

Anna G. Piotrowska (Jagiellonian University in Kraków)

Music-making as enforced labour in the concentration camp

Preliminary considerations on the example of Auschwitz

The existence of cultural, including musical, life in concentration (extermination and death) camps has already been well-documented and has become a topic of extensive academic research.¹ The qualities of awkwardness and even unsuitability implicit in the concept of enjoying music in camps — in the face of trauma accompanying camp atrocities² — have always been stressed,³ but the scholars interested in that issue have approached it differently by adopting various methodological measures. Some, for example, concentrate on documenting facts (e.g. examining the choice of compositions played in the camps, verifying the names of inmates working as musicians); other focus on the functions that music performed in camps (especially emphasising the role of

¹ See, for example, Jacek LACHENDRO, “Orkiestry w KL Auschwitz” [Orchestras in the KL Auschwitz], *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* 27, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu (2012), 7–148; Ben ARNOLD, “Art Music and the Holocaust” in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 6/4 (1993), 335–349.

² On that topic see, for example, works by such scholars as Lawrence L. Langer, Dominick LaCapra or Dori Laub.

³ Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, the cellist from Auschwitz, said in her 2018 speech given in the German Bundestag: “It is hard to believe, but there was music in Auschwitz”. See: <https://www.bundestag.de/en/documents/textarchive/speech-lasker-wallfisch-542306>, accessed on 17 October 2020.

specific rhythmicity of songs or marches as synchronised with the prisoners' stride, etc.). No research has so far, however, been dedicated to the issue of musicianship in concentration camps as an instance of enforced labour. Hence, in this paper it is argued — on the example of Auschwitz understood as a complex system of camps⁴ but also drawing on other telling examples — that in these particular circumstances the 'official(ized)' music-making can be classified as a specific type of enforced labour.

The issue of the musicianship in camps has not been problematized in this way in the existing scholarship and consequently it has never been categorized and/or discussed with regard to such notions as 'Beruf' or 'space of work', etc. In this paper, the importance of dull and commonplace practicalities is highlighted by underlining the role of the actual space needed for practising music and performing it in public, rehearsing and composing it, not to mention the space required to store instruments and the necessity of organizing the storage place where the instruments could be kept and taken care of (a 'workshop'). These seemingly prosaic aspects of musical life cultivated in the camps visibly attest to the significance of the physical dimension inherent in music-making and thus immediately prompt further considerations of music-making as an example of enforced labour as encountered in concentration camps. The paper argues that by taking into account the spatial-temporal specificity of concentration camps and presenting the multidimensionality of the phenomenon of musical life as encountered there, the current understanding of music-making in camps can be significantly broadened and enhanced.

The paper is based on materials of two types: 1. primary sources that include original documents from the era (eye-witness accounts), and 2. secondary literature predominantly comprising sociological texts that debate the meaning of the concept of 'work'⁵ as well as historical works that reflect on the changes in understanding and defining the spaces of work. Of special value here are original materials, such as diaries and memoirs of former inmates, as they constitute the theoretical backbone of the paper which is based on the so-called

⁴ Orchestras were also present in other concentration camps, e.g. Oranienburg, Sonnenburg, Duerngoy, Hohnstein, Esterwegen, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Buchenwald.

⁵ Different organizations of 'work' affect its various meanings as embedded in a number of structures, and subjected to a specific "connectedness with the spheres of kinship, religion, politics" etc. See: Patrick JOYCE, "Introduction" in *The Historical Meanings of Work*, ed. Patrick Joyce, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

Original-Ton methodology claiming the non-reproducible character of authentic testimonies.⁶ In fact, former inmates who had served as musicians in camps started to recount their own experiences immediately upon release. Already in the late 1940s, the composer Szymon Laks (1901–1983), deported to Auschwitz in July 1942, reflected on the role of music and the position of musicians there.⁷ Some camp survivors also published their memoirs,⁸ while others — notably Aleksander Kulisiewicz (1918–1982) who had spent five years at Sachsenhausen — discussed camp singing practices in scholarly articles and devoted their life to performing and recording camp songs.⁹ Referring to original accounts by the musicians who played or sang in camp musical ensembles may thus not only enable a better insight into their daily routines or shed new light on the musical practices cultivated in the camps, but also reveal to what degree music-making was treated as yet another form of enforced labour.

Musicianship under the Nazi regime

While the boundaries between the enforced and the voluntary (often spontaneous) music-making in camps may seem, in some instances, blurred, the official musical life, as pursued in Auschwitz under the scrutiny of the camp's authorities, certainly needs to be labelled as an example of enforced work. Yet, despite the observation that the Nazi obsession with music can, or even should, be linked with the “deployment of the musical professional”,¹⁰ the status of musicians as enforced workers is rarely discussed in scholarly literature that focuses on enforced labour during World War II.

⁶ See: Harun Maye, Cornelius Reiber, and Nikolaus Wegmann (eds.), *Original/Ton. Zur Mediengeschichte des O-Tons* (Konstanz: UVK, 2007).

⁷ Szymon LAKS, *Musiques d'un autre monde*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1948.

⁸ See, for example: Anita LASKER-WALLFISCH, *Inherit the Truth. A Memoir of Survival and the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2000), or Fania FÉNELON, *The Musicians of Auschwitz* (London: Sphere, 1979) or Emilio JANI, *My Voice Saved Me: Auschwitz 180046* (Milan: Centauro Editrice, 1961). Some accounts, for example, those provided by Fania Fénelon, were already the subject of scholarly revision. See: Susan EISCHEID, *The Truth about Fania Fénelon and the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁹ Barbara MILEWSKI, “Remembering the Concentration Camps. Aleksander Kulisiewicz and His Concerts of Prisoner's Songs in the Federal Republic of Germany”, in *Dislocated Memories: Jews, Music, and Postwar German Culture*, eds. Tina Frühauf and Lily Hirsch (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 141–160.

¹⁰ Leon BOTSTEIN, “Art and the State: The Case of Music”, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 4, (2005), 493.

Moreover, in the research on enforced labour the issue of musicianship is either omitted or treated only marginally (as it is the case with other forms of artistic creativity). Since “the Nazis cultivated and promoted the musician”, the figure of the musician, even in a camp, was often felt to have become the metaphor for “the ideal Nazi subject”,¹¹ obedient and loyal, always willing to sing and play. Music-making in camps was often viewed as a lighter, and less strenuous or physically demanding type of work. Hence in many accounts, diaries, testimonies, etc., it was often mentioned indirectly, rarely if ever presented as ‘proper’ work and regarded rather as a form of survival strategy. This approach, diminishing the work of musicians in camps, can be also associated with various emotions experienced by inmates. Some of them were jealous of the position musicians enjoyed in camps; others were unaware of the actual situation of the musicians and minimized the problems of that professional group. Those original voices are nevertheless of crucial importance, as they often — between the lines — demonstrate the reality of the musicians’ everyday life in concentration camps.

The work of musicians in concentration camps

From an organizational point of view, it was the orchestra, as a certain type of collective structure, that began to be preferred in concentration camps, for example in Auschwitz¹² (although smaller ensembles also existed).¹³ Hence orchestras were established in almost all Auschwitz satellite camps.¹⁴ Furthermore, as attested to by former inmates in their memoirs, those orchestras appeared to be an indispensable element of the camp reality, treated merely as another component of everyday life there.¹⁵ One of the inmates,

¹¹ BOTSTEIN, “Art and the State”, 493.

¹² LACHENDRO, “Orkiestra w KL Auschwitz”, 7–148.

¹³ For example, a jazz combo was active during a short period between September 1944 and January 1945. See: Guido FACKLER, “This music is infernal...: Music in Auschwitz”, at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Klaudia_Kroboth/publication/269874098_Fackler2/links/5498728d0cf2519f5a1de4ad/Fackler2.pdf?origin=publication_list (accessed on 30 March 2018), 5.

¹⁴ Hans-Ludger KREUTZHECK, “Kapellen der Hölle. Die offiziellen Lagerkapellen in Auschwitz und anderen Konzentrationslagern“, *Verein für demokratische Musikkulturen in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 8/17 (1995), 33–44.

¹⁵ Mel MERMELSTEIN, “Kwarantanna w Auschwitz” [Quarantine in Auschwitz], in: *Wspomnienia więźniów obozu KL Auschwitz* [Recollections of Auschwitz Inmates], ed. Jadwiga Metaja, Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1995), 210.

Jerzy Brandhuber, remembered that an orchestra was “a permanent, daily component of life [...]. It plays when you go out to work and when you come back”.¹⁶ More detailed explanations of how those orchestras originated can be found in several other testimonies: the inmates speculated that the camp authorities might have realized how many musicians they had at their disposal¹⁷ and decided to have the orchestras organized.¹⁸ Alternatively, some assumed that the idea to create the very first orchestra originated among the inmates themselves.¹⁹ Apparently, it was Franciszek (Franz) Nierychło (the kapo in the camp’s kitchen), who persuaded four, then nine musicians to practise together. In order to please *Lagerführer* Karl Fritsch, they would perform the tunes from his native Bavaria. In Auschwitz, the first orchestra appeared in December 1940 and held regular rehearsals from January 1941 onwards.²⁰ In 1942, sixteen musicians chosen by Nierychło were transferred to Birkenau to establish another orchestra, this time under the Cieszyn-born conductor Franz Kopka. In 1943, the *Frauenkapelle* was organised in Birkenau. And that project was again supported by the camp authorities, especially by SS-*Oberaufseherin* Maria Mandel, known for her passion for classical music.²¹ In the Monowitz camp, an orchestra of twenty-two players was created under the lead of Stanisław Dondalski, who was later substituted by Bronisław Stasiak.²² In the Jaworzno camp there was no orchestra, but the inmates were allowed to keep instruments. As already mentioned, other ensembles existed besides these orchestras. For example, in Rajsko, the all-female choir *Peony* was established in 1943, often singing for the kapo Heinz Zimmer.²³ Such choirs (*Lagerchöre*)

¹⁶ Shirli GILBERT, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 177.

¹⁷ Guido Fackler writes that “from 1939 more and more prisoners from many countries and social classes began to be deported, and among these there was a higher proportion of professional musicians, artists and intellectuals”. See: Guido FACKLER, “Cultural Behaviour and the Invention of Traditions: Music and Musical Practices in the Early Concentration Camps, 1933–6/7”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2010), 616.

¹⁸ Eckhard JOHN, “Musik und Konzentrationslager. Eine Annäherung”, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1991), 14.

¹⁹ Ewa KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz* [Cultural life in Auschwitz] (Zamość: Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna im. Jana Zamoyskiego, 2006), 89.

²⁰ Gabriele KNAPP, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz. Musikalische Zwangsarbeit und ihre Bewältigung* (Hamburg: von Bockel, 1996), 53.

²¹ Ibidem, 99.

²² Ibidem, 100.

²³ Ibidem, 113.

were preferred by authorities in the early years of the functioning of the camps, i.e. before the WWII.²⁴

Choirs and orchestras were supposed to provide musical entertainment for the SS staff employed in the camp (as well as their families):²⁵ regular concerts were held on Sunday afternoons and even Rudolf Höss, the *Kommandant* of Auschwitz, enjoyed them. During these events — for better visibility and sound — the Auschwitz orchestra would be situated on top of a bunker (provided that the weather was good) to perform a repertoire consisting mainly of light music, e.g. fragments of operettas (by Franz Lehár or Johann Strauss) or dance tunes.²⁶ But the list of work duties of the camp orchestra was much longer, as also other religious holidays were obligatorily embellished with music.²⁷ Furthermore, orchestra had to perform during formal visits paid to the camp by various (e.g. international) committees. On such special occasions, the orchestra was enlarged even more: the number of woodwinds would be doubled, singers added, etc.²⁸

Above all, orchestras served by fulfilling utilitarian purposes on a daily basis: musicians accompanied *Arbeitskommandos* going out to work and greeted them on their return to the barracks. To meet the demands of the authorities, orchestras performed for about two or three hours in the morning, usually presenting German and Czech marches that supposedly provided the energetic beat deemed appropriate for the atmosphere of the camp.²⁹ Inmates hated that marching routine, comparing it to a “damn rhythm of fear”,³⁰ calling it “devil’s sarcasm”, or pure “irony”.³¹ It was, however, quite widely understood that orchestras were there to “facilitate the marching discipline of labour *Kommandos* during the morning”.³² Musicians also had to perform when new transports arrived, as well as during the moments of punishment or during the procedures of

²⁴ FACKLER, “Cultural Behaviour”, 608.

²⁵ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 89.

²⁶ Ibidem, 94.

²⁷ IWONA URBAŃSKA, *Życie kulturalne więźniów w KL Auschwitz w świetle relacji i pamiętników* [The Cultural life in the concentration camp of Auschwitz seen through testimonies and memoirs] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2005), 101.

²⁸ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 94.

²⁹ Ibidem, 93.

³⁰ GILBERT, *Music in the Holocaust*, 84.

³¹ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 93.

³² Ibidem, 89.

selection.³³ According to some inmates, “orchestras played a valuable role in the extermination process”³⁴ and music was used as a tool of torture. For example, it was heard during the retrieval of the escapees³⁵ or even during executions.³⁶ Wiesław Kielar recalled such a situation in detail: “as usual, we were coming back to the accompaniment of the orchestra when I noticed [...] a scaffolding”.³⁷ Music was not only a part and parcel of the sonic experience of the camp life, but often became associated with viewing the massacred and the killed: “the orchestra was playing a march, SS men were giving orders *Augen rechts*”.³⁸

Taking this into consideration, it is difficult to imagine that inmates would voluntarily decide to work as musicians. And yet, it is often underlined — especially in the memoirs of the former inmates — that some camp musicians might have been, and in fact were often considered as opportunists seeking better conditions while imprisoned in the camp. It appeared almost impossible that under the camp circumstances any inmates could be “truly interested in arts with no vested interest”.³⁹ Musicians in Auschwitz were aware that “the existence of our kommando was controversial to our prisoners. Many of them thought we were high-ranking prisoners, and they said we lived in “silken conditions”⁴⁰ — enjoying privileges such as lighter work, better clothes, sometimes increased food rations. That opinion was prevalent in the light of widespread rumours concerning those superior conditions enjoyed by musicians in the camp. But being a member of an orchestra did not excuse prisoners from labour duties. Furthermore, what often escaped the notice of other inmates — who were not musicians themselves — was the fact that the work of musicians in the camp was extremely hard. Their daily routines were adjusted in such a way that they practiced for extremely long hours, which obviously affected their overall health condition. The prolonged hours of rehearsals resulted from

³³ Ibidem, 97.

³⁴ GILBERT, *Music in the Holocaust*, 145.

³⁵ Ibidem, 176.

³⁶ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 89.

³⁷ Wiesław KIELAR, “Edek i Mała” [Edek and Mała], in *Wspomnienia więźniów obozu Auschwitz* [Memoirs of the Auschwitz camp inmates], ed. Jadwiga Mateja, Teresa Świebocka, (Oświęcim: Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum, 1995), 245.

³⁸ Ibidem, 245.

³⁹ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 93.

⁴⁰ Hanna DUNICZ-NIWIŃSKA, *Drogi mojego życia: wspomnienia skrzypaczki z Birkenau* [Paths of my life: recollections of a violinist from Birkenau] (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2013), 84.

the authorities' aspirations to achieve the impression of total perfection in all aspects of the camp life including musical performances. That strive for perfection was evident, for example, in the rehearsals' regime: according to former musician-inmates, their rehearsal hours ranged from twelve to seventeen (!) per day. The conditions of musicians in the camps were additionally determined by the status of their conductor, who usually enjoyed various prerogatives, but sometimes overused his or her position.⁴¹ These supposedly better conditions came with a price: for example, the conductor Stanisław Dondalski beat the musicians, as did Franz Nierychło.⁴² At the same time, the conductor of the *Frauenkapelle*, Sonia Winogradowa, who apparently was a good pianist but a mediocre conductor, did not meet the high expectations of the authorities and the musicians from her orchestra were forced to take on physical chores on top of their musical responsibilities.⁴³ That was not an unprecedented situation, however, as musicians in Monowitz worked physically alongside other inmates in addition to playing in an orchestra.

Sites of music-making in Auschwitz

Orchestras in concentration camps were assigned special places where musicians lived and worked. When the first orchestra appeared in Auschwitz in December 1940, undertaking regular rehearsals from January 1941 onwards,⁴⁴ the musicians were given their own location on the ground floor of the Barrack 24, near the main gate and the kitchen. The room was decorated with portraits of famous composers: Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Joseph Haydn, Antonin Dvořák, Gioachino Rossini and Frédéric Chopin made by the inmate Mieczysław Kościelniak, who also portrayed the Auschwitz orchestra

⁴¹ The advantaged position of the conductor was directly derived from the Nazi ideology as "the Nazis cultivated and promoted the musician, particularly the orchestra conductor, as an aesthetic metaphor for the need for a single spiritual dictator. [...] The cult of the conductor as a spiritual leader was perfectly attuned to the attitude that needed to be cultivated with regard to the Führer himself. [...] But it was not only the star musical performer as cultural symbol and ambassador that interested the Nazis". See: BOTSTEIN, "Art and the State", 493.

⁴² Hubert SZCZEŚNIAK, "Muzykalia w zbiorach Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau" [Musical sources surviving in the collection of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum], *Kwartalnik Młodych Muzykologów UJ* 32/1 (2017), 148.

⁴³ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 99.

⁴⁴ KNAPP, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz*, 53.

itself.⁴⁵ The lockers for instruments and scores were placed in that *Musikstube*. Additional tables were used by the musicians to prepare copies of their own parts of the scores. It was the inmate Henryk Gadowski whose responsibility was to arrange music for different instruments, while Jerzy Sapiński took care of the scores and instruments. Waclaw Kunz and Maksymilian Piłat were in charge of keeping musical instruments in good condition.⁴⁶ The *Musikstube* served also as a place for servicing and repairing instruments, resembling a kind of musical ‘workshop’. Only instrument renovation, rather than manufacturing, was undertaken as the instruments in the camp were either directly brought by inmates or sent by their families on their request. According to the reports kept at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, there were altogether more than 200 different instruments at the disposal of the camp in different phases of its functioning.⁴⁷

Also in Birkenau, the *Frauenorchester* under Alma Rose’s leadership⁴⁸ had their own barrack (number 12) — standing near the barbed wire that divided the camp from the main one.⁴⁹ The barrack was in a good condition and “consisted of something like two rooms, yet without a door between them. In one of them, the band rehearsed. There were stools and score stands, two instrument closets in the corners, and a table where the copyists worked. In the other part, there were three-level bunks to sleep in, where we also ate our meals,

⁴⁵ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 91.

⁴⁶ These instruments were acquired in various ways, for example confiscated from newcomers, or — following Nierychło’s idea — purchased with money taken from inmates. Despite those actions, certain instruments were lacking, while others were disproportionately overrepresented. Additionally, orchestras featured instruments usually not used in that type of ensemble (e.g. mandolins and accordions). The overall sonic effect produced by these orchestras was described as “bizarre”. See: Jessica DUCHEN, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 178.

⁴⁷ SZCZĘŚNIAK, “Muzykalia w zbiorach Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau”, 127. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch remembered exactly that: “the orchestra was based in Block 12, close to the end of the road into the camp, just a few metres from Crematorium I and with an unobstructed view of the ramp. We could see everything: the arrival ceremonies, the selections, the columns of people walking towards the gas chambers, soon to be transformed into smoke”. See: <https://www.bundestag.de/en/documents/textarchive/speech-lasker-wallfisch-542306>, accessed on 17 October 2020.

⁴⁸ See: Richard NEWMAN and Karen KIRTLEY, *Alma Rose: Vienna to Auschwitz* (Portland, OR.: Amadeus Press, 2000). When in charge of the orchestra Rose preferred Jewish players — trying thus to help them survive.

⁴⁹ SZCZĘŚNIAK, “Muzykalia w zbiorach Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau”, 97.

and shelves for bowls, mugs, and food parcels from families. [...]. Another peculiarity was the fact that there was wooden floor in the musical part”.⁵⁰ In Monowitz, barrack number 11 served musical purposes until a new one (4 meters by 4 meters) was erected.⁵¹

The spatial presence of the musical component on the camp map not only marked its topography but also could be interpreted as a visible sign of the orchestra's role in the camp life. Another visual aspect manifesting the status of musicians as workers ‘belonging’ to the camp were their uniforms: musicians were supposed to wear clothes appropriate for their artistic tasks. Hence, when the orchestra led by Nierychło played for SS officers or for the *Kommandant* Höss near his villa, all instrumentalists were dressed up in linen or cotton suits with a red stripe on their backs, wore trousers with a stripe going on a side and a cap hemmed with black fabric.⁵² Similarly, the ladies from the *Frauenorchester* in Birkenau would sport white blouses, dark blue skirts and blue scarfs on their heads.⁵³ Only in Monowitz did the orchestra members wear the same clothes as other inmates, still differentiating their attire distinctively from others by marking it with a fold featuring a lyre.⁵⁴ The obligation to wear such neat clothing can be interpreted as evident (visually noticeable) continuation of the tradition inherited from the nineteenth-century concert halls as if to underline the (supposedly attenuated) position of musical life in the camp.⁵⁵ At the same time, it helped to distinguish and maybe even distance musicians from other inmates. In reality, those elegant clothes were nothing else but a different type of an obligatory uniform that musicians were forced to wear in the workplace: their appearance only emphasised their subordination to the imposed rules.

Music-making in concentration camps as a form of enforced labour

The assumption critical for this paper is that music-making — at least in these specific, institutionalized instances of practicing music in concentration camps

⁵⁰ DUNICZ-NIWIŃSKA, *Drogi mojego życia*, 80–81

⁵¹ KUŹMA, *Życie kulturalne w KL Auschwitz*, 100

⁵² Ibidem, 92.

⁵³ Ibidem, 99.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, 100.

⁵⁵ For more on that topic, see: Anna G. PIOTROWSKA, “On Music in Auschwitz. The Nineteenth Century Tradition of Musical Life” in *Scores of Commemoration*, ed. Béla Rásky and Verena Pawlowsky (Wien: New Academic Press, 2015), 59–71.

— should be treated as a ‘job’ because musicianship received the status of a proper ‘Beruf’ that solidified over the course of the 19th century and was especially celebrated in German speaking circles. While the official music-making in concentration camps (i.e. selecting the repertoire, arranging scores for the instruments available in the camps, as well as rehearsing, performing, composing music, etc.) was directly subjected to the ideology and served its purposes, the literature on the enforced labour during WWII rarely, if ever, mentions artistic activities, let alone music-making. For example, while discussing enforced labour, such authors as Herbert Ulrich or Alexander von Plato concentrate on enforced work in agriculture, industry, or in public enterprises, usually referring to prisoners of war. When describing civilian workers, the authors highlight the country of their origin (e.g. Poland or Soviet Union) without elaborating on the specifics of their professions. Only Edward L. Homze, in his book on *Foreign Labor in Nazi Germany* (first published in 1967) mentions, and only in passing, a captivating case of the so-called foreign workers’ cafes, hinting at the ambiguous position of musicians working there. While these cafes were, above all, supposed to provide entertainment for forced workers, in reality they also attracted many Germans.⁵⁶ For example, in the war-period Berlin, where numerous foreign workers were stationed in *Arbeitslager*, one could find such places frequented by forced workers of foreign origin, e.g. Belgians. The Franco-Belgian club *Le Pont* that operated in Berlin between 1940 and 1945 acted even as sort of a hub for social life for French-speaking enforced workers (attracting also many francophone Germans). Consequently, many of the enforced labourers living in Berlin found the city rather attractive and for some of them the time in Berlin, despite the situation, was “the best time” of their life (as they confessed in their post-war memoirs⁵⁷). But as Sharon M. Harrison rightly points out, although Berlin “initially offered much entertainment, some western Europeans soon tired of it and longed for home. As the war wore on, it is doubtful that foreign workers had the energy or inclination to participate in Berlin’s rich social and cultural offerings, engage in educational programs or play sport, especially as their work hours were extended and the bombing

⁵⁶ Edward L. HOMZE, *Foreign Labor in Nazi Germany*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 287.

⁵⁷ Gerlinda SWILLEN, *Koekoekskind: door de vijand verwekt (1940–1945)* [Cuckoo child conceived by the enemy (1940–1945)] (Antwerp: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2009), 42.

of the city made daily life increasingly difficult”.⁵⁸ What most authors fail to observe is the fact that entertainers, for example musicians who performed in cafes, etc., often had no other choice and were indirectly forced to work there. In that context, it seems justified to classify some instances of music-making (alongside other artistic activities) as yet another type of enforced labour, with the work of musicians in concentration camps being its most acute manifestation.

The uttermost experience of a concentration camp — such as Auschwitz — allows insight into the enforced nature of music-making under the Nazi regime — as unpaid work requiring the physical effort associated with playing any musical instrument and involving long hours dedicated to rehearsals, performances, etc. Orchestras in Auschwitz performed regardless of weather conditions over the passing seasons.⁵⁹ Very low temperatures or heat did not put a halt to any orchestral duties; the musicians were allowed to play inside the buildings only during heavy rains and frosty days, but even then always with wide open windows so that they could be distinctly heard outside by the *Kommandos*⁶⁰ (it was essential since the musical accompaniment was supposed to be loud enough to outshout a variety of other sounds). Harsh physical conditions involved carrying instruments, music stands, etc. As one of the orchestra members recalled: “after the assembly, we carried our instruments to the block, and then we returned for stools and stands. This was the “everyday life” we had to accompany with our music”.⁶¹ Another dimension of the exploitation was psychological pressure — disregarding the circumstances, the musicians were not allowed to show any signs of emotions.⁶²

Although music-making has not been acknowledged as an example of enforced labour in the existing literature, it has already been categorized as such on a more practical basis by former inmates. Documents preserved in the archives of the *International Tracing Service* (ITS) demonstrate that in the

⁵⁸ Sharon M. HARRISON, *Belgian Labour in Nazi Germany: A Social History*, (PhD thesis, The University of Edinburgh 2011), 218.

⁵⁹ Even the stands eventually became rotten under those conditions. See Szymon LAKS, *Gry oświęcimskie*, (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 1998), 93–94.

⁶⁰ The *Frauenorchester* of Birkenau had similar tasks. During rainy days, the ladies performed in the bath building. However, their duties during bad weather were cancelled on the pretext that it was harmful to the instruments.

⁶¹ DUNICZ-NIWIŃSKA, *Drogi mojego życia*, 83.

⁶² URBAŃSKA, *Życie kulturalne więźniów*, 109.

years following WWII several musicians and artists actively sought (through a bottom-up process) some documents that would validate their enforced labourer status (for example, one Polish artist wanted to confirm the coerced nature of his work for the BELI Circus). The ITS archives also hold registration cards of various — Belgian, Italian, Hungarian — musicians, dancers, acrobats, etc. Music-making in Auschwitz was recognized by the camp's musicians as an example of enforced labour in their memoirs, even if they did not use those exact words. For example, the violinist Hanna Dunicz-Niwińska noted that other prisoners “were often shocked [...] they did not know some of us had been forced to join the orchestra. And when anyone wanted to leave the band, even at the price of working aussen, she faced the alternative: the band or the penal company”.⁶³

The Auschwitz-Birkenau experience “continues to cast a disturbing shadow over basic beliefs concerning right and wrong, human rights”⁶⁴ also as a real site of the enforced work of several musicians. This experience reveals how certain cultural concepts and ideas were contested while their limits pushed to the extreme and tested. Among others, the notion of a musician as a “prophesying priest, even a god-like one”⁶⁵ was harshly scrutinized, and the image of an “artist, sitting up in his ivory tower late at night and contemplating the state of this world”⁶⁶ mercilessly mocked at. This paper looks at the music in camps through the perspective of a musician, insisting on the validity of the human aspect of music-making in concentration camps. Hence, the text refers to musicians performing in orchestras (or a choir), rather than addressing the idea of how/when/why music was present in the camp or aptly “instrumentalised”⁶⁷ (e.g. used as

⁶³ DUNICZ-NIWIŃSKA, *Drogi mojego życia*, 84.

⁶⁴ John K. ROTH, “Gray Zones: The Holocaust and the Failure(s) of Ethics”, in *The Holocaust. Voices of Scholars*, ed. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie; Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2009), 31.

⁶⁵ Walter SALMEN, “Social Obligations of the Emancipated Musician in the 19th Century”, in *The Social Status of the Professional Musician from The Middle Ages to the 19th Century*, ed. Walter Salmen (New York: Pendragon Press, 1983), 267.

⁶⁶ Ernst KŘENEK, *Exploring Music* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966), 161.

⁶⁷ On that topic see also: Katarzyna NALIWAJEK-MAZUREK, “The Functions of Music within the Nazi System of Genocide in Occupied Poland”, in *Music and Genocide*, in the series ‘Studies in Social Sciences, Philosophy and History of Ideas’, ed. Wojciech Klimczyk, Agata Świerzowska, Volume 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 54–70.

a propaganda measure⁶⁸ or as an element antagonizing the inmates,⁶⁹ introduced in the attempt to ‘normalize’ the camp life, pushed alternately towards its ridiculing⁷⁰ its banalization, or theatricalization). Music in Auschwitz was performed by real people who had to work hard: they often found themselves thrust into a rigid framework of temporal and spatial rules and forced to play for their lives. As Shirli Gilbert observed, “contrary to our post war assumptions, [...] music was [...] rather a vital and thoroughly appropriate part of the camp enterprise”.⁷¹ Consequently, musicians were treated like cogs in a well-performing machine — vital, and significant for the whole system, parts of an ‘enterprise’ subjected to ideology.

As signalled already in the opening paragraph, this paper focused on the Auschwitz example, while being also a voice in the ongoing discussion concerning totalitarian systems and the commemoration of their victims.⁷² Hence, the suggested perspective can be also applied for researching music-making in other totalitarian systems, e.g. in Soviet gulags, etc. Furthermore, this methodological proposal may be extended to other instances when musicians, or artists are degraded and dehumanized while their work becomes treated as the ultimate product of their enforced labour.

Proofread by Jarosław Szurek

⁶⁸ Krzysztof BILICA, “Muzyka w obozie według Szymona Laksa i innych” [Music in the camp according to Szymon Laks and others], *Muzykalia XI / Judaica* 3, (2011), 6. Available at: http://demusica.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/bilica_muzykalia_11_judaica3.pdf, accessed on 17 October 2020.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, 10.

⁷⁰ Bartosz DĄBROWSKI, “Kategoria groteski w opisach muzyki z obozów koncentracyjnych. Gry oświęcimskie Szymona Laksa” [The category of the grotesque in descriptions of music from concentration camps. Gry oświęcimskie by Szymon Laks], *Narracje o Zagładzie 2* (2016), 224–234. A concentration camp with an orchestra would be sarcastically referred to with a vulgar term: *Konzertlager*. See: Yaacov Lozowick, *Hitler’s Bureaucrats: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil*, trans. Haim Watzman (London: Continuum International Pub. 2010), 41.

⁷¹ GILBERT, *Music in the Holocaust*, 195

⁷² See more on the subject, among others in: Daniela Henke and Tom Vanassche (eds.) *Ko-Erinnerung: Grenzen, Herausforderungen und Perspektiven des neueren Shoah* (Berlin: De Gruyter Verlag, 2020).

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Abstract

The paper proposes a new perspective on researching the already well-documented phenomenon of musical life in Nazi concentration camps. Acknowledging the awkwardness and even unsuitability of musical performances in such places, the author argues that, under camp circumstances, music-making should be defined as a specific type of enforced labour. Hence such concepts as 'enforced labour', 'Beruf' (job) or 'space of work' are introduced while discussing musicianship in concentration camps. Although the paper draws on several examples, it particularly focuses on Auschwitz, understood as a complex system of camps. Seemingly prosaic aspects of musical life present there (prolonged hours of rehearsals, uniforms worn during concerts, etc.) are highlighted in order to rationalise the classification of music-making in concentration camps as yet another example of enforced labour.

Keywords: music in concentration camps, music in Auschwitz, enforced labour, space of work

