

Frank Monk

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Frank Monk refused to write about his holocaust experiences, instead he chose to remember two performances of Verdi's Requiem Mass held in Terezin Concentration Camp. The performances were so memorable the commandants promised to keep the choir together.

'The promise was kept. All together the choir ascended the first wagons of the transport that took them to Auschwitz'

For Frank those performances enabled Verdi's great work to become 'a restatement of everything that matters most, the supremacy of art, the immortality of beauty and truth and the divinity in suffering man'.

His wife Rachel practised as a G.P. in New Zealand after retraining in Dunedin. She was much loved by her patients, holding clinics at Turangawaewae for Princess Te Puea and later having a race horse named after her.

Haunting Memories

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The Lachrymose to them was the expression of the endless tears dropped in suffering. The Dies Irae was their realisation that the Days of Anger had descended upon them. They, who did not believe in Hell thereafter, had experienced Hell on earth. The great finale Libera Me was a prayer for deliverance from the days of evil.

A few days later a second performance of the Requiem took place. This time the audience consisted of Eichmann, the camp commander, and the S.S. guards of the camp.

Verdi's Requiem experienced a marvellous transformation. The Lacrymosa became an accusation of guilt for the tears shed needlessly. The Dies Irae was a thunder of threat, telling their jailers that the Days of Wrath were at hand.

Hymn of Liberty

The Libera Me became the hymn of liberty and deliverance which was defiantly thrown into the faces of the jailers. “Li-be-ra nos! Li-be-ra nos!” Three strokes short, one long from the kettle drums in the finale were the signal of liberty.

A few weeks later, the summer drew to its close and the liberation was close at hand. As a reward for the performance the Camp Commander had promised that the choir would be maintained and kept together.

The promise was kept. All together they ascended the first wagons of the transports that took them to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. This is described in a little book by a Czech writer Josef Bor, *The Terezin Requiem*, and is available in an English translation. To me it is the greatest book which has come out of the last war, and will still be a classic when other books are forgotten.

Today it is to be found on the bookshelf of every cultured person in Central and Eastern Europe. In classical and disciplined language it becomes a passionate affirmation of the sanctity of the human spirit and a defiance of those who would debase it.

May all those who listened to Verdi’s Requiem read this book. It will give them a deeper understanding of what the Requiem means today, nearly 100 years after it was composed.

The Terezin performance enables it to become a restatement of everything that matters most; the supremacy of art, the immortality of beauty and truth and the divinity in suffering man.

About the Author

Living quietly in Glen Innes are Frank Monk and his wife Rachel. Neither could be persuaded to write their life story. This couple brought with them from Europe their intense love for, and knowledge of, music. Many New Zealanders have developed a love of opera from attending Monk’s Opera House, as it was called, on Sunday evenings. Video tapes of innumerable operas were shown and authoritatively discussed in their hospitable and book-lined living room. This recollection of Frank’s entitled ‘Haunting Memories’ is published as a tribute to the cultural input of the Monks to the life of Aucklanders. It was first published in the *Auckland Star* many years ago. Rachel is a much loved, and the last surviving Jewish refugee, general practitioner in Auckland. After requalifying in Dunedin she practised, by direction, in Pukemiro, a mining town. Princess Te Puea, unable to establish adequate medical care for her Tainui people, drove to Pukemiro in 1943. That visit resulted in Rachel holding clinics at Turangawaewae. No fee above social security was charged. Those clinics terminated in 1946 when Rachel moved to Auckland. Maori patients have continued to visit her from the Waikato ever since. She is probably the only doctor to have patients name a race horse in her honour. The large newspaper headlines following a race “Dr Monk wins again” highlights the physician more than the horse.