

DORIS GROZDANOVICOVÁ: REMEMBERING KAREL REINER

A Conversation with Sebastian Foron

We are standing in front of the battlements of Terezín. You must have had to go over this bridge quite often.

Yes, I used to look after the sheep in those days. We had to go and fetch them from the bastion, where they were kept in stalls. I've known since that day that sheep aren't as daft as people say they are!

You and your family came on the first transport from Brno.

When the Wehrmacht marched in in spring 1939, I had to leave high school, but I was lucky that the sole Jewish high school in the entire Protectorate was in Brno. So I went there for not quite a year. Then it was closed.

You had well-known teachers there – your music-teacher was Pavel Haas.

Yes, he was. My art-teacher was Otto Ungar – he died, too – and then Valtr Eisinger, my literature-teacher, was also in Terezín; he looked after the young people there and... All of them died.

Yes, Valtr Eisinger encouraged the boys to bring out their own newspaper.

The newspaper was called *Vedem*; the editor was the thirteen-year-old Petr Ginz.

So you came to Terezín at the beginning of 1942.

We came here in January. Brno is at the beginning of the alphabet, and Heydrich wanted to be able to tell his *Führer* on his birthday on 20 April that Brno was *judenrein*, cleansed of Jews.

It was here in Terezín that you met Karel Reiner

He first came here in 1943, from Prague.

And probably his wife, Hana Reinerová, as well.

I can't remember her here at all; we became good friends only afterwards. There was such a dreadful number of people here; when you were younger, the older people were old and I had more to do with the younger ones.

Karel Reiner wrote some compositions in Terezín, too. His wife told me that he gave her the manuscripts before his deportation to Auschwitz. She carried them under her clothing, but then when she got to Auschwitz, she had to give them up. Everything Reiner composed in Terezín was destroyed. As the 'Composers' Room' in the Ghetto Museum shows, he gave many concerts as part of the cultural events here – small-scale ones, for a small audience, in the billets, the cellars, the attics, sometimes as part of theatrical presentations, often as a pianist.

Yes, again and again. There were others there, too, like the conductors Rafael Schächter and Karel Ančerl, singers like Karel Berman and the producer Gustav Schorsch, and many famous actors.

The presentations were secret at first, I'm told, and people had to keep a lookout in case anybody came past, but later they were permitted.

Yes, it's said that they were permitted because they [the Nazis] thought to themselves, they're all going to die anyway, so it's all the same if they amuse themselves here....

The famous opera...

Brundibár – I heard it once, only once....

It was performed 55 times here, I think.

But it was rare for a child to take his or her role twice: the roles constantly had to be filled with new people.

After you were liberated, you had to get your bearings all over again.

Yes, it's bad when you don't know where to go and you have nobody left. That's very, very difficult.

After the liberation you later worked as a translator, and there was a translators' union.

It still exists; that's where I got to know Hana Reinerová better. That was in 1983, because I certainly wasn't a member before that.

Then that was after Reiner's death, since he died in 1979. Were you in regular contact with Mrs Reinerová after that?

Yes, we got on very well. She always tried to stand up for her husband's music. But in that political climate it was fruitless; she suffered from it a good deal.

Is it really true that you got to know Reiner's two daughters only at the first performance of the Cello Concerto in the Rudolfinum in December 2010?

Before that I had known them only in passing, not well, but since the concert we meet often and are very good friends. I have you to thank for that.

I'd like to go into the difficult situation in Prague after 1948. When Reiner came back to Prague after his liberation from Dachau, he suffered a good deal from the repressions of the Communist Party, as you did, too.

I have to say that on 1 June 1945 I joined the Communist Party, because for me the Russians were the liberators, and at the beginning nobody knew anything about the atrocities, about Stalin, about any of that – really we didn't – and many sensible people fell into it, and I have to acknowledge that I was in the Party. But I didn't stay right up to the bitter end: I always had such troubles with it, and then I just couldn't, when we learned about everything that had happened. But nobody knew, or very little.

For Reiner, as for you, the Russians were the liberators. He also became a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and in that connection even wrote political songs, but they didn't meet the expectations of the Party. Reiner didn't want to comply with these expectations. He was well able as far as his technique was concerned, but he didn't want to curry favour. He met increasing resistance from the authorities: his style was too individualist, too 'formalist', it didn't conform with socialist prescriptions. And his pre-war interest and engagement in anthroposophy was treated with contempt. And so he fell into a kind of isolation that had considerable consequences for his music. He had written Gebrauchsmusik before, including incidental music, in the '30s, for the theatre manager Burian.

So already very young.

Yes, he was born in 1910, so he was in his mid-twenties. At that time he wrote a lot for the theatre and after the war he worked again with Burian, who had opened another theatre.

The theatre 'D 46': it was his old theatre he re-opened in 1946.

And for a short time Reiner composed for him. But their paths parted and they didn't much work together after that. At the same time Reiner worked for two years with the 'Opera of 5 May' that his teacher Alois Hába had founded.

I didn't know that.

I think that the tragedy which explains why Reiner has remained unknown has to do above all with the fact that political developments meant that he couldn't be played in public any more. His musical language was largely rejected by the authorities and so there were only a very few performances, and frequently not in the original versions but in reduced arrangements he made for a small circle. In the aftermath of the events of the 'Prague Spring', he left the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1970 and had to renounce all his official positions and performances of his music were banned. And that is despite Reiner's having been both Secretary of the Syndicate and, after 1949, Secretary of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers.

And then he had been a student of Hába. And Hába's was the kind of music that wasn't popular, these quartertones.

Exactly: not only twelve tones but a further subdivision, for which Hába developed its own instruments. I've seen a quarter-tone piano in the Prague Museum. As far as I know, only a very few people could play it, among them Viktor Ullmann and Karel Reiner himself, since he was an excellent pianist.

They knew each other well: they often met and swapped ideas.

They were close friends. Ullman and Hába were members of the Anthroposophical Society in Prague and they were Reiner's sponsors when he joined it. Even though he was deported to Auschwitz in October 1944 Reiner was the only one in this group of composer-friends – Viktor Ullmann, Hans Krása, Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein – not to have been murdered; instead, he was put on transports to other camps. Whether Reiner and Haas were friends beforehand I can't say; they probably first met in Terezín.

I don't know. I spent the days outside the fortress with the sheep.

Reiner lived only in the ghetto. I'm amazed at the expressiveness of his music. You would think at first that his music might contain only echoes of his painful memories, but it's striking how much variety there is in the perspectives and moods of the different works. That's what makes his music so interesting: sure, there are dark moods stamped with his history, but there are also happy moments, even dancing ones, and when you consider the conditions under which the works were written – as with the drawings, literature and music which arose here – it's difficult to comprehend how people managed to switch off or abstract themselves from it. It probably has to do with the desire to be thinking, through culture, of something other than the day-to-day agony – whether through music, literature or drawing. I learned from the Ghetto Museum that in one of the boys' homes Reiner used to work in secret on cultural activities with the boys in the attic.

It would have been the end if people had been entirely pessimistic. But nobody knew what lay ahead. It would have been entirely different if we had known, but nobody did.