Music against Death: *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and Operatic Defiance

YOSSI MAUREY

History

Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung (The Emperor of Atlantis or Death's refusal) occupies a singular place among the musical works composed in Theresienstadt.[1] Written in 1943 by Viktor Ullmann to a libretto by the poet and painter Petr Kien, this one-act opera confronts totalitarian power through allegory, irony, and musical quotation. Although rehearsals were begun in the ghetto, the work was never performed there. Both Ullmann and Kien were deported to Auschwitz in October 1944, and neither lived to see the opera staged. Why rehearsals were halted remains unknown, and the opera's fate stands in striking contrast to works such as Krása's *Brundibár*, which was repeatedly staged in the camp.[2] This asymmetry raises questions not only about political satire, but also about the opera's unsettling engagement with the Austro-Hungarian musical tradition itself—questions that will return with particular force in the opera's final scene. The opera thus survives as one of the

[1] I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who read an earlier version of this article; their thoughtful and incisive comments significantly strengthened the final text. In particular, their suggestions for clarifying arguments and refining the scope were important in shaping the article in its present form.
I benefitted greatly from the input of my colleagues in the Musicology Department of the Hebrew University. Yoel Greenberg provided perceptive and constructive comments on an early draft; Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower) offered exceptionally fine and perceptive readings, which sharpened the conceptual stakes of the argument and brought greater precision to several of its central claims. I owe particular thanks to Nir Cohen-Shalit, whose contribution went far beyond generous collegial assistance and preparing the musical examples. In addition to sharing his copy of the opera's vocal and orchestral scores, he read a draft of the article with exceptional care, drawing my attention to crucial textual, musical, and source-critical issues and offering sustained, rigorous feedback that shaped the argument at several key points.
[2] Laetitia Petit, "L'oeuvre de la mort. À propos de l'opéra *Der Kaiser von Atlantis. Die Tod-Verweigerung* écrit à Theresienstadt," *Études théâtrales, Centre d'études théâtrales, Université catholique de Louvain* 76–77 (2025): 123–31, at 127, 131. Conceived as a children's opera with a reassuring resolution, Brundibár fulfilled a markedly different cultural, educational, and psychological function within the ghetto. The contrast invoked here is therefore not generic or aesthetic, but situational, underscoring the divergent roles these works played within the camp and the different risks entailed by their musical and symbolic languages.

most complex musical responses to life under Nazi persecution, articulating its critique not only through dramatic narrative but also through a densely layered musical language that engages and subverts the Austro-German tradition from which it draws.[3]

In December 1941, the fortress town of Terezín in northern Bohemia was emptied of its Czech population and transformed into a settlement into which Jews from Moravia, Bohemia and Austria were transported. Located about 60 km northwest of Prague, the fortress town of Terezín, known in German as Theresienstadt, was assigned a special role by the Nazis, who transformed it into a ghetto and transit camp. As part of Nazi propaganda aimed to counter reports of persecution of Jews, Theresienstadt was established as a model ghetto. Although the ghetto was not originally intended as a destination place for Jewish artists—its population included men and women from all walks of life—it became, by August 1942, home to numerous musicians and actors, following the mass deportation there of the majority of Czech Jews. The artists were allowed to compose music, paint, stage theatrical productions, and more, with the Nazis generally showing little genuine interest in the ghetto's cultural life and exploiting the arts for propaganda purposes only when it suited their needs. In relation to music in particular, playing an instrument was, on the one hand, "a sign of belonging to the Central European educated bourgeoisie," yet, on the other, the ghetto was a place of pretense—ironically described as "probably the freest town in Europe in respect to culture."[4] There were nominal authorities and offices, the purpose of which was merely to keep up the appearances of an autonomous "forced community."[5] However, the camp was, in essence, a transit ghetto like many others, where thousands struggled to survive under inhumane conditions and where death from hunger, disease, and exhaustion was widespread. Between November 1941 and October 1944, about 143,000 Jews (including those, like Ullmann, who were considered to be Jews according to the Nuremberg Laws of 1935) were forced into moving to the camp. About 34,000 of them, mostly elderly, died in the camp itself, while more than 87,000 people were later sent to the death camps, mainly to Auschwitz; about 4,000 of them survived.[6]

It is within this setting—simultaneously a site of cultural performance and a machinery of destruction—that the meaning of artistic creation becomes

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[3] Throughout this article, my discussion of the music is informed by the following edition: Henning Brauel, ed., *Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung, Op. 49b* (Mainz: Ernst Eulenburg & Co. GmbH, 2015).

[4] Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 169–74, 53; Zdenek Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 1st American ed. (New York: Fertig, 1983), 125.

[5] I borrow the term from Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*.

[6] Ibid., 7, 9; Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 247–51.

especially urgent. How can a work composed within Theresienstadt mobilize theatrical play not as an escape from reality, but as a mode of confronting it, while still offering its audience a meaningful and transformative experience? To address this question, I examine how Ullmann and Kien—both emerging from assimilated Bohemian-Jewish milieus, though at different stages of their artistic lives—construct a soundscape that subverts traditional musical idioms while engaging directly with the existential and ideational tensions generated by their environment.

Viktor Ullmann arrived at Theresienstadt in 1942, about a year after marrying Elizabeth, his third wife. Whether he sensed that his time was running out or was simply compelled by artistic necessity, his two years in the camp became the most intensely productive period of his life.[7] Written in 1943, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* was composed at a time when the Nazis relaxed certain cultural restrictions in the ghetto, allowing, encouraging, and even ordering prisoners to perform, write, and rehearse new works in order to maintain the illusion of a "model ghetto."[8] This temporary leniency permitted rehearsals for the opera to begin in 1944, but as deportations to Auschwitz escalated, performances ceased, and the opera was never staged during Ullmann's lifetime, premiering almost thirty years later in Amsterdam.[9]

Ullmann was born in 1898 in Teschen, a town in Austrian Silesia that was divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia after World War I. He studied with Arnold Schoenberg in Vienna in 1918, though only for a year. Recognizing his talent, Schoenberg recommended him for a position under his brother-in-law Alexander Zemlinsky. From 1920 to 1927, Ullmann worked as a conductor at Prague's New German Theater, frequently substituting for Zemlinsky. Appointed Kapellmeister in a small town in northern Bohemia in 1927, he saw his career take a tragic turn with the rise of Nazism.[10] Following Hitler's rise to

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[7] For a comprehensive list of works, see Hans-Günter Klein, *Viktor Ullmann, Materialien*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed., Verdrängte Musik (Hamburg: Von Bockel, 1995), 17–63. According to some, "a full half of [Ullmann's] compositions date from the two years in the camp." See Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "'Death, Where Is Thy Sting? ' The Emperor of Atlantis," *The Opera Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2000): 224–39, at 226.

[8] A telling example is the last performance of Verdi's Requiem in the camp, held on June 23, 1944, which was staged at Nazi command and attended by a Red Cross delegation together with SS leaders, including Adolf Eichmann. See Zvi Semel, "'Deliver Me, O Lord, from Eternal Death on that Fearful Day . . .' : Verdi's Requiem at the Terezín Ghetto," in *Theresienstadt: Film Fragments and Testimonies: Historiography and Sociological Analyses*, ed. Lara Pellner, Hans-Georg Soeffner, and Marija Stanisavljević (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2024), 155–74, at 158.

[9] Max Bloch, "Viktor Ullmann: A Brief Biography and Appreciation," *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 3, no. 2 (1979): 151–78, at 168.

[10] Hans-Günter Klein, "Viktor Ullmann," in *Musik in Theresienstadt. Die Komponisten Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, Hans Krasa, Viktor Ullmann, Erwin Schulhoff und ihre Werke. Die*

power in 1933, Ullmann moved permanently to Prague, which soon became his final artistic refuge. On March 15, 1939, Hitler's army marched into Prague, and by June 1939, all Jews in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were forced to wear the yellow Star of David with the word "Jude" emblazoned on their clothing. Soon after, Jewish property was confiscated,[11] and by the end of 1941, Jews were prohibited from owning musical instruments, attending concerts, or participating in theater. In 1942, all Jewish education was banned. Forced out of public spaces, Jewish cultural life retreated into the shadows, surviving through private performances held in apartments and Jewish institutions.[12] This marginalization was underwritten by a broader ideological investment in German musical heritage, reinforced by projects such as the biographical series *Die grossen Meister der Musik*, edited by Ernst Bücken, which by 1938 explicitly promoted racial research as a core objective of German musicology. Within this framework, composers such as J. S. Bach were elevated as embodiments of an imagined unity between music, faith, and the German *Volk*. At the same time, Nazi cultural policy sought to segregate Jewish musical activity through institutions such as the Jewish Cultural League (Jüdischer Kulturbund), which permitted Jewish musicians to perform only what was defined as "their own" music, while excluding them from the core German canon.

In the words of Maria Euchner, Ullmann "had three strikes against him: he was Jewish by birth, an avant-garde composer—therefore creating what the National Socialists deemed 'degenerate' music—and he was an anthroposophist."[13] These factors sealed his fate. Despite the grim reality of Theresienstadt, Ullmann did not treat composition as an escape, but as a sustained engagement with the conditions of his confinement. In this historically specific sense, the "resistance" at stake here did not necessarily entail overt political opposition; rather, it names the preservation of human dignity, cultural identity, and critical thought within an environment designed to erase them.[14] Such creativity could be profoundly sustaining for the ghetto's

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Referate des Kolloquiums in Dresden am 4. Mai 1991 und ergänzende Studien., ed. Heidi Tamar Hoffmann and Hans-Günter Klein (Berlin: Musical Reanimata, 1991), 60–72, at 60.

[11] Jože Karas, *Music in Terezín, 1941–1945* (New York: Beaufort Books Publishers, 1985), 3.

[12] One such event in 1940 was entirely dedicated to Ullmann's compositions, showcasing both well-known pieces and new repertoire. See ibid.

[13] Maria Euchner, "Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod-Verweigerung: Opera as Political Defiance," in *Edinburgh German Yearbook 13: Music in German Politics/Politics in German Music*, ed. Siobhán Donovan and Maria Euchner (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2022), 91–114, at 93.

[14] One well-documented example of musical resistance in Terezín was the performance of Verdi's Requiem. Conductor Rafael Schächter urged the performers to view the work not merely as music but as a symbolic act of struggle—an assertion of human dignity and moral opposition in the face of violence and death. In his interpretation, the performance itself became

population, offering moments of autonomy and shared meaning, even as it took place within cultural frameworks permitted—and at times exploited—by Nazi propaganda.[15] The opera thus stands at this intersection of sustenance and subversion, where the very act of creation both accommodated and subtly contested the conditions of totalitarian rule.

This article approaches *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* as a paradox: an opera that stages the suspension of death at the very site of industrialized death. Situating the opera within the framework of Nazi propaganda and cultural control in Theresienstadt, I analyze Ullmann and Kien's strategies of quotation, irony, and theatrical allusion. Drawing on composers such as Brahms and Mahler alongside a Lutheran chorale, Jewish cabaret idioms, and Brechtian techniques, Ullmann transforms elements of the Austro-German musical tradition into a medium that both inhabits and resists its historical moment. I argue that the opera constructs a theatrical world organized around three interlocking axes—death, time, and mirroring—through which authority and mortality confront their own distorted images. Its fractured temporality, oscillating between suspension, repetition, and arrested time, becomes a central device for interrogating catastrophe. The opera thus speaks simultaneously to the inhabitants of the ghetto and to future listeners: it is not only testimony but a reflective structure in which multiple temporal layers meet. Music, by virtue of its temporal nature, renders audible this tension between motion and stillness. Within this framework, death itself becomes double-edged: both the instrument of imperial power and the force that escapes it, a mirror in which domination encounters its own limits.

Time

> Der tiefste Schmerz kann zu Musik nicht werden[16]

As Andrew Porter notes, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* is "an elusive, death-welcoming parable about a mad, murderous ruler" set in the fictional land of

a vehicle for expressing what could not be spoken openly under Nazi rule. See Semel, "Deliver Me, O Lord," 165–66.

[15] See the nuanced approach to "spiritual resistance" in Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 174–77. Shirli Gilbert cautions against romanticizing music in the ghettos and camps as a straightforward symbol of "heroic resistance," arguing that such narratives risk oversimplifying and decontextualizing its role. While music sometimes served as an act of defiance, it was only one small part of camp or ghetto life, offering victims fleeting moments of diversion, emotional expression, and meaning-making amid constant fear, hunger, and violence. See Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16–18.

[16] "The deepest pain can not be turned into music," from the opening of poem 18 of Ullmann's *Der fremde Passagier: Ein Tagebuch in Versen*, Eng. trans. by Sonja Lyndon, https://viktorullmannfoundation.com/poems/ (accessed February 8, 2026).

Atlantis, where the characters repeatedly allude to events that tragically shaped the real lives of its creators. The ruler "says farewell to the world in a mock-Faustian vision of a natural paradise no longer spoiled by men; had his dream come true, all men would be dead."[17] Scored for seven singers and fourteen musicians playing on a variety of instruments, including tenor banjo, alto saxophone, clarinet, and also a harpsichord, the opera begins with a spoken prologue heard through a loudspeaker. Prior to the introduction of any characters, the work foregrounds its own generic status, opening with the explicit declaration to the audience that it is "a kind of opera in four scenes."[18] In essence, the libretto tells the story of the tyrannical Emperor Überall, who rules the corrupt empire of Atlantis. When the Emperor orders personified Death to accompany his troops into battle for his own glorification, Death refuses to comply and withdraws from his appointed role. As a result, the mortally wounded are no longer able to die, producing a grotesque suspension of the natural order. The drama unfolds around this breakdown of meaning and function, which can be resolved only when the Emperor ultimately submits to Death and becomes his first victim.

Laetitia Petit's insightful reading of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* makes clear that Ullmann and Kien's opera is inseparable from the linguistic and bureaucratic apparatus of Theresienstadt: a world governed by a constellation of lexical, syntactic, and acoustic cues, where the mechanized soundscape and administrative language of the camp supplant human speech. Her analysis of the opera's "langue totalitaire" makes clear how the regime's bureaucratic idiom became both the instrument and the emblem of annihilation—an insight that underlies the evocation of that world's linguistic texture.[19] The loudspeaker, the drum, the trumpet fanfares, and the rigid exchanges of orders and reports all reproduce the rhythm of command that organized life in the camp. And yet Ullmann and Kien turn it inside out: the very language that silenced individuality becomes, on stage, a material of critique. The opera's world is permeated by

> a language that no longer names but counts, in which man is nothing more than the "calculating machine of God"; a toneless language that speaks only in decrees (drum). The effect of the discourse of technology, of the refrain of numbers and machines, is that this language, which no longer speaks, makes the subject disappear.[20]

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[17] Andrew Porter, "A Lecture and a Parable," *The New Yorker*, June 6, 1977, 108–12, at 111.
[18] "Hallo, hallo! Sie hören jetzt: Der Kaiser von Atlantis . . . eine Art Oper in vier Bildern."
[19] Petit, "L'oeuvre de la mort," 130.
[20] ". . . une langue qui ne nomme plus mais qui compte, où l'homme n'est plus rien d'autre que la 'machine à calculer de Dieu,' une langue sans timbre, qui ne parle que par décrets (tambour) . . . cette langue qui ne parle plus fait disparaître le sujet." See ibid., 131.

The opera is not simply set in Theresienstadt; it is written in its language, adopting its mechanical idioms only to turn them against themselves. The blaring loudspeaker that opens the work—an anonymous voice issuing orders to an unspecified population—thus stands as both symptom and satire of the totalitarian voice: impersonal, omnipresent, and fatally efficient, yet in Ullmann's hands made to resonate with absurdity, exposing the violence of its own grammar.[21]

Having transformed the bureaucratic idiom of Theresienstadt into a musical one, Ullmann and Kien extend this strategy to space itself: the indeterminacy of setting functions as another form of resistance to totalitarian definition. The opera explicitly refuses spatial and temporal specificity; the Loudspeaker announces that the opening scene "takes place somewhere/anywhere" ("spielt irgendwo"). This refusal is all the more striking when set against the operatic repertoire that dominated musical life in the camp, which consisted largely of familiar canonical works—above all comic operas such as Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, alongside occasional performances of Verdi and Puccini.[22] By contrast, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* withdraws from identifiable locations, historical markers, and conventional narrative realism, situating its allegory in a deliberately unmoored theatrical space that resists both documentary reference and escapist illusion. In doing so, the opera distances itself from the consolatory functions often associated with the camp's musical culture and instead constructs a world in which power, death, and language operate according to distorted yet intelligible rules, a Brechtian logic examined further below.

The opera's opening musical gesture is a direct reference to the death motif from Josef Suk's Symphony No. 2, Op. 27—a quotation that would have been instantly recognizable to many of Theresienstadt's Czech inmates (see Example 1).[23] Completed in 1906, the symphony, named "Asrael," was originally conceived as a tribute to Suk's teacher, Antonín Dvořák, who passed away in 1904. However, tragedy struck again in 1905, when Suk's wife—Dvořák's daughter—died unexpectedly. In response, Suk expanded the work's scope, rededicating it to the memory of both his wife and her father. The symphony's title, "Asrael," is fitting: according to some Islamic and Jewish traditions, Asrael is the angel of death, responsible for escorting souls from the body to the afterlife. The death motif appears throughout the symphony in various transformations, reinforcing its somber character.[24] Structurally, it is

[21] Ibid., 130–32.
[22] Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 29.
[23] Ibid., 33.
[24] The motif first appears in m. 46 of the opening movement, culminating in mm. 358–60.

constructed from two tritones—intervals once deemed perilous, even diabolic, and requiring contrapuntal ingenuity to avoid—the first ascending and the second descending, separated by a major second.

(a)



(b)



(c)



Example 1. The "Death" motif. (a) Suk, *"Asrael" Symphony*, fifth movement, rehearsal no. 1. (b) Ullmann, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, prologue. (c) The Loudspeaker's "hook" line, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, scene 2.

The motif's inherent instability, rooted in the tension of the dissonant tritone, encapsulates the work's central preoccupation with loss and mourning, lending its appearance in the opera an especially poignant resonance. Notably, Ullmann transforms Suk's death motif into a fanfare-like gesture, played by a trumpet and followed by a drum. This stark instrumentation likely evoked the military fanfares frequently heard in Theresienstadt—whether during the visits of high-ranking Nazi commanders or blaring from loudspeakers that summoned prisoners to their daily labor. Throughout the opera, the death motif is inextricably linked to the chilling refrain "Hallo, hallo," broadcast over the loudspeaker—as if death itself is being announced. In a "city" built on illusion and deception, even a simple greeting carries an ominous falsehood. From the very first notes, the opera's opening statement serves as both a warning and a premonition, heralding the inescapable fate that awaits.

The prologue introduces the opera's emblematic figures: Emperor Überall of Atlantis, the Drummer, who functions as an agent of mediation within the drama, Death, depicted as a weary retired soldier, and Harlequin, a *commedia dell'arte* figure representing Life and associated with vitality and play. From the outset, as we have seen above, the audience is placed in an indeterminate setting. Harlequin's opening lament, in which he reflects on the loss of laughter among the living, establishes a mood of existential fatigue. As the opera progresses, this suspension of time and space becomes even more apparent. In the course of the first scene, Death and Harlequin engage in conversation, reinforcing the sense of temporal dislocation: "D'you know what day it is today?" to which Harlequin responds: "I once changed my days just like my shirts, now I see no point in changing, but give me back nice clean laundry and I just might reconsider. Is it Tuesday? Wednesday? Friday? Each day's like another" ("Was haben wir heut für einen Tag?" "Ich wechsle die Tage nicht mehr täglich, seit ich's mit dem Hemd nicht tun kann, und nehme nur einen neuen, wenn ich frische Wäsche anziehe. Vielleicht Dienstag? Mittwoch? Freitag? Einer wie der andre."). Their dialogue underscores the opera's detachment from linear time, where the very markers of past, present, and future dissolve. Thus, from the very beginning, the opera ruptures both spatial and temporal dimensions. It simultaneously announces the end—through the death motif—and marks a new beginning, shifting from absolute time to musical time.[25] The opera unfolds in a deliberately ambiguous setting: neither anchored in a specific place nor fully detached from historical reality. While its allegorical framework imparts a sense of timelessness, the allusions to the contemporary world under German occupation are unmistakable. This is especially evident near the end of the first scene, in the Drummer's aria (sung by a mezzo-soprano).

After the perfunctory "Hallo, hallo" motif—first stated by the trumpet and then taken up by the Drummer—the aria praises the Emperor to the melody of the *Deutschlandlied*, recast in a minor key with Phrygian inflections and further distorted by chromatic coloring.[26] Equally striking is the middle section of the

[25] By "absolute time" I mean a linear succession of moments in which music unfolds. My terminology follows the extensive exploration of time in Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988).

[26] As is well known, the melody of the *Deutschlandlied* has its origins in "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser," the so-called "Kaiserhymne" composed by Joseph Haydn in 1797 to a text by Lorenz Leopold Haschka. During the Nazi period, only the first stanza of the *Deutschlandlied* was used, followed by the Horst-Wessel-Lied. I am grateful to Nir Cohen-Shalit for drawing my attention to the fact that in Ullmann's manuscript this version of the aria is crossed out and replaced by an alternative musical setting that omits the *Deutschlandlied*. As Cohen-Shalit points out (personal communication), nearly all performances reject it in favor of the earlier

aria set to the words "Imperial Duke in the lands of Ophir, High Priest of Astarte" ("regierender Herzog von Ophir und wirklicher Truchseß der Astarte"), which corresponds to part B of the *Deutschlandlied* melody. Here, the line acquires a distinctly Mahlerian hue: short fanfare-like figures in the clarinet and then the trumpet evoke a musical world characteristic of Mahler, whose works, as is well known, were banned under the Nazi regime. The timbral coloring is equally telling, for the prominent clarinet writing cannot help but allude to sonorities linked with jazz and klezmer, styles that the Nazis vilified as "degenerate."[27] The result is a deliberate collision of references: a distorted national symbol, a proscribed musical past, and timbres coded as "Other" in the cultural politics of the Third Reich—all coalescing to heighten the grotesque character of the scene. This subversive quotation of the German national anthem leads directly into a proclamation calling for a war of all against all ("aller gegen alle"), in which no one is meant to survive.

The opera's reliance on allegory is inseparable from its reconfiguration of character and development in ways that belong to the broader field of German political "epic" dramaturgy forged in the 1920s—above all in the experiments of Erwin Piscator and, in a different key, in Brecht's subsequent theorization of epic (later "dialectical") theater. Rather than organizing its figures around psychological depth or linear inner transformation, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* presents characters whose primary function is demonstrative: they make visible relations of power, authority, coercion, and collective complicity. In Piscator's practice, epic techniques aimed at the demonstration of complex but changeable socio-economic factors conditioning modern existence; Brecht, while indebted to this terrain, radicalized the anti-Aristotelian critique by insisting that such demonstration should displace identification, fostering critical distance rather than emotional absorption grounded in compassion and fear.[28] Read against this shared horizon, the opera's allegorical figures are not "underdeveloped characters" but legible configurations whose meaning emerges in the relations they stage (and in the musical idioms through which those relations are

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setting, not least because later in the scene distant echoes of the Drummer quote only the *Deutschlandlied* version and not the alternative one.

[27] The significance of the saxophone in the opera's instrumentation is especially evident in the final section of this aria, which is structured as a passacaglia. Here, the saxophone engages in a canon-like imitation of the Drummer by taking up the passacaglia theme, a gesture that reinforces the Drummer's musical and dramaturgical presence.

[28] Herbert Knust, "Piscator and Brecht: Affinity and Alienation," in *Essays on Brecht: Theater and Politics*, ed. Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust, University of North Carolina Studies in Germanic Languages and Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 44–68, at 46–49.

rendered).[29] Within this framework, the relative fixity of most figures in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*—Death, Harlequin, the Loudspeaker, the Drummer—appears less as a dramaturgical limitation than as a deliberate strategy of typification and demonstration. These figures function not primarily as individualized subjects but as nodes of social attitude—a theatrical and musical *Gestus*—in which speech, gesture, and stylistic code (quotation, parody, and topical musical markers) replace inward motivation with outwardly legible social positions.[30] The Emperor's trajectory constitutes a revealing exception, but even this "development" can be understood as instrumental rather than novelistic: it serves to expose the contradiction of sovereignty once death withdraws obedience. If the opera permits change at all, it is not to reintroduce a consoling arc of inward growth, but to lay bare the structural dependence of power on the very forces it claims to command—an exposure that sits naturally within the epic/political theater continuum shaped by Piscator's demonstrative dramaturgy and Brecht's insistence on critique over catharsis.[31]

Besides the musical devices discussed above, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* also abounds with instances where Ullmann uses theatrical idioms that, while perfectly acceptable during the Weimar Republic, became quite an act of subversion during the Third Reich. The prologue of the opera, for example, is highly reminiscent of similar prologues in some of Brecht's plays, mainly *Mother Courage* and *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Brecht, who had fled Berlin in 1933 after the Reichstag fire, himself ridiculed Hitler in his *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and also in his constant reference to him as "the housepainter."[32] In addition, being a dedicated Marxist, Brecht and his entourage were strongly disliked by the anti-Marxist Hitler, and Nazi commentators frequently complained of a "Jewish stench" in the theater.[33] Consequently, satire and Marxism were strongly allied.[34] Against this backdrop, and in light of Goebbels's explicit prohibitions against political reference in theaters, cabarets, and related venues, Ullmann's opera emerges as a

[29] Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theater," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964; reprint, London: Methuen, 1988), 193.
[30] Ibid., 198.
[31] Knust, "Piscator and Brecht," 46–47.
[32] Peter Thomson, "Brecht's Lives," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2–39, at 31.
[33] Aside from a gas bomb thrown by a Nazi sympathizer during the performance of *In the Jungle* in 1929, the production of *Drums in the Night* "led the Nazi party to public protest in the press and a threat of 'war in the theater.'" See Tony Meech, "Brecht's Early Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 43–55, at 53.
[34] Walter Benjamin, for instance, perceived an alliance between Marxism and satire in Brecht's *Threepenny Novel*. See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: NLB, 1973), 84.

particularly charged intervention. Its satire operates in the manner of cabaret: topical, allegorical, and immediately legible to contemporary audiences. The work's effectiveness, therefore, lies not in its public reception or performance history—since it was never staged in the ghetto—but in the precision with which it mobilizes forbidden theatrical languages, rendering its critique intelligible and potentially incendiary within the conditions of censorship under which it was conceived.[35]

Rather than existing in a spatial void, the opera suspends conventional notions of time and place in ways that register both the immediate conditions of its creation and its broader, more universal reach. It simultaneously abolishes time and engages with specific historical and musical moments (with references to Hannibal's elephants, Suk's death motif, and unmasked allusions to dictators such as Hitler), creating a counterpoint of impossibilities. This tension between historical specificity and temporal suspension is central to the opera's structure. On the one hand, it invokes recognizable histories, both musical and political, drawing the audience into a world shaped by real events; on the other, it resists the ephemerality of passing time, existing instead in a liminal state where chronology is meaningless.

A striking example of this contradiction emerges in the second scene, during the exchange between the Loudspeaker and the Emperor, where time is both referenced and destabilized, reinforcing the opera's broader meditation on history, authority, and the collapse of linear progression. Emperor Überall, isolated in his heavily fortified palace, remains oblivious to the full extent of the crisis unfolding outside, relying solely on reports from the Loudspeaker. He learns that an entire city has been wiped out and that even those sentenced to death remain alive, revealing that Death's withdrawal has disrupted the natural order. Struggling to maintain authority, he reinterprets the situation as a triumph, declaring immortality a gift to his people and spreading the message through official propaganda. However, rather than reinforcing his rule, this illusion of control only accelerates his downfall. The scene opens with a seemingly straightforward question: "What time is it?" Yet, in a world where temporal continuity has been disrupted, no simple answer can suffice. The Loudspeaker provides an exact time—5:32—but immediately subverts its meaning by revealing that someone who was hanged at 4:13 is still alive. "Death's bound to arrive any moment" ("Der Tod muß jeden Augenblick eintreten"), the Loudspeaker repeats, to the increasing frustration of the

[35] "Theresienstadt, Theresienstadt, hooray! / Is the most up-to-date ghetto in the world today." This is a refrain from a cabaret sketch called "Theresienstadt Questions." See Roy Kift, "Reality and Illusion in the Theresienstadt Cabaret," in *Staging the Holocaust: The Shoah in Drama and Performance*, ed. Claude Schumacher (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147–68, at 154.

Emperor, who finds himself powerless in a reality where only Death refuses to obey his rule. Desperate to reassert control, he orders a firing squad, only to watch in disbelief as they fail to kill their intended victim, Death. In a final act of irony, he summons a doctor—who, under normal circumstances, would be responsible for preserving life—only to demand that he confirm the inevitability of death. But even the doctor is forced to concede the surreal reversal of natural order: "The soldiers cannot die . . . thousands are wrestling with life at this very moment, doing their best to die" ("Die Soldaten können nicht sterben . . . Tausende ringen mit dem Leben, um sterben zu können").

The inability to die in this opera signals a rupture in conventional temporal duration, a disruption that must have carried especially grim resonance for Viktor Ullmann and Petr Kien. This break is underscored through the scene's insistently repetitive design built around five statements of the same double-tritone motif (G–D♭ and E♭–A): the Loudspeaker intones the motif four times—three to the words "Hallo, hallo," and once to "command dispatched" ("Befehl vollzogen")—while Emperor Überall delivers a single statement to the words "Hello, shoot him to death then" ("Hallo, Tod durch Erschießen"). The effect is further intensified by an inverted and temporally stretched version of the first half of the motif (D–D♭ . . . G), which accompanies the Loudspeaker's line "Death's bound to arrive any moment now" (at rehearsal nos. 5–6). Notably, this is the only scene in the opera that employs such insistent repetition. The repetition creates not balance and symmetry, as it often does, but the illusion of stability that masks a more fundamental disjunction. At the same time, its insistence carries an ominous, unsettling charge: repetition here does not reassure, but disturbs.[36] Paradoxically, the scene that is most emphatically marked—both textually and musically—is also the one that negates one of the most essential conditions of life: the capacity to die. Musical time remains ordered, delimited, and measurable, while lived time is suspended in an unending present. This tension captures something essential about music itself, which is at once governed by strict formal constraints and capable of pointing beyond them.[37]

While musical quotation appears throughout the opera, the closing moments bring these intertextual strategies into unusually close alignment, producing a particularly dense and conspicuous network of references in the Emperor's final aria, "Des Kaisers Abschied," and in the finale. At this last stage, Ullmann explicitly draws on two canonical works of the Austro-German tradition: the third song from Brahms's *Vier ernste Gesänge*, Op. 121, which

[36] I am grateful to Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower) for this observation.
[37] Barbara Barry, *Musical Time: The Sense of Order* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990), 250.

meditates on submission to death, and Mahler's "Der Abschied" from *Das Lied von der Erde*, which functions as a primary poetic and musical point of departure. The somber atmosphere of Mahler's "Abschied" is immediately evoked in Ullmann's setting. The aria opens with an oboe gesture that closely recalls Mahler's own, hovering above low, resonant cello and bass sonorities in a strikingly similar orchestral disposition. This allusion extends beyond orchestration and melodic contour to the textual domain, although the precise direction of influence remains uncertain. While the Emperor's farewell aria is transmitted in two textual versions—an earlier one beginning "Von allem was geschieht" and a later one beginning "Der Krieg ist aus"—only the latter is securely attributable to Kien's libretto.[38] The earlier text, preserved in Ullmann's hand in the autograph score but absent from Kien's manuscript, has been identified as an extended quotation from *Tantalos* (1917), a tragic drama by the Austrian poet Felix Braun, a text Ullmann had already set in his now-lost *Symphonische Phantasie* for tenor and orchestra.[39] Whether the music of the farewell aria likewise derives from that earlier work remains unclear. What is certain, however, is that the aria—particularly in its earlier textual layer—introduces an additional mythological and intertextual dimension that enters into dialogue with the Mahlerian horizon, further thickening the network of references at this climactic moment.

Mahler's "Der Abschied" itself is based on two Chinese poems—the first by Meng Haoran (Mong-Kao-Jen) and the second by Wang Wei—both encountered by Mahler through Hans Bethge's anthology *Die chinesische Flöte* (1907). In Bethge's collection, the original titles explicitly invoke the figure of the "friend": "Erwartung des Freundes" ("Awaiting the Friend") and "Der Abschied des Freundes" ("The Friend's Farewell").[40] In *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, this role is assumed by personified Death, whom the Emperor addresses as a "strange young man" ("Fremder Jüngling"). Both Mahler's setting and Ullmann's opera are rich with imagery of nature, whose cyclical and regenerative force is set against the finitude of human life. The Emperor's words—"There will be rivers flowing and high mountains all around and flowers in full bloom exposed to sun and wind in high pastures" ("Es werden Flüsse kommen und Gebirg wird um mich sein. Auf hohen Wiesen wird in

[38] Two distinct versions of the farewell aria exist. The earlier version, beginning "Von allem was geschieht"—the one discussed in this article—does not appear in Peter Kien's handwritten libretto and is less frequently performed today. Both versions, however, are preserved in Ullmann's hand in the autograph score.

[39] Ingo Schultz, *Viktor Ullmann. Leben und Werk* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008), 214.

[40] Christian Wildhagen, "The 'Greatest' and the 'Most Personal': The Eighth Symphony and *Das Lied von der Erde*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mahler*, ed. Jeremy Barham, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 128–42, at 136.

Sonn' und hartem Wind die Blume blühn")—are particularly revealing in their use of the future tense, suggesting continuity beyond the speaker's own death. This grammatical projection into the future reflects a conception of time in which individual biological existence is bound, yet time itself remains absolute and transcendent.[41]

The Emperor's farewell aria most strongly echoes Mahler's "Abschied" in its imagery and rhetorical posture, particularly in a passage recalling Mahler's lied: "The sun is going down behind the mountains, in every valley evening is descending . . . The flowers grow pale . . ." ("Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge. In alle Täler steigt der Abend nieder . . . Die Blumen blassen im Dämmerschein . . . "). This affinity extends beyond imagery to structural and linguistic features. Both texts shift, near their conclusions, to the third-person singular; both introduce the figure of a horse; and both conclude with a word denoting eternity (*ewig*, *ewigem*).[42] At the philosophical level, too, the convergence is striking, for Mahler's additions to Bethge's translations reinforce not only submission to death but also an affirmation of nature's perpetual renewal: "My heart is quiet and awaits its hour! The dear earth everywhere blooms in spring and grows green again. Everywhere and forever the far horizons are radiant with blue" ("Still ist mein Herz und harret seiner Stunde! Die liebe Erde allüberall blüht auf im Lenz und grünt aufs neu! Allüberall und ewig blauen licht die Fernen!"). Similarly, the farewell aria expresses resignation to death in lines such as "For it's not the other side that we need fear but rather this world that is veiled in darkest shadow" ("denn es ist das Ferne nicht beklagens wert, viel mehr das Nahe das in ewigem Schatten ruht"). Yet, despite the shared musical and poetic vocabulary, the concept of farewell in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* diverges sharply from that of *Das Lied von der Erde*. Mahler's work yields humbly to the natural cycle of life and death, whereas the opera presents a grotesque distortion of that order. Here it is the tyrant who departs life, not as an act of peaceful submission and reconciliation with nature, but as a precondition for restoring death to others. The farewell in *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* does not affirm continuity but functions instead as a grim, ironic reinstatement of biological order, one that exposes, with devastating clarity, the consequences of totalitarian power. Where Mahler's "Abschied" resonates with the twilight of the Austro-Hungarian imperial world,

[41] Some scholars reject the term "absolute time" as being "a contradiction in terms." Thomas Clifton, for example, prefers to define time as a relationship between people and the events they perceive. See Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 51. For a different approach see Kramer, *The Time of Music*, 5–6.

[42] Significantly, the final lines of "Der Abschied," including the emphatic *ewig* and the shift to the third person, are Mahler's own additions, absent from Bethge's translation.

Ullmann's opera reframes the gesture of leave-taking within the shadow of Nazi domination, transforming Mahler's elegy for a passing order into a stark theatrical meditation on the downfall of a murderous regime.[43]

Mirrors

> Die Maske herunter
> Jetzt zeige dich—!
> Du Narre, du bunter—!
> Der Dämon bin Ich![44]

At the conclusion of the Emperor's final aria, the stage directions specify that "Death takes the Emperor gently by the hands and leads him through the mirror," a mirror that has been present in the Emperor's chambers throughout the preceding scenes and that, once uncovered earlier, revealed Death as the Emperor's own reflection before assuming an active presence on stage. Passing through the mirror marks the restoration of order: the dying can finally die, and the living can begin to laugh again. At this moment, temporal duration resumes its natural role in shaping subjective experience, allowing the world to recover its familiar structure. If reality lies beyond the mirror, then the opera itself may be understood as a mirror image of that reality—an inverted reflection shaped by the outer world. In this sense, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis*, like Theresienstadt and the Holocaust more broadly, unfolds as a grotesque mirror-world, set against the ordinary one beyond it. As Beverly Clark suggests, such theatrical counter-worlds offer not merely distortion but a kind of transcendence from the mundane, a means of imaginatively escaping an oppressive reality.[45] This dynamic of inversion and distance also helps explain the work's later reception. The opera's sustained afterlife reflects a continuing effort to engage with the aesthetic and historical legacy of Theresienstadt and of the Holocaust more broadly. Yet *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* has undergone more than a simple revival; in an important sense, it entered the repertoire—and thus cultural consciousness—only decades after its creators were deported to Auschwitz.

After Death leads the Emperor through the mirror, the opera intimates a return to normalcy, made especially palpable in the music of the finale. Here, Ullmann introduces a transformed version of the chorale from Bach's cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80—streamlined in texture and recast in

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[43] I am grateful to Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower) for suggesting this historical framing.
[44] "The mask comes off / Now show yourself—! / You fool, / The demon is me!" From Ullmann's "Der Feind," poem 19 in his *Der fremde Passagier.*
[45] Beverly Lyon Clark, *Reflections of Fantasy: The Mirror-Worlds of Carroll, Nabokov, and Pynchon*, American University Studies Series IV, English Language and Literature (New York: P. Lang, 1986), 9.

triple meter rather than the original duple.[46] Structurally, the finale follows the model of Bach's chorale, employing symmetrical phrasing and traditionally German—more precisely, Lutheran—musical techniques, including a customary four-voice texture and a brief *a cappella* canon (see Example 2).[47] Notably, the longest and most overt musical quotation in the opera occurs at this pivotal moment when order seems to be reestablished. Yet, while Bach's original text proclaims an unshakable faith in God as a mighty fortress and deliverer, Kien's libretto subverts this message entirely.



Example 2. Comparison of the chorale "Ein feste Burg" (upper staves), transposed to F major, with the opera's final chorale (lower staves). Brackets mark non-parallel phrases; corresponding pitches are vertically aligned, resulting in uneven spacing.

The familiar words—well known to Ullmann and likely to many musicians in Theresienstadt—affirm divine protection: "A mighty fortress is our God, A sure defense and armor; He frees us from every ill that now befalls us."[48] In contrast, Kien's rewritten text transforms the chorale into a desperate supplication to Death, not for salvation but for release from suffering: "Come Death and be our honoured guest, our hearts for you are waiting. Free us from life's tormenting test, lead us to rest from all our suffering" ("Komm Tod, du unser werter Gast, in unsers Herzens Kammer. Nimm von uns Lebensleid und Last, führ uns zur Rast nach Schmerz und Jammer"). Rather than celebrating

[46] See the detailed analysis in Mindy Elicia Buckton, "Re-Contextualizing Viktor Ullmann's 'Der Kaiser von Atlantis' within Twentieth-Century German Opera" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 2013), 57–65. Ullmann likewise weaves another Lutheran chorale ("Nun danket alle Gott") into the finale of his seventh and final piano sonata.

[47] The chorale melody also "signified the persistent anti-Semitism in the Christianity of Central Europe." See Philip Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 227.

[48] English translation by Joshua Rifkin. Liner notes to *Johann Sebastian Bach: Cantatas BWV 147 & 80*, Oiseau-Lyre, 417-250-2, 1987, compact disc.

divine triumph over adversity, this final plea resigns itself to the inevitability of death, exposing a grim irony at the heart of the opera. By appropriating Bach's revered Lutheran chorale only to invert its theological intent, Ullmann and Kien turn the finale into a bitter commentary on faith, suffering, and the role of death as the ultimate arbiter of peace. The departure from Luther's chorale is significant: rather than invoking divine intervention or other "worthy" powers, the finale becomes an expression of renunciation—an abandonment of life and a dissolution of hope. This is powerfully reinforced by the act of stepping through the mirror, both serving as metaphors for a return to reality, where the dying can finally die. At last, the rupture between musical time and biological time, which has permeated the opera from the beginning, is resolved; the two temporal dimensions align once more. This resolution not only signifies the inevitable fate of Ullmann and his fellow inmates in Theresienstadt, but also brings the opera itself to its long-deferred conclusion.

Both the penultimate aria and the finale draw extensively on the Austro-German musical tradition. At first glance, this engagement with Germany's cultural heritage might suggest continuity and affirmation, as if invoking a lineage oriented toward permanence and future renewal. The use of a Lutheran chorale, in particular, recalls earlier acts of historical positioning by composers such as Mendelssohn and Berg, for whom quoting Bach functioned as a claim of belonging within a revered tradition.[49] Ullmann's engagement with the German musical past, however, departs sharply from such gestures of affiliation. As Philip Bohlman has observed, the chorale's customary organ accompaniment is replaced by an instrumentation associated with cabaret—harmonium, guitar, banjo, and snare drum—displacing the music from the sphere of ecclesiastical gravity into one marked by irony and stylistic friction.[50]

Read in this light, the Emperor's farewell aria emerges as an integral counterpart to the finale's critique of German musical authority. If the finale exposes the canon through overt irony and stylistic collision, the farewell aria stages a more subtle and troubling deformation from within. Saturated with allusions to Mahler and Brahms, it is arguably the most overtly "German" music in the opera, drawing on a language of metaphysical depth, inwardness, and moral seriousness long associated with musical humanism.[51] The Emperor's

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[49] Schoenberg, Berg and other Second Viennese School composers were often accused of using an atonal language that "undermined the essence of German musical expression, the triad." See Pamela Maxine Potter, *Most German of the Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 19.

[50] Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity*, 227.

[51] Mahler repeatedly resisted identification as a "German" composer, and Ullmann must have been fully aware of this ambivalence, as well as of the broader Habsburg musical world in which Mahler, Brahms, and earlier figures such as Haydn were formed. The irony at work here therefore does not rest on national belonging in a narrow sense, but on the later appropriation

self-sacrifice is thus framed in music that carries the full symbolic weight of that tradition. Yet this apparent transcendence conceals a disturbing logic: his death is not an ethical reckoning but a functional necessity, required to restore death to others. What presents itself as moral elevation is ultimately the Emperor's final assertion of authority. Taken together, the farewell aria and the finale operate as complementary gestures—the former stretching German musical ideals to their most earnest extreme, the latter exposing their deformation through irony and rupture.

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Der Kaiser von Atlantis was never performed in Terezín. Although rehearsals were initiated, they were ultimately discontinued, and the opera remained unstaged during the short lifetimes of Ullmann and Kien. While it is often assumed that the authorities perceived the work as a satirical challenge to totalitarian power, no documentary evidence establishes the precise reason for the interruption or the point at which rehearsals were halted. Whatever the immediate cause, Ullmann's treatment of German musical symbols—most notably his reworking of Bach's chorale in the finale—would have conflicted sharply with Nazi cultural doctrine. Within National Socialist ideology, Bach was elevated as a cornerstone of German musical identity, embodying an imagined unity between Lutheran faith, music, and the *Volk*.[52] By relocating this emblem of cultural authority within a cabaret-inflected musical setting, Ullmann undermines its ideological function without overt denunciation. The opera's irreverent recontextualization of Bach, coupled with its deliberate entanglement of canonical German music with styles branded as degenerate, places it in fundamental tension with the regime's effort to police and purify musical meaning. In this sense, the finale articulates a subversion of Nazi cultural dogma through musical means rather than an explicit political statement.

Before his deportation to Auschwitz, Viktor Ullmann entrusted his musical manuscripts to his fellow inmate Emil Utitz.[53] The textual transmission of *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* remains complex: the libretto survives in four diverging

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of an Austro-Hungarian musical humanist tradition as an emblem of German cultural authority. I am grateful to Ruth HaCohen (Pinczower) for a perceptive comment that significantly sharpened this argument.

[52] Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 215. This was the view advanced by Joseph Müller-Blattau, who, in his *History of German Music* from 1938 (*Geschichte der deutschen Musik*), more or less accepted Germanness in music "as a given set of racial proclivities." See Potter, *Most German of the Arts*, 211.

[53] Viktor Ullmann, Henning Brauel, Andreas Krause, and Sonja Lyndon, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis, oder, Die Tod-Verweigerung: Spiel in einem Akt von Peter Kien, Op. 49 (1943)* (Mainz: Schott, 1993), 10. See also Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 120.

variants, and two versions of the Emperor's penultimate aria are preserved. No definitive performance version is transmitted. While the opera as it survives forms a largely coherent musical and dramatic whole, Ullmann's compositional intentions were inevitably left open-ended by the circumstances of its interruption, leaving certain aspects unresolved rather than conclusively fixed. This incompletion mirrors the opera's logic of distorted reality. Like Theresienstadt itself—simultaneously presented as refuge and revealed as deception—the opera unfolds within a world where illusion and truth cannot be cleanly separated. Yet this incompletion is not merely a historical loss. The opera's afterlife—through recordings, performances, and continued scholarly engagement—echoes one of its central claims: that music can endure even when history is violently cut short. By staging Death's refusal to serve power until its dignity is restored, Ullmann and Kien reclaim death from the machinery that had stripped it of meaning. Through parody, quotation, and the collision of musical languages—from Bach and Brahms to cabaret and Brechtian satire—the opera renders music itself a medium of ethical confrontation. In doing so, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* performs a profound reversal of Nazi ideology.