

# Music as a Collective Container for Trauma: The Performances of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* in the Terezín Ghetto

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## Abstract

Building on an earlier analysis of the repeated performances of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* in the Terezín ghetto, this article revisits the undertaking as a paradigmatic instance of musical practice under conditions of radical persecution. Drawing on survivors' testimonies and historical–musicological sources, and guided by psychoanalytic concepts, we suggest that Verdi's *Requiem* could function as a collective container in Bion's sense: a structured musical–textual matrix that received death and terror and returned it in forms that could be borne, shared, and symbolically elaborated. We bring Ogden's modes of experiencing into dialogue with the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC), used here as a descriptive vocabulary for layered musical and bodily experience. Focusing on *Dies irae* and *Libera me* movements, we trace how musical form, vocal embodiment, and textual meaning converged with Jewish liturgical memory and with the political circumstances of Verdi's composition, which many prisoners experienced as charged with subversive significance. We argue that rehearsals and performances created a liminal, ritualized space in which inmates could experience themselves as singular subjects and as a community, reclaiming dignity, agency, and voice. Within this musical “third,” psychic life and meaning could, however precariously, be sustained in the midst of an otherwise scarcely representable catastrophe.

**Keywords:** Terezín, Verdi's *Requiem*, Bion, Ogden, Expressive therapies continuum, Trauma, Containment, Music

## Introduction

In the winter of 1944, in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) ghetto, a choir of Jewish prisoners performed Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* under the direction of Czech conductor Rafael Schächter at least fifteen times; the final documented performance took place in June 1944 [1].

Survivors consistently testified that singing and listening to the piece provided an organizing, empowering, and consoling refuge in the face of brutal reality. Many recalled these performances as among the most meaningful experiences of their imprisonment: “This music lifted our spirits; it gave us strength and hope,” recalled Edgar Krasa [2] (pp.44). Edith Kraus [3] (Appendix A, pp.249–251) noted that hearing the *Requiem* still gave her chills.

“Music” and “Holocaust” would seem to designate radically incompatible registers of experience. Yet in many camps and ghettos, various forms of artistic activity—sometimes imposed by Nazi authorities, sometimes arising from prisoners' own initiative—developed under extreme conditions [4]. In Terezín, a transit ghetto established in 1941 to concentrate the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia before deportation to labor and extermination camps, cultural life persisted alongside overcrowding, hunger, disease, forced labor and systematic deportations [5]. Schächter's *Requiem* undertaking belongs within this paradoxical coexistence of culture and dehumanization.

The present article grows out of an earlier study of the Terezín performances of Verdi's *Requiem*, authored by one of us from a primarily musicological perspective [4]. That study

focused on historical reconstruction and on the musical and cultural contexts of Schächter's undertaking. Here, we return to the same historical event from an additional vantage point, integrating the perspective of an art psychotherapist to develop a psychoanalytic reading of the *Requiem* as a collective container for trauma. We approach the performance space as a "third area" in Ogden's sense [6], within which different modes of experiencing could be held together and transformed, using the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) as a conceptual scaffold for differentiating layered registers of musical–bodily experience (sensory–kinesthetic, perceptual–affective, and cognitive–symbolic), rather than as a prescriptive intervention model [7–9].

Methodological note: Our reading is interpretive and heuristic - that is, a theory-generating, concept-guided interpretation rather than a diagnostic reconstruction of individual inner states [10]. We do not claim to psychologize historical actors. Instead, we draw on psychoanalysis as a culturally reflective, hermeneutic methodology used in both clinical and non-clinical inquiry, including the interpretation of art, culture, and social experience [11]. In this spirit, psychoanalytic concepts are used as a vocabulary for articulating possible functions of a shared musical event at the level of collective experience, grounded in survivors' testimonies and historical–musicological sources [12]; interview quotations are cited from Semel's dissertation transcripts by appendix and page [3].

### Terezín as Radical Liminal Space

Terezín, a small, fortified town north of Prague originally built for about 7,000 soldiers, was turned into a ghetto where up to 60,000 Jews were crammed into dilapidated barracks with primitive sanitation. Hunger, disease, and exhausting forced labor led to extremely high mortality: of more than 155,000 Jews who passed through Terezín between 1941–1945, about 35,440 died there [13–15].

Within this existence on the constant brink of death, an extensive artistic enterprise persisted: Concerts, operas, lectures, theatre and cabaret, among others, were active within the ghetto's walls [5]. Schächter's *Requiem* undertaking must be understood against this backdrop: cultural life embedded within a machinery of dehumanization and death.

We regard Terezín as a radical liminal space: an in-between zone where ordinary categories of time, place, and social order were profoundly disrupted. Liminality here was not a symbolic threshold but a violent suspension of continuity. Contemporary research on protracted uncertainty and "living in limbo" suggests that such conditions can intensify distress, erode agency, and strain identity [16]. At the same time, anthropological [17] and psychoanalytic accounts [18,19]

remind us that transitional states may, under certain conditions, open a space for new symbolization and identity work; recent scholarship similarly uses liminality to theorize processes of identity reconfiguration and transformative reflection [20,21]. We suggest that the *Requiem* performances constituted such a transitional ritual: a time-bounded, collectively held form in which psychological survival could find expression. Because empirical studies cannot speak directly to coerced sacred choral performance in Nazi camps, we draw on adjacent research on group singing only to establish the clinical plausibility of our claims, without implying causality [22].

### Verdi's *Requiem* in Terezín: Outline of an Undertaking

Although cast as a liturgical Mass for the dead, Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* was conceived within a strongly political and cultural context. Composed in 1874 in memory of Alessandro Manzoni, a central moral figure of the Italian struggle for unification (The *Risorgimento*), the work has often been read as a secular, humanistic meditation on judgment and deliverance, giving voice both to anxiety in the face of death and to an urgent plea for release from its terrors [1,23]. Verdi's insistence that it be performed in concert halls rather than as part of church services, further underlines its orientation beyond strictly liturgical use and its resonance with struggles against tyranny, for both national and private liberation [24].

Against this background, the decision to perform Verdi's *Requiem* in the Terezín ghetto acquires an additional layer of meaning. The rehearsals unfolded under severe constraints: After exhausting forced labor, with limited materials and minimal accompaniment, and with singers repeatedly depleted by the transports, yet the ensemble persisted across many months [4]. The initiative was led by Rafael Schächter, a young Czech pianist and conductor who became a central figure in the ghetto's musical life [1], who undertook to rehearse one of the most demanding works in the western canon, originally written for an orchestra, choir and four soloists. Schächter recruited professional musicians among the prisoners and auditioned additional volunteers, assembling a mixed choir of roughly 150 singers. Rehearsals, extending over approximately six months, took place in a damp basement each evening after the day's exhausting work [4].

After the premiere, most members of this first choir were deported to their death. Schächter assembled a second choir of similar size, and later, after further deportations, a third choir of about sixty singers, who carried out the remaining performances [4]. The final performance, mandated by Nazi authorities, took place in front of the Red Cross delegation and senior SS officers, including Adolf Eichmann on 23 June 1944 [25]. A few months later, Schächter himself, together

with many of his musicians, was deported to Auschwitz and subsequently murdered; only very few members of the ensemble lived to see liberation [4].

This outline already suggests a pattern of insistence: against the backdrop of dispossession and erasure, Schächter and his collaborators reconstituted the choir repeatedly. The work was literally relearned under the shadow of the transports – a terrifying unknown, increasingly associated with disappearance and feared death [3]. These repeated acts of re-creation are central to our reading.

### Music, Trauma, And Containment

Primo Levi, reflecting on Auschwitz, understood artistic efforts under such conditions as attempts to create meaning—gestures of thought that, however minimally, transcended the camp [26]. Amos Goldberg describes trauma as an anxiety-laden excess that resists narrative integration and leaves a lacuna in the mind [27], while Cathy Caruth emphasizes the paradox of survival, haunted by an ungraspable threat to life and by the enigma of having survived at all [28]. Levi added: “Our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of man” [26]. In this vein, trauma scholarship underscores how overwhelming experience can disrupt autobiographical continuity and narrative coherence; Dana Amir suggests that when trauma shatters narrative, witnessing does not disappear—it changes its form. What cannot yet be told as story may still insist on being borne—through fragments, repetitions, tonalities, and received forms that carry what language cannot [29].

Against this background, if trauma entails an assault on the capacity to think, represent, and remember, then aesthetic forms here, a canonical musical work may provide a different pathway for symbolization. In Terezín, performers and audiences repeatedly sang and heard a *Requiem* saturated with images of judgment and death while they themselves were surrounded by both. The question we pursue is how this musical and textual structure could offer them a way of being with, and thinking, the unthinkable.

Drawing on Bion's formulations [30], we read the Terezín *Requiem* as a collective container, a structured musical–textual matrix capable of receiving inmates' unformulated anxieties and returning them in a modified, more bearable form. Adjacent empirical and integrative clinical literatures on trauma treatment emphasize the value of structured, group-based formats for supporting affect tolerance, relational regulation, and phased processing under threat [31]. Following Ogden's theory of modes of experiencing – the autistic–contiguous, paranoid–schizoid, and depressive configurations of subjectivity [19] –we assume that under massive trauma, psychic life tends either to congeal within a single mode or to shuttle violently among them, without the possibility of

symbolic elaboration or “thirdness.” We use Ogden's model here as an interpretive vocabulary for shifts in organization of experience; adjacent post-2022 work on approaches that target mentalizing/integration provides convergent support for the plausibility of such shifts under conditions of safety and structure [32]. We suggest that the *Requiem* afforded prisoners, at least intermittently, a capacity to move among these modes in and through the music itself.

To describe the stratification of experience, we invoke the ETC [33,34] not as a prescriptive model of intervention but as a phenomenological lexicon. The ETC, originally formulated in visual art therapy, has also been adapted to music therapy, demonstrating its usefulness for differentiating kinesthetic–sensory, affective–perceptual, and cognitive–symbolic dimensions of musical experience [9,35]. Transposed to the musical medium, the ETC allows us to distinguish, heuristically, between (1) a sensory–kinesthetic layer of bodily engagement with voice, breath, movement and vibration; (2) a perceptual–affective layer of musical form, dynamics and emotional coloring; and (3) a cognitive–symbolic layer of textual, liturgical and political meaning. Read in dialogue with Bion and Ogden, these layered modes help us trace how the work may have functioned as a container for different aspects of inmates' psychic life. Bion's [30] container/contained and Ogden's [19] modes of experiencing are used here as heuristic lenses rather than as fixed clinical diagnoses.

### Analysis: Layers of Experience- ETC, Bion, and Ogden in Terezín

#### Sensory–kinesthetic: the embodied voice as “musical skin”

Across the close readings that follow, we use the ETC as an analytic scaffold for describing shifts across sensory–kinesthetic, perceptual–affective, and cognitive–symbolic registers of musical experience. We place this vocabulary in dialogue with Bion's [30] container/contained and with Ogden's [19] modes of experiencing, treating all three as heuristic lenses rather than as diagnostic claims.

On the sensory–kinesthetic level [9,35], choral singing in Terezín demanded deep breathing, postural alignment, muscular effort and coordinated use of facial and respiratory musculature, all in stark contrast to the passive, broken, starved body that the camp sought to produce. Singing together required shared tempo, shared inhalations before each phrase and a shared bodily orientation toward the conductor. Within an environment designed to fragment bodies and relationships, the choir organized them.

In a choir, each singer's voice is at once unmistakably his or her own and immediately taken up into a larger sonorous body. One hears one's voice doubled, thickened, and carried

by the mass of other voices; the “I” resounds within a powerful collective “We.” This experience of being acoustically held and amplified by others is central to the sensory power of the *Requiem* in Terezín and is consonant with contemporary studies showing that group singing can enhance feelings of connection, vitality and emotional regulation [36–39].

We may think of this layer as providing a kind of “musical skin” for the group—an auditory/sonorous envelope—that held together bodies and psyches on the verge of disintegration [40,41]. Ogden’s [19] autistic–contiguous mode, with its reliance on sensory envelopes to secure continuity of self, seems pertinent here. Survivors’ descriptions evoke precisely such experiences. Edna Amit [3] (Appendix A pp.257–259), spoke of singing in the *Requiem* as something that “fulfilled” her, radically different from the daily progression from one bowl of soup to the next. In Bion’s terms [30], the *Requiem* offered a rudimentary containing form for *Beta-elements* of bodily terror, a rhythmic–sensory matrix within which existence could be felt, however temporarily, as continuous and shared.

### **Perceptual–affective: *Dies Irae* as ecstatic terror and protest**

Liturgically, *Dies irae* (“Day of Wrath”) is the long sequence in the *Requiem* Mass that gives a sharp account of Judgment Day: The earth trembling, the trumpet summoning the dead, the book of deeds being opened and every soul standing before an all-mighty judge. Its dense, rhythmic language condenses images of cosmic catastrophe and ultimate accountability. Within the Mass, however, this apocalyptic imagery is not merely narrated but enacted as a communal plea: a ritualized confrontation with mortality that seeks, through sound and collective voicing, to render terror thinkable and bearable. For many Central-European Jewish prisoners, these images most probably echoed *Unetaneh Tokef*, the High Holiday prayer recited at the emotional peak of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* [4]. *Unetaneh Tokef* likewise stages a Day of Judgment in which the “Book of Records” is opened and the decree of “who shall live and who shall die” is pronounced, yet it does so within a liturgical economy that frames judgment as ethically consequential and, at least imaginatively, transformable through repentance, prayer and communal solidarity. Even among secular Jews, fragments of its language and melody often remained part of a deeply internalized religious–cultural memory [4].

These textual and ritual resonances intensify the affective charge of *Dies irae* in Terezín: Catholic eschatology and Jewish liturgical memory are superimposed, so that the music becomes a site where fear and pleading are voiced at once. Ruth Ha Cohen-Pinchover’s notion of “Oratorical Moments” [42] is useful here: sounds from different times and traditions are projected upon the present, creating an alchemical layering of

meanings. In Terezín, therefore, *Dies irae* could simultaneously invoke the *Risorgimento*’s political ideals, Jewish High Holiday dread and the immediate Nazi reality.

On the perceptual–affective level [9,35], musical structure—including form, dynamics, timbre, and texture—functions as a set of emotion cues that can shape and communicate affective experience [43,44].

Here the ETC’s perceptual–affective band [9,35] meets Ogden’s [19] paranoid–schizoid mode. The music gives powerful form to experiences of persecution, judgment and annihilation. Yet these effects are not unbounded: they are held within a highly organized structure that can be heard, from a Bionian perspective [30], as an apparatus for transforming persecutory *Beta-elements* into *Alpha-elements* of rhythm, contour and phrase. Terror is given form.

Several survivors explicitly experienced the *Dies irae* as directed at the Nazis. Aliza Shek (Semel, 2018, Appendix A, p. 255–256) recalled that it felt “addressed to the Germans”. Edgar Krasa testified that Schächter told the choir they could “sing things to the Nazis that [they] could not say,” drawing their attention to verses of divine judgment from which the persecutors would not escape [2] (pp. 43). Karel Berman later described the performances as a “subversive and militant project... we sang our uprising and gave people the strength to survive” [45] (pp. 236). *Dies irae* thus functions at once as ecstatic terror, protest and ritualized working-through of persecutory anxieties.

### **Cognitive–symbolic: Text, politics and the work of meaning**

On the cognitive–symbolic level [9,35], we attend to the ways in which prior cultural knowledge and interpretive frames inflected the inmates’ encounter with the work; music-cognition research increasingly conceptualizes such meaning-making as guided by culturally learned expectations (“priors”) that organize perception and interpretation [46,47].

From the perspective of the ETC, this is the cognitive–symbolic band, in which musical and verbal elements are integrated into coherent meaning. In Bion’s terms [30], *Alpha-elements* become woven into networks of thought, conviction and memory. In Ogden’s terms [19], we are close to the depressive mode, in which questions of responsibility, mourning and ethical relation to the Other can emerge, however fleetingly, alongside terror and hatred.

### **Libera me: The singular voice within the chorus**

The final section, *Libera me, Domine*—“*Deliver me, O Lord*”—was particularly significant for many survivors. Greta Klingsberg [3] (Appendix A, pp. 247–248), who sang in the *Requiem*’s choir,

recalled: "I was well aware of the meaning of *Libera me* when I sang it, and I meant it with all my heart... it was reality: free us of this horror".

Musically, *Libera me* opens as a personal, imploring prayer sung by the soprano soloist, answered by a hushed choral response. The soprano's line alternates between inward, tremulous phrases and dramatic leaps to high, intense cries, which then fall into charged silences. Later, the *Dies irae* motif returns, recontextualized, before the movement subsides into a quiet, almost fragile repetition of the opening plea: "*Deliver me, O Lord, from eternal death.*" Operatic tradition often reads singing at the moment of death as defiant persistence: the voice continues where the body fails [48]. In *Libera me*, the soprano's solitary plea, held by the chorus, may have echoed Terezín's oscillation between radical aloneness and fragile communal belonging under the shadow of deportation.

Using the ETC as a descriptive vocabulary rather than a prescriptive map, we can hear "*Libera me*" as engaging multiple registers at once: sensory–kinesthetic (breath, vocal strain), perceptual–affective (dynamic contrasts, timbral color, and the shaping of its dramatic arc), and cognitive–symbolic (the explicit plea for deliverance). In Bion's terms [30], the movement can be read as a concentrated enactment of container–contained: the soprano's line gives form to unbearable fear and hope, which the musical structure receives, transforms, and returns as a shareable aesthetic object. Heuristically, one might hear in *Libera me* a momentary shift toward depressive-position capacities—still terrified, yet able to speak, plead, and mourn.

### Discussion: Requiem as Therapeutic Anchor and Transitional Ritual

Discussions of artistic activity in camps have often been framed through the idioms of "spiritual" or "cultural" resistance. We are mindful of cautions against redemptive narratives that can aestheticize suffering [49], alongside accounts that emphasize the persistence of moral life and small acts of agency under terror [50]. Our claim is modest: the *Requiem* did not mitigate the catastrophe, but it may have provided a transient, ritualized form of agency and shared meaning within it.

Testimonies repeatedly frame the *Requiem* performances as an organizing, life-sustaining force. Edna Amit [3] (Appendix A, pp. 257–259) recalled that it "fulfilled" her and "organized our lives". Shmuel Bloch [3] (Appendix A, pp. 260–261) recalled that the act of creation strengthened their spirits. For some participants, the music functioned as a transitional object [18], accompanying them through the long hours of forced labor; Marianka Zadikow-May testified that it "followed" her even after rehearsals ended [2] (pp.42). While empirical studies cannot illuminate this historical case directly, contemporary evidence

syntheses suggest that structured music engagement can support affect regulation and social connectedness in other trauma-exposed populations—mechanisms that render our "anchor" metaphor clinically plausible without implying causality [51].

Within a system designed to annihilate subjectivity, the *Requiem* offered a reliable point of reference: recurring rehearsals and performances with a fixed inner structure, relatively insulated from the day-to-day arbitrariness of Nazi decrees. From a Bionian perspective [30], it can be read as supporting *Alpha-function*—transforming raw fear, rage, and despair into more bearable forms—while, through Ogden's modes [19], it may have enabled movement among autistic-contiguous, paranoid-schizoid, and depressive configurations rather than psychic freezing in any single state. We emphasize that these psychoanalytic constructs are used as heuristic descriptors rather than clinical claims; convergent contemporary group-trauma literatures similarly highlight how structured, time-bounded collective forms can help participants tolerate affect and support meaning-making, albeit in radically different settings [31,32].

As a liminal ritual, the *Requiem* straddled two worlds: forced labor, hunger, deportations and death, and the world of high art, communal ritual, and humanistic ideals. Bedřich Borges (Borges, [52]) reflected that participation in this "apocalyptic vision" elevated not only life but also imminent death, carrying the singing "beyond the lives of the singers". Within this fold, coercion and degradation coexisted with a stubborn reassertion of choice, creativity and spiritual transcendence. Through Verdi's *Requiem*, the Jews of Terezín gave voice to their existence, singing of their own lives and approaching deaths.

### Limitations and future directions

This commentary relies on a necessarily partial and retrospective record of testimonies and archival traces, and our psychoanalytic vocabulary is offered as a heuristic lens rather than a claim of causality or clinical diagnosis. Future work could broaden the testimonial corpus, compare Terezín with other camp and ghetto musical initiatives, and place historical analysis in closer dialogue with contemporary empirical research on collective music-making and trauma.

Reflecting on the potentials of music and the arts in the face of extreme trauma, the Terezín *Requiem* does not redeem or mitigate the horror; it does, however, show how a shared artistic form can become a vessel in which psychic life, meaning, and testimony precariously endure. For clinicians, it offers a historically grounded example of how a shared artistic object may temporarily support containment, mutual recognition, and meaning making when direct narration is impossible.

## Conclusion

The performances of Verdi's *Requiem* in the Terezín ghetto constitute an extreme, and therefore clarifying, instance of what music can be under conditions of radical dehumanization. Through the lenses of Bion, Ogden and the Expressive Therapies Continuum, we have suggested that this piece functioned as a collective container for trauma: organizing bodily experience, refining and crystallizing overwhelming affects, weaving them into symbolic and ethical meanings that could themselves be transformed and carried forward. In this sense, our reading complements the earlier musicological analysis of the Terezín performances, shifting the focus from historical reconstruction and musical structure to the psychic functions of the *Requiem* as a container for collective trauma. For the prisoners, the *Requiem* created a musical "third" in which they could, for the duration of rehearsals and performances, experience themselves as subjects who breathe, feel, think and protest, rather than as anonymous objects of murderous ambitions. In singing of judgment and mercy, life and death, they sang, implicitly, of their own predicament. They also articulated, through sound, gesture and shared ritual, a commitment, however fragile, to remain human and, for those who survived, later to bear witness. In the choral act of many voices breathing and sounding together, the solitary cry of each singer was at once amplified and held, so that radical aloneness could be briefly reconfigured as a fragile experience of shared subjectivity.

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