

WHEN WORDS ALONE FAIL:
MUSIC AND THE SHOAH

STUDENT WORKSHEET

סיפורי מוסיקה
STORIES OF MUSIC



Note: This worksheet will provide you with an overview of the lesson, and will provide you with the materials that will help you to understand and integrate the lesson's major points. These materials include lyrics to songs that will be explored in depth, questions to consider while listening to some pieces of music, and more. This is not meant to be comprehensive, and your instructor may modify this lesson to enhance the learning experience for your particular class.

Introduction

In this lesson we are going to explore some of the musical activities that took place during the Shoah, and the ways that Jews have collectively remembered the Shoah through music.

Lesson outline

Part 1: Prelude

- Commemorating the Shoah--what is commemoration
- Commemorating the Shoah--what was the Shoah

Part 2: Music of Resistance:

- Cultural and Spiritual Resistance
- Music as Resistance

Part 3: Humor and Satire during the Shoah:

Part 4: Music in the Camps:


Part 5: Commemorating the Shoah

Part 6: Coda (Closing Section): Commemoration Continues

Part 1 — Prelude: Commemorating the Shoah—what is commemoration

While the bulk of this lesson will focus on the unique music that was composed during or directly related to the Shoah, we invite you to start by exploring the role of music in responding to and remembering the Shoah.

At a given point, your instructor will have you break into groups, one for each musical example: Reich, Silver, and Cohen. (*NOTE:* In some cases, the instructor may choose not to break into smaller groups.) With your group, please read the provided information about the composer and the work before listening to the track. After you have listened to the track, discuss your reactions/observations.

Songs are hyperlinked to the underlined title where it states “**PLAY** 

Upon reconvening as a whole group, each group will be giving a brief oral presentation that should include:

- the name of the artist and 1-2 sentences about the artist,
- the name of the work and 1-2 sentences about it,
- a 1 minute clip of music, and
- the group’s thoughts on what the artist might be trying to express about the Shoah through this composition. The group does not have to reach a unanimous opinion on this!

Steve Reich

- Steve Reich is among the foundational composers of the minimalist music movement. Reich uses interlocking rhythmic patterns that change at a very slow rate as the musical language through which he speaks.
- Reich engages with his own Jewish identity on many different levels, exploring elements of Jewish text and history (ancient and modern) in many of his works.
- Reich’s musical language incorporates elements of music from the US, such as jazz, and around the world, including the use of instruments and rhythms from West Africa and Latin America.
- Few composers have had the overall impact that Reich has had in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21th Century. Reich has influenced the works of generations of composers.

Different Trains I. “America--Before the War”

- *Different Trains* is Reich’s reflection on how, as a child in 1939-1942, he was regularly traveling by train from New York to Los Angeles and back, and how, had he been a child in Europe at the same time, he would have been on “very different trains.”
- The piece uses pre-recorded spoken word and testimony, and employs a technique in which the instruments imitate the voices. Through this technique, Reich incorporates the voices into the ensemble as their own “instrument.”

Sheila Silver

- Sheila Silver incorporates elements of tonality and atonality into her musical language, including fascinating rhythmic complexity.
- Silver engages with Jewish themes on a multitude of levels, drawing inspiration from Jewish texts such as the Psalms, and Jewish melodies such as the Hassidic *niggun* in her piano concerto.

To the Spirit Unconquered I. With great intensity--strained, sometimes violent

- According to Silver, the work “is about the ability of the human spirit to transcend the most devastating of circumstances, to survive and to bear witness.”
- The work is inspired, in part, by the writings of [Primo Levi](#).
- The work explores the emotional experience and development of individuals who experienced the Shoah.

Leonard Cohen

- Leonard Cohen grew up in a very observant, and learned, Jewish family.
- Later in life, he would become a Buddhist monk, but would never abandon Judaism as his religion.

- Cohen’s deepest expressions of Judaism were through the writing of text.

“Dance Me to the End of Love”

While popularly considered a love song, Cohen described in a radio interview that the song was inspired by a photo of musicians playing in a concentration camp. From the interview:

“It’s curious how songs begin because the origin of the song, every song, has a kind of grain or seed that somebody hands you or the world hands you and that’s why the process is so mysterious about writing a song. But that came from just hearing or reading or knowing that in the death camps, beside the crematoria, in certain of the death camps, a string quartet was pressed into performance while this horror was going on, those were the people whose fate was this horror also. And they would be playing classical music while their fellow prisoners were being killed and burnt. So, that music, ‘Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin,’ meaning the beauty there of being the consummation of life, the end of this existence and of the passionate element in that consummation. But, it is the same language that we use for surrender to the beloved, so that the song—it’s not important that anybody knows the genesis of it, because if the language comes from that passionate resource, it will be able to embrace all passionate activity.”

— Leonard Cohen, *CBC Radio Interview (August 26, 1995)*

Part 2 — Music of Resistance

“Zog nit keyn mol” (“Never Say That You are Walking the Final Road”)

— Yiddish transliteration and translation
(Hirsh Glick)

*Zog nit keyn mol, az du geyst dem letstn veg,
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho,
S’vet a poyk ton undzer trot: mir zaynen do!*

Never say that you walk the final road,
Though leaden skies obscure blue days;
The hour we’ve longed for will still come,
Our steps will drum – we are here!

*Fun grinem palmenland biz vaysn land fun shney,
Mir kumen on mit undzer payn, mit undzer vey,
Un vu gefaln s’iz a shprits fun undzer blut,
Shprotsn vet dort undzer gvure, undzer mut!*

From green palm-land to distant land of snow,
We arrive with our pain, with our sorrow,
And where a spurt of our blood has fallen,
There will sprout our strength, our courage.

*S’vet di morgnzun bagildn undz dem haynt,
Un der nekhtn vet farshvindn mit dem faynt,
Nor oyb farzamen vet di zun in dem kayor –
Vi a parol zol geyn dos lid fun dor tsu dor.*

The morning sun will tinge our today with gold,
And yesterday will vanish with the enemy,
But if the sun and the dawn are delayed –
This song will go through the generations.

*Dos lid geshribn iz mit blut, un nit mit blay,
S'iz nit keyn lidl fun a foygl oyf der fray,
Dos hot a folk tsvishn falndike vent
Dos lid gezungen mit naganes in di hent.^[1]*

*To zog nit keyn mol, az du geyst dem letstn
veg,
Khotsh himlen blayene farshteln bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho –
S'vet a poyk ton undzer trot: mir zaynen do!*

This song's written with blood, not with lead,
It's not a song about a bird that is free,
A people, between falling walls,
Sang this song with pistols in their hands.

So never say that you walk the final road
Though leaden skies obscure blue days.
The hour we long for will still come –
Our steps will drum – we are here!

“Buchenwald Marsch” (“Buchenwald March”)

— German transliteration and translation

(Music by: Herman Leopoldi; Lyrics by: Fritz Löhner-Beda)

*Wenn der Tag erwacht,
eh´ die Sonne lacht,
die Kolonnen ziehn zu des Tages Mühn
hinein in den grauenden Morgen.
Und der Wald ist schwarz
und der Himmel rot,
und wir tragen im Brotsack
ein Stückchen Brot
und im Herzen, im Herzen die Sorgen.*

*O Buchenwald,
ich kann dich nicht vergessen,
weil du mein Schicksal bist.
Wer dich verließ,
der kann es erst ermessen,
wie wundervoll die Freiheit ist!
O Buchenwald,
wir jammern nicht und klagen,
und was auch unsre Zukunft sei –
|| : wir wollen trotzdem
„ja“ zum Leben sagen,
denn einmal kommt der Tag –
dann sind wir frei! :||*

*Unser Blut ist heiß und das Mädal fern,
und der Wind singt leis,
und ich hab sie so gern,
wenn treu, wenn treu sie mir bliebe!*

When the day awakes,
before the sun laughs,
the crews embark for the toils of the day,
into the dawn.
And the forest is black and the sky red,
we carry a small piece of bread in our
bags
and in our hearts, in our hearts our
sorrows.

Oh, Buchenwald,
I cannot forget you,
because you are my fate.
Only one who has left you, can measure,
how wonderful freedom is!
Oh, Buchenwald, we neither lament, nor
complain,
and whatever our future may hold:
we still want to say “yes” to life,
because one day the time will come -
then we will be free!

Our blood runs hot and the girl is far,
and the wind sings softly,
and I love her dearly,
if she's true, remains true to me!

*Die Steine sind hart,
aber fest unser Schritt,
und wir tragen die Picken und Spaten mit
und im Herzen, im Herzen die Liebe!*

O Buchenwald ...

*Die Nacht ist so kurz und der Tag so lang,
doch ein Lied erklingt,
das die Heimat sang,
wir lassen den Mut uns nicht rauben!
Halte Schritt, Kamerad,*

*und verlier nicht den Mut,
denn wir tragen den Willen
zum Leben im Blut
und im Herzen, im Herzen den Glauben!*

O Buchenwald ...

The stones are hard, but our steps
determined,
and we carry the picks
and spades with us,
and in our hearts, our hearts love.

Oh, Buchenwald...

The night is so short and the day so long,
But if a song from our homeland is heard,
we do not let it rob us of your courage.
Keep pace, comrade, and do not lose
courage,
For we carry the will to live in our blood
and in our hearts, our hearts faith.

Oh, Buchenwald

“Shtil di nakht iz oysgeshternt” (“The quiet night is full of stars”)

— Yiddish transliteration and translation

(Hirsh Glick; arranged and translated by Daniel Kahn)

Silent stars are shining o'er you
In the frost your hands are numb
Remember, sweet comrade, how I showed you
How a soldier holds her gun

A girl, a coat of fur and leather
Holding a pistol in her hand
Waiting and watching for the German
Convoy to come around the bend

*Shtil di nakht iz oysgeshternt
Un der frozt hat shtark gebrent
Tsi gedenkstu vi ikh hob dikh gelernt
Haltn a shpayer in di hent*

*A moyd, a peltsl un a beret
Un halt in hant fezt a nagan
A moyd mit a sametenem ponim
Hit op dem soyne karavan*

She aims her trusty little weapon
Breathes, and pulls the trigger back
A transport full of ammunition
One shot stops it in its tracks

*Getsilt, geshosn un getrofn
Hot ir kleyninker piztoyl
An oyto a fulinkn mit vofn
Farhaltn hot zi mit eyn koyl*

At dawn, she crawls out of the forest
With garlands of snow all in her hair
One more little victory for freedom
One more comrade brave and fair

*Fartog fun vald aroysgekrokhn
Mit shney girlandn oyf di hor
Gemutikt fun kleyninkn nitsokhn
Far undzer nayem frayen dor*

Part 3 — Humor and Satire During the Shoah

“Ikh fur in keltser kant” (“I am going to Kielce”)

— Yiddish transliteration and translation
(Yankele Hershkowitz)

Refrain:

*Ikh fur in keltser kant,
Dort est men retekhlehk mit shmant,
Mayrn, burkes far a drayer,
Khutsi khinem krigt men ayer.
Dortn s'leybn iz nisht tayer,
Fur avek zay nisht kayn frayer.
Ikh fur in keltser kant,
Dort est men retekhlehk mit shmant.*

Verse:

*Dort boyet zikh a naye medine
In dem zayen mir kayn grine,
Rumkowski Khayim vet zayn indzer fraynt
Servus yidn servus
Ikh fur nokh haynt!*

Refrain:

Ikh fur in keltser kant...

Refrain:

I'm going to Kielce,
Where they eat radishes with cream,
Carrots, beetroots as much as you want,
And eggs for half the price.
Life there is not expensive,
Go there, don't be a fool
I'm going to Kielce,
Where radishes and cream they eat.

Verse:

There, they build a new nation,
Nobody there will be 'green'.
Rumkowski Khayim will be our friend.
Bye-Bye, Jews,
I'm going right away.

Refrain:

I'm going to Kielce...

“Baym Geto Toyerl” (“By the Geto Gate”) —

Yiddish transliteration and translation
(L: Avrom Akselrod; M: Mark Varshavsky)

*Baym geto toyerl
Brent a fayerl,
Un di shrek iz groys.
Es geyen yidelekh
Fun di brigadelekh,
Fun yedn gist zikh
shveys.*

*Tsi zol ikh vayter geyn,
Tsi zol ikh blaybn shteyn,
Ikh veys nit ven un vu?
Der komendantele*

*In grinem mantele
Er nemt dokh ales tsu.
Milkh fun fendele
Shpek fun kendele-
Oy yidelekh, men brent!*

*Holts a shaytele,
Gelt fun baytele
Er khapt alts fun di hent.*

*O, khaver mitn shtrayf,
Ikh bin in gantsn treyf,*

*Helf mir baym kontrol.
Ikh gib dir af dem tsvek
Haynt a kilo shpek,
Un morgn nokh a mol.*

*Shtelt zikh oys tsu fir,
Un du shtey leb'n mir,
Gey nit in der zayt.
Gey tsum rekhtn goy
"Shitas yau tvarkoy"
S'iz do a labn broyt.*

“Baym Geto Toyerl” (“Fun der Arbet”)

(Translation from: Vinkovetzky, Aharon, Abba Kovner and Sinai Leichter, eds. *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, Vol. 4. Jerusalem: 1987, Magnes Press, Mount Scopus Publications, p. 135)

Near the ghetto gate
A fire burns.
The control is fierce.
Jews are coming
From the brigades
Sweat pouring from each face.

Shall I continue on,
Or shall I stop?
I don't know what to do...
The commander there,
In his green coat
Grabs everything he can.

A block of wood,
Money from a purse,
He stands and helps himself;

Milk from the can
And soup from the pot--
Jews, we are aflame!

Oh, friend with the stripe
I am altogether “treif”
Please help me at the control!
I will give you all
I have today
And tomorrow too!

Stand in groups of four,
You stand at my side,
Do not creep forward,
Go to the gentile on the right.
“This one in o.k.”
There is a loaf of bread...

Part 4 — Music in the Camps

“Arvoles Lloran por Lluvias” — Ladino and translation

*Arvoles lloran por lluvias
y montañas por aires,
ansí lloran los mis ojos
por tí, querida amante.*

*Blanka sos, blanka vistas
Blanka la tu figura,
Blankas flores kaen de ti,
De la tu ermozura.*

*En frente de mi hay un angelo
con tus ojos me mira
llorar quero y no puedo
mi corazón suspira*

*Torno y digo
qué va a ser de mi
en tierras ajenas
no puedo vivir.*

Trees cry for rain
Mountains cry for air,
And thus my eyes weep--
For you, love, dear.

Fair-skinned you are, and fair you dress
Fair, too, is your figure.
Fair white flowers fall because of you,
Because of your allure.

In front of me there's an angel
that looks at me through your eyes.
I want to cry, and I cannot;
My heart sighs.

I turn and wonder:
What will become of me?
In foreign lands
I don't have a destiny.

(Note: The following is an optional activity. Your instructor may or may not be using this material.)

Alma Rosé: Conductor of the Women’s Orchestra

You may be asked to read [this short article on Alma Rosé](#) and discuss the following questions:

- Was this an example of forced labor or active resistance?
 - Consider the use of the music, was it being weaponized? Or being used as a tool of freedom?
- How does the story of Alma Rosé align (or not) with your understanding of the individual’s experience during the Shoah?
- How does Alma Rosé’s story, together with that of Vitka Kempner’s story (immortalized in “*Shtil, di nakht*”), affect your understanding of women’s experience during the Shoah?
- Is there anything else you find particularly fascinating, compelling, or inspirational about this story? Or conversely, do you find it problematic in any way?
- What else do you feel can be learned from the story?

Part 5 — Commemorating the Shoah

“*Adio Kerida*” — Ladino and translation

*Tu madre kuando te pario
i te kito al mundo
korason eya no te dio
para amar segundo*

When your mother delivered you
and brought you to the world
she did not give you a heart
to love another

*adio, adio kerida
no kero la vida
me l'amagrates tu*

Goodbye--goodbye beloved,
I don't want to live.
You made my life bitter.

*a, busakate otro amor,
Aharva otras puertas,
aspera otro ardor,
ke para mi sos muerta. (adio, adio...)*

I'll go look for another love,
knock on other ports,
in hope there is true passion,
because for me, you are dead.

“Arvoliko” — Ladino and translation
(Flory Jagoda; translation by Judith Cohen)

*Kuantus anyus mi kali aspirar
Laz penas di la gera ulvidar
Ulvidar, ulvidar
Dulores di pena ulvidar*

How many years must I wait
The pain of war to forget.
To forget...to forget...
The sorrows of pain to forget.

*Kuantus vezes pudemos viyajar
In laz tyeras ajenas paz tupar
Paz tupar, paz tupar,
i penas ulvidar?*

How many times can we travel
in foreign lands seeking peace
seeking peace, seeking peace--
and to forget so much pain.

*Arvoliko in la muntanya
Mi sta yamando a dizir mi la verdad,
La verdad, la verdad
a dizir mi la verdad
La verdad, la verdad,
a dizir me la krueldad.*

Dear little tree in the mountain
Calling me, telling me the truth.
The truth...the truth...
Telling me the truth.
The truth...the truth...
Telling me...cruelty.

Part 6 — Coda: The Commemoration Continues

Pair share

- ❓ What role(s) do you think playing Shoah-associated music serves today?