfulfilled wish at the time of his death in October, 2002. Shony had hoped that his *Symphony of the Holocaust*, which he composed in his head while in the death camps, would be performed one day at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Not only would it be providing a personal response to what he experienced at the camps, but he also wanted to kindle a bit of beauty in that place of misery.

Here, too, the story is filled with some fascinating developments. Arranging the event was no small feat. The family had to trace the Galiano that was sold ten years after Shony's death (it was residing in Mexico). Then they had to discover just the right musician to stand in for Shony at the performance, a musician with the requisite skills, dedication to the project, and temperament. The journey itself was demanding...none of them were able to adequately gauge the toll of touring a site of such immense suffering and death. Getting through the performance, in that setting, feels unbelievably glorious, but also quite heart wrenching (keep tissues handy.)

The music itself is the third strand in this weaving of tales. In many ways, it is the Shony Braun story. In the film, we only hear sections of the 17-minute work, some played by Shony himself, some by Concertmaster Mark Kashper in performance with the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony under the baton of Dr. Norren Green (April, 2023), and others evocatively performed by Armenian violinist Erik Fhukasyan, the man who ended up with Shony's violin. Erik's family also had to flee their home country because of persecution, so there are some deep sympathies there, and he is quite an accomplished musician.

Off and on, at the different story points, Dr. Noreen Green walks us through the symphony's five continuous movements and the various themes. Those include a theme of survival, a prayer theme (recalling Braun's father's last words), the triumphant theme of liberation followed by the sadness of commemorating those who didn't make it, and, finally, an "exuberant" celebration of the joy of living, recalling the high-spirited playing of the gypsies, as well as mimicking the calls of birds who represent freedom and escape from suffering.

Shony Braun's opus came to be recommended for a Pulitzer Prize. The understanding of the holocaust that results from the way that DeHart combines all three stories, shifting back and forth, well establishes why that should be so. *SYMPHONY OF THE HOLOCAUST* is an amazing work that documents sorrow and tragedy, but also celebrates survival, love, and triumph. It is an unforgettable experience that, in many ways, is perfectly right for the times...one should prepare to be incredibly moved.