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To cite this article: Beate Kutschke (2010) On Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death*: Coping with the Holocaust in the 1980s, Contemporary Music Review, 29:6, 643-660, DOI: [10.1080/07494467.2010.619748](https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2010.619748)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2010.619748>



Published online: 04 Nov 2011.



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# On Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death*: Coping with the Holocaust in the 1980s

Beate Kutschke

*After the Second World War, the artistic consciousness of Europe began to address the horrific reality surrounding genocide under fascism. This article relates Rzewski's oratorio-like work The Triumph of Death (1988) for string quartet, voices and conductor, to the specific mode of coping with the extermination of the European Jews prevalent in the 1980s. In the context of this phase of dealing with the Holocaust, the musical means employed in the composition adopt specific meaning. Drawing on the increased interest in psychologization among intellectuals which emerged in the 1960s and 70s, the elements of instrumental theatre stimulate the quasi-psychoanalytical technique of association; the juxtaposition of styles—folk, social dance and post-minimalist-contemporary music—complies with the grotesque dance-of-death-like atmosphere created in the libretto. The musical stream specific of the postminimalist style responds to the increasing tendency toward universalizing and 'eternalizing' of the Holocaust, which was typical of the 1980s.*

*Keywords:* Holocaust; Peter Weiss; Claude Lanzmann; String Quartet; Auschwitz; Postminimalism; Instrumental Theatre

## Music about the Holocaust

Not surprisingly, the starting point for many of the discussions of compositions concerning the Holocaust is Theodor W. Adorno's latterly-diminished verdict of 1951 according to which 'writ[ing] poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.<sup>1</sup> Reiterating and distributing Adorno's famous dictum, scholars implicitly drew on what was later, in the 1980s and in a non-aesthetical, but historiographical context, coined the 'singularity thesis'. In the latter, the Holocaust is historically unique in so far as some of its features—the rigidity of state planning, the systematization of its execution, and, according to some scholars, the psychic motivations—cannot be found with

other, preceding and following, genocides such as Stalin's mass murders, the genocide of the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire, and that of the Tutsis by the Hutus. In light of this—often rather implicit—notion of the Holocaust, scholars have raised doubts about whether it is possible in principle to represent the Holocaust appropriately in art, i.e. to develop—in Cassirer's terms—'symbolic forms' that transform the historical phenomena and events connected with the Holocaust into aesthetic fiction that does not violate the sentiments of the survivors and the commemoration of the victims by distorting or playing down the events in the death camps.<sup>2</sup> To summarize this position emphatically: as regards its artistic representation, the Holocaust possesses a sort of ineffable character.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this theoretical discourse, numerous compositions about the Holocaust have been composed during the past 65 years, especially in the context of commemoration.<sup>4</sup> Often they seemed to be stimulated by current events. In the 1960s, for instance, the unusually high number of Holocaust compositions obviously responded to the Eichmann trial (of 1961) and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials (of 1963 to 1966) that brought the crimes of the Shoah into the public consciousness. What, however, stimulated Holocaust compositions in the mid 1980s, i.e. 40 years after the crimes? To answer this question, Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death*, composed from 1987 to 7 August 1988, appears to be a particularly good case study. In what follows, I will demonstrate that various peculiarities of the music—the associative character of instrumental theatre, the assemblage of styles as well as the specific mode of motion of postminimalist techniques—can be related to the new phase of dealing with the murder of the European Jews that developed in the 1980s.

### Reception Modes of Peter Weiss' *Die Ermittlung* in the 1960s and 1980s

Rzewski based the libretto of his largest-scale work to date on a theatre piece that had been created and premiered already in the 1960s: Peter Weiss' *Die Ermittlung* (*The investigation*) for the premiere of which, in Berlin in 1965, Luigi Nono had composed the electronic stage music.<sup>5</sup> Rzewski must have been well familiar with Weiss' drama because, during the year of the premiere, he had continued to live—though not continuously—in Berlin after a stipend of the arts program of the DAAD had brought him to the divided city in 1963.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Rzewski mentioned in the context of 'History as mythology', his reply to a student's critique of a performance of *The Triumph of Death* at the California Institute of the Arts in March 1992, he and Weiss have shared the same political orientation toward Marxism.<sup>7</sup> In this light, his choice of Weiss' drama as libretto was quite natural. On the other hand, however, the theatre piece seemed to be rather outmoded in the mid 1980s because it projected strongly attitudes and ideas reflecting the approach to the Holocaust of the time of its creation, i.e. 20 years earlier. In the early 1960s, Weiss wrote his theatre piece in direct response to the Auschwitz trials. He was driven by the desire to contribute to raising the public consciousness about the Holocaust that had just started to build up in light of the trials. Believing that objective, i.e. non-emotional information would be best

suited to convey the facts of the murder machine in Auschwitz, Weiss aimed at an artwork that was marked by a distinctively documentary character. Therefore, he drew on the witnesses' testimonies of the trials, and created his drama by basically quoting the dialogues between the court, defendants, witnesses and solicitors. Despite this orientation towards authenticity, the dramatist revised the wording of the testimonies. He omitted word repetitions, replaced specific terms by unspecific ones and transformed hypotactic formulations into parataxis, all this to the end of creating a stereotypical expression<sup>8</sup> that, by the way, also corresponded to the politically engaged, sober, cool and biting elocution that had been shaped by Berthold Brecht, Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler in the context of socio-political and agitprop art in support of the workers' movement and the Communist party in the second half of the 1920s, and which was revived in the later 1960s in the context of the student and protest movements.<sup>9</sup>

Presenting a sober, anti-emotional documentary of the Auschwitz trials, Weiss—just like Jean Cayrol (text) and Hanns Eisler (music) in Alain Resnais' film documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) of 1956—quite obviously paid tribute to the required mode of representing the Holocaust that historians had established in the 1950s, and that still prevailed in the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> In the introduction to *Anatomie des SS-Staates* (*Anatomy of the SS State*), a collection of expert reports on the Third Reich and Auschwitz that the West German public prosecution department had initiated in the early 1960s,<sup>11</sup> one of the authors, the political scientist Hans Buchheim, took a clear distance from a moral-emotional perspective. It was necessary to arouse not 'the [bad] conscience', he argued, 'but sober [...] operations of intellect and reason. Only in this way, do we avoid drawing false conclusions from the past'.<sup>12</sup> In the same vein, the sentimental response of the audience in western Europe to the premiere of a theatre piece based on the diary of Anne Frank was severely criticized—'one should not sentimentalize the fate of Anne Frank'—because, as the historian Eva Reichmann, a specialist in research on anti-Semitism, stated, people forgot 'that to disturb is only the beginning'; what the audiences should additionally do is to ask 'why had this child to die, and become clear about the political processes that led to the extermination'.<sup>13</sup>

During the following 20 years, however, the West German (as well as the European and North American) mentality regarding the attitude toward emotions, in general as well as in the context of the Holocaust, changed significantly. In the 1950s, the experience of emotions was reduced to a sentimentalism that balanced out the missing of a candid and equitable response to the Holocaust,<sup>14</sup> and thus provoked the above-cited verdict by those researchers, writers and journalists who desired a true understanding. After that, in the 1980s, an emotional ice block seemed to have been melting. In the aftermath of the socio-cultural liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, among the—first and foremost leftist—intellectuals, not only had extroverted, emotionally uncontrolled behaviour modes become popular, but West German society had in general developed an increased interest in psychological-emotional issues that was additionally spurred on by the intensified research on

trauma<sup>15</sup> that psychologists, sociologists and politicians recognized to be necessary in the aftermath of WWII and the Vietnam War. The trend toward psychologization manifested itself in publications such as *Psychoanalyse und Nationalsozialismus* (*Psychoanalysis and national socialism*) of 1984<sup>16</sup> as well as the way in which the Dutch state dealt with Holocaust victims. It offered psychotherapies that were thought to replace the payment of compensations.<sup>17</sup>

The new awareness of psychological-emotional matters manifested itself, for instance, in Claude Lanzmann's famous two-part documentary *Shoah*, premiered in 1985, i.e. three years before *The Triumph of Death*, that assembled the recollections of eye witnesses: victims and culprits. Although formally *Shoah* and *Die Ermittlung* resemble each other—both display a strong documentary character—*Shoah* is additionally marked by an intense psychological orientation. To say it bluntly: whereas Weiss' *Die Ermittlung* simulated the situation during the criminal case, Lanzmann, the interviewer, had arranged a setting that not always, but temporarily emulated a psychotherapeutic session; a session that performed the process known as narrative exposure therapy.<sup>18</sup> He started the interview that his camera team recorded by inviting the interviewee to narrate the recollected events and procedures in the camps as precisely as possible and then, on an appropriate occasion, requested—or even demanded and insisted—that the interviewee remembered and expressed highly personal details that required the interviewee(-patient)—if he/she was a victim—to revive and live through strong, usually repressed emotions again. When the interviewee was a culprit, Lanzmann asked them to reactivate behaviour modes that had become improper after 1945, such as the singing of a Nazi concentration camp song.

In this context, in the 1980s, the sober, anti-emotional tone of *Die Ermittlung* seemed to be rather outdated. Paradoxically enough, however, at the same time, the new, psychologically oriented reception modes provided a new perspective that permitted the reading of the piece in a different, more up-to-date way. The emotive-psychological turn suggested an interpretation of the austere, cold tone of the victims in Weiss' drama as expression of trauma, i.e. of *repressed*, but actually overwhelming emotion,<sup>19</sup> while the similarly apathetic tone of the murderers articulated what, as regards the attitude of West German citizens toward the Holocaust and the NS crimes, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their duograph of 1967 had called 'striking emotional numbness'; the 'turn of the inner solicitousness to one's own behaviour in the Third Reich'<sup>20</sup> and the 'inability to mourn'.<sup>21</sup> In other words: the changed reception modes of the audiences permitted an understanding of Weiss' piece as a particularly *truthful* mirror of the witnesses' psyche. How did Rzewski respond to the presetting of the libretto? Not surprisingly, Rzewski adopted the psychological approach. As I will demonstrate, Rzewski does not draw on the discourse of trauma and PTSD (nor does his music suggest that it be interpreted as unintentional expression of trauma<sup>22</sup>; Rzewski has most likely not been traumatized because his family has lived in the USA since the early twentieth century and, thus, did not directly suffer persecution). Instead, he utilized the potential of instrumental theatre.

### Elements of Instrumental theatre

One of the most striking features of Rzewski's composition for string quartet and voices (an undefined number; ideally, however, there should be four voices) is the presence of elements of instrumental theatre, as it was shaped by Mauricio Kagel and Georges Aperghis, as well as by Dieter Schnebel and, later, since the end of the 1970s, by Manos Tsangaris. The numerous instructions in Rzewski's score ask the instrumentalists to shout, whistle,<sup>23</sup> laugh on cue or stomp with the feet,<sup>24</sup> to operate a cassette recorder with the growling of dogs, an amplified typewriter,<sup>25</sup> or a washboard<sup>26</sup> as well as to play cards and drink beer.<sup>27</sup>

Instrumental theatre (or 'musical theatre' or 'theatricalized music', as it is also called sometimes) puts the instrumentalists, whose bodily presence and gestures are usually considered to be little more than the side-effect of the movements necessary to produce the intended music, on stage, like a singer in a music theatre piece. In contrast to a usual music theatre piece in which the instrumentalist is supposed to accompany the singers invisibly, in an instrumental theatre piece the instrumentalist is made an actor *him* or *herself*. Unlike in a concert setting, the instrumentalist is asked to perform not only music based on the score, from which gestures and bodily movements automatically derive, but also gestures and actions, prescribed in the score, that do not serve any sound production.

Because of the usually rather heterogeneous character of the various elements presented during the performance of instrumental theatre—the musical sounds and noises, the gestures and actions (with and without objects), the objects and utterances of the performers—the spectator-listener is stimulated to connect temporarily the fragmentary, heterogeneous visual and auditory cues with each other, and to create a sort of (imagined) narration: a story, a communicative process, a mode of social behaviour and the like that exceeds the performance-oriented<sup>28</sup> presentation, i.e. the presentation of sounds and bodily motions that, according to the paradigm of autonomous music, is supposed to possess no extra-musical meaning. On the contrary, because the material presented in instrumental theatre pieces is heterogeneous and abstract, and thus enigmatic, it requires the spectator-listener to generate meaning—individual meaning—from the few polyvalent cues that are given to him/her in a highly creative fashion. It is this emergence of meaning around which, according to Aperghis, the concept of instrumental theatre centres. The composer creates visual and auditory stimuli that make the spectator-listener link the events on stage with each other and, most importantly, relate them to other extra-musical events: experiences and images of his/her individual environment. In Aperghis' laconic words, 'the brain of the spectator narrates itself stories that I [Aperghis] did not tell'.<sup>29</sup>

In *The Triumph of Death*, premiered in the Théâtre de la Place in Liège on 10 December 1988,<sup>30</sup> these stories emerge from the collision of two sorts of cues: on the one hand, the actions and noise production of the instrumentalists who have been 'displayed' for the audience in the back of the stage, and on the other hand, the verbal

text of the actors-singers. Noises, gestures and movements that cannot be identified as elements or side-products of a music-oriented action tend to be interpreted as elements of a communicative process, i.e. signs or symbols. Thus, all the noises, gestures and movements of the instrumentalists that are not recognizable as part of the production of musical sound appear as commentaries on the verbal text presented in the front of the stage, where the description of increasingly brutal torture and murder takes place.<sup>31</sup> In this light, the breaking of tree branches anticipates the recollection of a witness stating that only a handful of the political prisoners could sustain their strength to the moment of their death.<sup>32</sup> The cellist's kicking over of a large waste basket metaphorically corresponds with the psychic debris that the Nazis produced.<sup>33</sup> The first violinist's attempt to destroy one of his/her co-instrumentalists' chairs by knocking it onto the floor indicates aggression that the musician, like the audience, might feel in light of the narration on stage.<sup>34</sup>

Even more significant, in the context of 1980s-psychologization, are those associations that reveal sadistic or apathetic attitudes. Whistling, noisy gasping, and laughing while the vocalist narrates the inspection of the rectums and the sexual organs of the deportees who had just arrived in the camp,<sup>35</sup> and the question of the court whether or not the people were 'required to undress' before they were locked in the gas chambers,<sup>36</sup> can be interpreted as an obscene reaction in light of the sexual connotations that these utterances possess; exclamations such as 'yu', 'he he' or 'hi hi' come across as ingenuous-joyous or sadistic commentaries on the presentation of torture and arbitrary murder.<sup>37</sup> Even those utterances and activities of the instrumentalists that *cannot* be related to the verbal text of the witnesses, either as a kind of mirror, or as sadism or sarcasm, invite the generation of meaning. When, at the end of the eleventh scene, the second violinist and the violist open cans of beer and start to play cards<sup>38</sup> or, in the ninth scene, the first violinist inflates a balloon and then releases it, letting it fly,<sup>39</sup> the spectator-listener attributes indifference and apathy to the behaviour of the instrumentalists, that is actually unrelated to the stage action.

In short, the features of instrumental theatre employed in Rzewski's *The Triumph of Death* stimulate those cognitive processes of association that also play an important

The image shows a musical score for a stage production. It consists of two main parts: a voice part and a balloon part. The voice part is labeled 'VOICE 3' and has lyrics in three languages: English, German, and French. The lyrics describe the date of September 19, 1941, and the first deportments to the Bunker block. The balloon part is labeled 'BALLOON' and includes instructions to inflate a balloon and release it at the end of measure 17. The score is written on a grand staff with five staves. The first staff is for the voice, and the other four are for the balloon. The music is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Figure 1 Frederic Rzewski, *The Triumph of Death*, 1988, p. 271.



role in psychoanalysis. As in psychotherapy, where free and direct association serves to reveal thoughts that the patient-client, obeying the authority of the superego, represses, the mechanism of instrumental theatre stimulates associations with what are usually subject to social taboos. The link between sexuality and extreme violence, for instance, that also plays a prominent role in the US-American television mini-series of 1978, *Holocaust*, might be one of those taboos. This, however, is only one respect in which *The Triumph of Death* reflects the 1980s mode of coping with the murder of the European Jews. I will reconstruct other aspects in what follows.

### Music in conflict

Unlike in 'classical', i.e. radical avant-gardist, instrumental theatre, the 'normal' performance of—often traditional, tonal—music plays still a prominent role. During the majority of the performance time of *The Triumph of Death*, the string quartet regularly accompanies the vocalists' declamation of text. Most strikingly however, at the same time, Rzewski transfers the idea of instrumental theatre—the presentation of heterogeneous, unrelated elements—to the *style* and/or *expression* of the music. In other words, the music of *The Triumph of Death* does not operate as traditional instrumental accompaniment of the singers on stage that usually mirrors the stage action (or, in later music theatre pieces, *comments* on the stage action). On the contrary, the music is, and is intended to be out of sync with the content presented by the vocal parts—so much out of sync that it seems to be an independent dimension; a sort of absolute, autonomous music. As Rzewski stated in the programme note of the premiere:

The musicians inhabit [...] a lofty sphere, removed from the terrestrial level on which the events of the past are described. They are indifferent to the action. Their music is contradictory. Sometimes abstract, sometimes evoking familiar themes and styles, it remains distant and formal.<sup>40</sup>

The musical means Rzewski chose in order to create the out-of-sync effect are musical styles and quotations whose expressions drastically contradict the seriousness of the content. In scene N° 11, for instance, 'The song of the fire ovens', the entertaining, joyful character of the old-time or bluegrass improvisation—the mostly plucked strings<sup>41</sup> imitate the timbre spectrum of an American folk music ensemble; the vocalist's part and his/her musical accompaniment are based on chunks of an extended pentatonic scale<sup>42</sup>—is diametrically opposed to the scene's content that, as climax of the drama, depicts the murder machine based on the gas chambers and cyklon B in full operation. In this light, the music seems to articulate a similar apathy to the one mentioned above, that the stage directions ask the instrumentalists to perform.

Other scenes of a similar, grotesquely entertaining musical character are scene No 8, 'The Song of Phenol', the music of whose major parts is a waltz that evokes major-minor tonality (B flat major, E major and E minor)<sup>43</sup> and scene No 6, 'The song of S.S. Sergeant Stark', in the later part of which the accompanying strings evoke a tango when a witness reports the predilection of Stark's modes of murdering.<sup>44</sup>



**APPENDIX: "A" MATERIAL** (314)

$\text{♩} = 76 \sim 100$

Figure 2 Frederic Rzewski, *The Triumph of Death*, 1988, p. 314.

Mechanically  $\text{♩} = 180$  ( $\text{♩} = 60$ ) (200)

**VOICE 2**

**A**  $\text{♩} \text{ con sord.}$

V.1

which room were the in- jec- tions gi- ven  
wel- cham Raum war dan die in- jek- tion-en ge- ge- ben  
quel la pièce fai- sait on les pi- è- res

V.1

**VOICE 1** In Room  
Dans la pièce numéro

**VOICE 2**

(1) One That was the dan- tor's of- fice at the end of the cor- ri- dor  
Sins v- des war das erst- zimmer es lag am en- de des kor- ri- dor  
un c'é- tait le bu- reau du mé- de- cin au bout du cou- loir con- traire- vo

V.1

Figure 3 Frederic Rzewski, *The Triumph of Death*, 1988, p. 200.

In sum, like the elements of instrumental theatre, the sections of 'autonomous music' are marked by discrepancy or 'conflict' (in a structural, not a psycho-sociological sense). The conflict between musical expression and dramatic content is

(3) Captain  
 Herr Kommandant  
 Monsieur le Commandant

I didn't  
 ich habe doch  
 Je n'ai

do anything  
 nichts getan  
 rien fait

Ho dim.  
 dim.  
 dim.  
 dim.

(a)

He yelled  
 Da Rief er  
 Et lui criait

Get up against the wall  
 Los an die Wand  
 Allez au mur

Sarah  
 Sarah  
 Sarah

HE HE HE HE  
 NO NO NO NO  
 HA HA HA HA  
 HI HI HI HI

(b)

Figure 4 Frederic Rzewski, *The Triumph of Death*, 1988, p. 133.

complemented by a conflict between various styles and genres: folk, social dance and—as I will demonstrate in the last section of this article—postminimalist-contemporary style. The stylistic heterogeneity, together with the incompatible visual and auditory elements of instrumental theatre that additionally collide with the context, namely the testimonies of the Auschwitz trials, create an atmosphere that can be described appropriately as grotesque, i.e. a style that is marked by incongruity and distortion that derives from the intermingling of disparate phenomena and objects. In fact, Rzewski envisions the musicians as displaying ‘carnavalesque behaviour’<sup>45</sup> that is closely connected with the grotesque.<sup>46</sup> As in modern drama, where the grotesque style occurs particularly often in order to display an alienated world, a ‘deformed reality’, as Thomsen put it,<sup>47</sup> in *The Triumph of Death* the grotesque expresses the absurdity and inhumanity of the events in the concentration camps; the ‘perversion of reason’<sup>48</sup>. Choosing this style, the composer might have been inspired partially by prominent models such as those of George Tabori and Edgar Hilsenrath, who had established black humour as a possible treatment of the subject of the ‘Holocaust’.<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, literary theorists have also connected the mechanisms of the grotesque with those of

political theatre. Complying with the programme of the anti-illusionist theatre of Brecht and Piscator, according to which ruptures and breaks generated by disparate dramatic elements should destroy the theatrical illusion and stimulate rational and critical thought, the ruptures and breaks that derive naturally from the grotesque style possess a critical impetus:

It may be felt [...] that there is no point to the grotesque, that it is a gratuitous mixing together of incompatible elements for its own sake, or for no other purpose than to bewilder the reader. But [...] [sometimes] it is quite clear that the grotesque is being calculatingly employed in the service of something which has a definite purpose—satire<sup>50</sup>

aiming at social criticism. Although this aspect does not play an explicit role in *The Triumph of Death*, it is subliminally present by means of the grotesque style.

In the context of the deformed, grotesque expression colliding with the tragic content of the piece, the stylistic quotations of dances—waltz and tango—and their perpetuum-mobile-like motion become depictions of a *danse macabre* that seems to be inspired by the overall dramaturgy of the libretto. Since Weiss aimed at informing the audience about Auschwitz, it was most helpful to arrange the testimonies in an order that described life and death in Auschwitz chronologically. Thus, *Die Ermittlung* starts with the arrival of the trains at the ramp (no visible murder) and finishes with the murder of inmates in the gas chambers; furthermore, it presents those scenes that referred to earlier states of the concentration camp's history (the murder of individual inmates by phenol and shooting) before those scenes that described later states of it (the systematic murder of thousands of victims by Cyklon B). In other words, the absurd increase of murder throughout Weiss' drama is not primarily caused by a specific dramaturgical purpose, but simply emulates the historical truth.<sup>51</sup> Thus, paradoxically enough, the music both *complies with* and *collides with* the libretto at the same time: the music's pace complies with the overall dramaturgy; its expression, however, collides with the general seriousness and tragic nature of the historical situation.



**Figure 5** Rudi Goguel, *Die Moorsoldaten* 1933. The original score that Langhoff reprinted in his report *Die Moorsoldaten* (Zurich: Schweizer Spiegel, 1935), documenting the whole process of being taken and held in 'Schutzhaft' (protective custody) by the NS-state, looks quite different. This is certainly due to the fact that Goguel was not a composer. The version of *Die Moorsoldaten*, as it is usually performed today, is harmonically much more 'conventional'.

### Eternalization and universalization

The last feature I will point to in this article is the specific drive or flow of many of the musical numbers. At the beginning of No. 6, the melodrama-like ‘prelude’ to the final narration of the murder, in which the actor describes the personal purification rituals of Stark after a series of murder, the actor’s speech is accompanied by figurations of the song *Die Moorsoldaten* (*Peat Bog Soldiers*).<sup>52</sup>

Having been composed, in 1933, by the miner Johann Esser (lyrics), the actor and director Wolfgang Langhoff (lyrics) and the resistance fighter and communist Rudi Goguel (music), internees of the concentration camp Börgermoor during the years 1933/1934, the song represents authentic concentration camp music.<sup>53</sup> Because of its production history, ‘Moorsoldaten’ appears to be a very appropriate quotation in the context of *The Triumph of Death*—except for the arrangement of the music. In contrast to the original, bitter, desperately motionless song (in minor key with sluggish quarter notes), Rzewski’s figurations are marked by a motoric, sanguine drive that the composer achieved by availing himself of techniques that various musicologists have classified as postminimalist.<sup>54</sup> Rzewski dissolved the original melody and harmonic progression of *Die Moorsoldaten* into a figuration that, unlike the way it is now found in the score, was most likely structured into groups of four eighth notes (not eighth-note triplets). Additionally, he doubled the tempo (quarter notes are now eighth notes). The clear *caesura* in the middle of the four-bar antecedent of the original melody is weakened by means of an immediate transition to the next phrase. Only then—I continue to reconstruct what I suppose was Rzewski’s compositional process—Rzewski turned the original rhythm, consisting of groups of four eighth notes, into pacy, brisk triplets that, in the existing 4/4 metre, naturally make the ends of the phrases occur irregularly in the framework of the bar scheme, and on weak beats. Against the resulting phase-shifting effect between the present metre and the original harmonic rhythm, not unlike the phase shifting between *talea* and *colour*, the major–minor-tonal origin remains clearly recognizable, yet—in accordance with the postminimalist style—in a blurred, distorted manner. It is this conflict, between the internal triple metre of the figurations and the framing double metre in which the figurations are ‘squeezed’, that creates the specific, motoric, sanguine drive of the number; a sort of rhythmic-metric liquefaction or flow.

The specific mode of motion described above is particularly intense in No. 6, but can also be found in numerous other numbers of the composition such as ‘The song of the bunker block’ (No. 9) and ‘of the Black Wall’ (No. 7). Quite obviously, its torrent of notes complements the grotesque *danse macabre* depicted in the dances. There is, however, more to it than that, as I will demonstrate in what follows.

The coping with the Holocaust in the 1980s was not only influenced by the trend toward psychologization, but was also marked by an entirely new phase of Holocaust commemoration politics. Evidence for this change in the approach to the extermination of the European Jews can be found in the so-called *Historikerstreit* (*Historians’ quarrel*). The *Historikerstreit*, which split the West German historians

Transformation 1:

Transformation 2:

(a)

(b)

(c)

**Figure 6** First measures of *Die Moorsoldaten*, developing into the figuration in Frederic Rzewski, *The Triumph of Death*, 1988, p. 119.

into two camps in 1986/1987, was caused initially by Ernst Nolte's thesis that the Holocaust has to be considered in a historical line with the work camps and mass murder of Stalinism, but later revolved around the 'singularity thesis' mentioned at the beginning of this article. The *Historikerstreit* was ended by the acceptance of the singularity thesis, i.e. the acknowledgement that the genocide of the European Jews by the national socialists was to be considered as specific, in comparison to other genocides. For this context, it is even more significant that the *Historikerstreit* was symptomatic of a general trend in West Germany regarding the approach to the Holocaust: the desire to come to terms with the past and to close this chapter. This



desire articulated itself in the comment of Christian Meier, the president of the society of (West) German historians, on the *Historikertag*, the annual meeting of German historians in October 1986. Instead of explicitly articulating the yearning for closure, he rather metaphorically evoked it by describing the aspired to situation as reality: 'Does a much deeper, more elementary process manifest itself in the quarrel [later coined the '*Historikerstreit*']: the end of the post-war era perhaps, the breaking of a spell, to which we were subjected during the preceding decades, the explosive breaking of an ice sheet on which we lived?'<sup>55</sup> In brief, the decision to acknowledge the singularity thesis—singularity and uniqueness not in the sense of 'this was a singular event and it is over now', but in the sense of 'this is so exceptional that its aftermath will never be over'—included the insight that the Holocaust could not be ruled off. The necessity to cope with it would endure into the future.

The 'Americanization of the Holocaust',<sup>56</sup> intensifying in the late 1970s, can be considered as the counterpart of the European situation on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to numerous American films informing the North American people about the murder of the European Jews, the 'Americanization of the Holocaust' included the integration of the Holocaust into the documentation, commemoration and critique of other examples of racism, genocide and intolerance. (The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles of 1993 has been dedicated to the presentation of both North-American racism against black people and the Holocaust.) So, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, there was a tendency to universalize the holocaust as a kind of genocide that, as a paradigm, was ejected from history and, in this sense, is eternal, without a closure to the past.

In the 1980s, the trend toward eternalization, i.e. the perspective of eternity and timelessness, can also be found in another area of thought: philosophy of history and historiography. Here, cultural critics proclaimed the end of history, i.e. the end of any significant change in the (western) world. In the context of this rather depressed *zeitgeist*, the eternalization and universalization of the Holocaust appear to be concrete variants of the rather general thesis of the *posthistoire*. As regards the interpretation of the Holocaust, however, unlike the posthistoric-postmodern *zeitgeist*, the point is not tiredness with history and general disappointment at the course of the twentieth century (marked by extreme violence and atrocities),<sup>57</sup> but the concrete experience that there are historical events whose impact is of never decreasing significance for the future. It is this insight with which Rzewski agreed in his above-mentioned text 'History as mythology' by stating: 'the story [of the Holocaust] is not over'.<sup>58</sup> In the light of this view, the musical peculiarities pointed out above can be interpreted as a response to the endurance of the Holocaust (as historical event and subject of historiography). So, the postminimalist, stream-like, anti-temporal drive of the phase-shifting figurations of *Die Moorsoldaten*, its relentlessness and pull, that draw the listener into the acoustic torrent, do not express posthistoric stagnation. Rather, this comments on the specific problem of the impossibility of closure, and articulates the helplessness and aporia in light of this diagnosis. Thus, when the performers and listeners reach the last chord (or rather:

interval) of *The Triumph of Death*, a dissonant, implacable tritone, the narrated (hi)story remains open factually and musically.

## Notes

- [1] Adorno, 1951, 34.
- [2] See Joy H. Calico in the introduction to her article on the cantata *Die Jüdische Chronik* (*A Jewish Chronicle*) (1961, premiered in 1966): 'Does mediation through art diminish the significance of those experiences or the magnitude of the crimes? Does an artistic rendering reduce the event to fiction, therefore blunting its historical reality? Does art help us to gain understanding of the event? Does anyone except a survivor or her descendants have the right to make such decisions? In short, what is the artist's responsibility in the work of commemoration?' (Calico, 2005, 95). Similarly, Marjorie Perloff summarizes the dilemma—though her concerns regarding beauty do not seem to be relevant anymore today in light of the fact that, since the twentieth century, beauty is not considered to be a necessary, or even a wanted quality of art: 'Part of the issue is that no representation seems adequate. Besides, when it is well done, and whatever its subject, art—film, documentary, photography, painting or writing—is beautiful. And it seems inappropriate to make a thing of beauty out of something that is all horror. When badly done it is worse: a misrepresentation, an exploitation, abuse upon abuse' (Perloff, 2006).
- [3] See also Waxman 2006, 162ff.
- [4] Cf. the list of Sophie Fetthauer, URL: <http://www.sophie.fetthauer.de/MusikundHolocaust06-05-20.pdf> >.
- [5] Nono transformed the stage music into the oeuvre *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto ad Auschwitz* (*Remember what they have done to you in Auschwitz*) in the same year.
- [6] Cf. Beal, 2006, 147, 179.
- [7] Rzewski, 1992, 2. I am deeply indebted to Gisela Gronemeyer who drew my attention on this text and made it available to me!
- [8] Cf. Best, 1971, 138; Weiss, 1968, 471; Tieder, 1988, 274; Kontarsky, 2001, 35ff.
- [9] Cf. Eisler, 1932.
- [10] For a—partially complementary—view regarding the emphasis on objectivity in the context of Holocaust research and coping with the Holocaust, see Wlodarski, 2010.
- [11] The trials were initiated and directed by the engaged Hessian chief public prosecutor, Fritz Bauer.
- [12] Buchheim et al., 1994 [1967], 11.
- [13] Reichmann, 1974 [1958], 171.
- [14] Such an honest response would have been, for instance, mourning (cf. their widely distributed monograph *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (*The Inability to Mourn*) by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich (1967)).
- [15] Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was included in the American *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III) for the first time in 1980.
- [16] Lohmann 1984.
- [17] Swaan, 1982, 141; Haan, 1997, 132f; and Gelder, 1998.
- [18] The purpose of narrative exposure therapy is to reduce the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder by confronting the patient with the memories of the traumatic event. According to Edna B. Foa and Barbara Olasov Rothbaum, telling one's story and directly facing the grief, anxiety and guilt related to trauma enables many survivors to cope with their symptoms, memories and other aspects of their lives (cf. Foa & Rothbaum 1999).
- [19] According to the trauma psychologists, the initial account of a traumatized patient is 'emotionless, stereotyped, and repetitious'. Traumatic memory resembles 'a series of still snapshots or a silent movie, the role of therapy is to provide the music and words' (Herman, 1992, 247).



- [20] Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich 1967, p. 38.
- [21] Title of Mitscherlich & Mitscherlich 1967.
- [22] On music and trauma in 1970s and 80s Eastern Europe, see Cizmic, 2004.
- [23] Rzewski, 1988a, 26.
- [24] Rzewski, 1988a, 299, ff. In No.11, 'The song of the fire ovens', Rzewski instructs the musicians to shout, laugh and stomp with their feet, not naturalistically, 'but precise and formal, as in the stylized gestures of certain types (e.g. Polish or Andean) of traditional folk music' (Rzewski, 1988a, 299).
- [25] Rzewski, 1988a, 64–75 and 87–115.
- [26] Rzewski, 1988a, 255–264.
- [27] Rzewski, 1988a, 313.
- [28] In this context, I use 'performance' in the sense of 'performativity' and 'performance theories', i.e. as a specific theatrical form that, unlike traditional drama that presents a story or narrative and whose actors display a fictive character, aims at exhibiting the body and bodily movement without any additional fictional meaning.
- [29] Georges Aperghis, interviewed by Natalie Singer (Singer 2000, 80f).
- [30] A CD of 1989 with the French version of *The Triumph of Death* and the title *L'instruction* documents eight of fourteen scenes: the Prologue, the Epilogue and six songs. A recording of 1999 and in Dutch language is available at: <http://icking-music-archive.org/ByComposer/Rzewski.php>.
- [31] Weiss' drama is designed according to the principle of escalation. Rzewski adapted Weiss' play without any changes, except for unavoidable cuts because the singing of rhythmicized language needs more time than spoken text.
- [32] Rzewski, 1988a, 83–86. Similarly, the pole of a length of one meter with which the violist is asked to beat on the floor in scene N° 4, 'The song of the possibility of survival', does not appear as a percussionist instrument that serves to produce noises, but as a weapon (Rzewski, 1988a, 57).
- [33] Rzewski, 1988a, 49.
- [34] Rzewski, 1988a, 140.
- [35] Rzewski, 1988a, 26.
- [36] Rzewski, 1988a, 127.
- [37] Rzewski, 1988a, 46, 49 and 51.
- [38] Rzewski, 1988a, 313.
- [39] Rzewski, 1988a, 271.
- [40] Rzewski, 1988b, 500.
- [41] Rzewski suggests the instrumentalists to use 'some kind of pick or spectrum, like a banjo' completed by possibly a real banjo or 'electronics' that create a 'metallic sound' (Rzewski, 1988a, 299).
- [42] The pentatonic scale occurs as two pitch class sets—'material A' and 'material B'. Material B is the transposition of material A. Material A, related to A flat major, consists of the pitches A flat, B flat, C, E flat, F and, additionally, D flat which operates as an appoggiatura of C, and 'material B', related to the D major and a tritone above material A, entails the pitches D, E, F sharp, A, B and, additionally, G operating as appoggiatura of F sharp.
- [43] Like a children's song, it consists of no more than five pitches in each of the phrases of irregular length.
- [44] 'He always liked to shoot the legs first' (Rzewski, 1988a, 131). Additionally, Rzewski mentions in the programme note that 'fragments of "Die Fledermaus" appear in the "Song of the Black Wall." The "Song of the Bunker" contains echoes of the ballad "I'am goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad"' (Rzewski, 1988b, 500).
- [45] Rzewski, 1988a, 299.
- [46] Cf. the discussion of the terms 'grotesque', 'absurd' and 'carnavalesque' in Schlüter, 2007.

- [47] Thomsen, 1974, 12.
- [48] Heidsieck, 1969, 18.
- [49] The use of black humour to narrate the Holocaust has become an established technique that, however, is considered to be a privilege of Jewish writers, i.e. those individuals who were victims of the Holocaust, or whose fate is closely connected with its victims (cf. for instance, Stenberg, 1982, 282). Stemming from Polish Jews who left Europe in the early twentieth century, before the seizure of power by the Nazis, Rzewski is certainly legitimized to effect a grotesque presentation of the Holocaust. Examples for this stylistic approach to the Holocaust in literature can be found, first and foremost, in the theatre plays of Tabori and Hilsenrath's novels 'Nacht' of 1962 and 'Der Nazi & der Frisör' of 1971, but also Tadeusz Borowski, Jakov Lind (short story 'Eine Seele aus Holz' of 1962), Romain Gary (novel *La Danse de Gengis Cohn* of 1967), Yoram Kaniuk, and Art Spiegelman (*Maus. A Survivor's Tale*) (cf. Kuhn, 2008, 7; and Lamping, 2003, 173).
- [50] Thomson, 1972, 4. Additionally, Rzewski could draw on the modes of critique, as they had been developed in the context of the student and protest movements of the 1960s and 70s: the playful performance of critical action as pleasurable event.
- [51] Other Holocaust narratives such as the children's book Clara Asscher-Pinkhof's *Sterrekinderen* (1961) are marked by the same increase of violence.
- [52] Starting in 1973, Rzewski uses increasingly often precomposed material (cf. Nicholls, 1998, 554).
- [53] Furthermore, since, in the course of the protest song movement, *Die Moorsoldaten* became internationally popular among leftist intellectuals—it was performed by singers such as Hannes Wader and Pete Seeger—it also epitomizes an element of Rzewski's personal musical, socio-cultural environment of the 1960s and 70s.
- [54] Cf., for instance, Nyman, 2000, and Bauer, 2006.
- [55] Meier 1987, 204.
- [56] The information and instruction of the North Americans about the Holocaust was carried out by presenting the actually tragic and depressing historical facts in a manner that complied with the US-American uplifting spirit, i.e. in these presentations, the final phase of the Holocaust is not murder, but emigration to Israel or the USA (cf. Rosenfeld 1997, 125).
- [57] In the 1980s, Walter Benjamin's ninth thesis on history became extremely popular among culturally pessimist intellectuals. In this thesis, Benjamin stated: 'There is a painting by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm' (Benjamin 1940, 269). I quote the translation of Dennis Redmond, URL: [http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses\\_on\\_History.html](http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html).
- [58] The wider context of this quotations is: 'We the living must bear the consequences of the actions of preceding generations, and must act in such a way as to repair the damage done to the world in which we now live, not only by those who committed the crimes under investigation, but also by those who attempted, and still attempt to cover them up. But the wounds inflicted upon humanity will never be completely healed. Our knowledge of history will never be perfect. It will always be flawed, full of holes, and tainted by the awareness that this history is written by the survivors, not the victims [...] For Weiss the drama described (not acted) on the stage is part of a larger, ongoing drama of which the players and the spectators are both a part. The sinking

feeling which most people must have as they come away from this play must proceed from the realization that this story is not over' (Rzewski 1992, 2).

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