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MUSIC REVIEW

## **‘Voices of Defiance’ by the Dover Quartet Review: Music Born of Oppression**

Compositions by Szymon Laks, Viktor Ullmann and Dmitri Shostakovich that were created in the midst of monstrous Nazi evil.



The Dover Quartet's new album is 'Voices of Defiance' PHOTO: CARLIN MA

By Barbara Jepson

‘Voices of Defiance,’ the Dover Quartet’s second album since its stunning victory at the Banff International String Quartet Competition in 2013, offers an illuminating voyage back to three unforgettable pieces written during World War II.

Out Friday on Cedille, the disc contains the affecting third quartet by little-known composer and concentration-camp survivor Szymon Laks; the absorbing third quartet of Viktor Ullmann —who survived the camp at Theresienstadt only to be gassed at Auschwitz; and the impressive, less frequently encountered second quartet of Dmitri Shostakovich, written at an artist’s retreat near Moscow as the Allies were beginning to vanquish the Nazis.

In his eloquent liner notes for the disc, Dover cellist Camden Shaw says the performers were unaware of Laks’s quartet until several European concertgoers brought it to their attention. They will play the Laks and/or Ullmann works on tour this season, including appearances on Nov. 4 at the University of Winnipeg’s “Virtuosi Concerts” series, on Nov. 18 at a People’s Symphony Concert in New York and on Dec. 18-19 at the Library of Congress.

Artistic endeavor in the midst of monstrous evil is a life-affirming act. But music in the camps was at times coerced or grotesquely used, its beauty drastically at odds with the surrounding

death and suffering, as Laks (1901-1983), conductor of the men's orchestra at Auschwitz, detailed in his memoir, "Music of Another World."

Born in Warsaw, Laks lived in Vienna and Paris before his internment at several French camps. He was later deported to Auschwitz and then Dachau. He wrote his third quartet shortly after returning to Paris in 1945.

Based on several Polish folk tunes, verboten in the camps, it exhibits the clarity and restraint of the neoclassical style, which developed during the interwar years as a reaction to perceived excesses of late Romanticism. Although not programmatic, the work veers between jaunty folk rhythms and doleful melodies, as if the composer is trying to rejoice in his freedom but can't forget all he experienced. In fact, the piece opens with a fleeting evocation of a train whistle followed by a churning rhythmic motif, apparently recalling the trains that transported Jews and political dissidents to the camps.

The subdued slow movement, whose rising four-chord opening yields to a sultry phrase, is particularly memorable, its wistful main theme building in intensity to a searing cry of the soul. Also striking is the final movement, which after a few fits and starts breaks into an increasingly irrepressible jig.

Ullmann's third quartet, composed at Theresienstadt in 1943, has a richly colored but pensive opening theme that recurs in various expressive guises—whether ominous, sweetly lyrical or infused with longing. After an acerbic Presto section that turns menacing, the somber Largo meanders. But in the episodic final movement, the opening theme ultimately returns for a fiercely impassioned, resolute conclusion. The Dover plays this short work with admirable expressive freedom and, where appropriate, a lustrous, well-blended sound.

The second quartet of Shostakovich, created in 1944 after he had already written eight symphonies, is rich in thematic ideas and possesses compositional virtuosity that the Ullmann and Laks do not quite match. The Dover handles the 35-minute work's spiky harmonies, propulsive rhythms and technical challenges with panache. The so-called Recitative and Romance, with its extended violin solo over chordal accompaniment, is more like a mournful elegy, skillfully rendered by violinist Joel Link. In the contorted Waltz, performed with mutes that alter the string sound, Mr. Shaw's cello evokes a ghoulish theremin. And in the stirring Theme and Variations movement, the players follow the score's trajectory from sorrow to fierce determination.

If there is a downside to "Voices of Defiance," it is the stylistic similarities of these works. All utilize dance rhythms or folk melodies, and employ a mostly tonal but astringent musical language. Still, that's a small price to pay for the thematic unity of the album, undoubtedly one of the most compelling discs released this year.

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