

IONARTS

Brundibár

by Charles T. Downey | [Monday, May 28, 2007](#)

One of Master Ionarts' earliest operatic memories is a performance he and I attended together a couple years ago (when he was three). Hans Krása's children's opera *Brundibár* was performed by the prisoners, children and adults, of the Terezín ghetto, where the composer was interned. The production we saw was mounted by the Washington National Opera's Opera Camp for Kids, a summer program for talented kids, from 10 to 14 years old. It was especially memorable because the person who created the role of the Cat, Ela Stein Weissberger, spoke about her experience of performing in the opera and surviving the Holocaust. In short, we both loved the opera and the staging. This past Christmas, I gave Master Ionarts a copy of the book adaptation of the opera, with an English text by Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*, and illustrations by Maurice Sendak, which was the basis of the English-language adaptation of the opera we saw.

Master Ionarts and I read the book together a lot, and recently we have been able to revisit the music, in the world premiere recording of the Tony Kushner version, made by Music of Remembrance. That Seattle-based group has made performing music from the



World War II era its specialty, especially music by composers killed in the Holocaust like Hans Krása, who was put to death as soon as he arrived at Auschwitz in 1944. This disc has quickly become Master Ionarts' preferred listening at meal times, and I will probably have to let him keep it in his room eventually. In the production we saw, the cast was entirely composed of children, as it was at Terezín. This recording uses all adult voices, meaning that the performances are all full-voiced and strong as a result, but the loss of the connection with the opera's fragile origins may be greater than what is gained. The only children's voices are the chorus parts, sung by the fine Northwest Boychoir, with a lovely Lullaby, for example, in the final act.

The opera is only 31 minutes long, so it is supplemented on this disc with the Overture for Small Orchestra. It is possible that Krása was planning to use the piece, composed in 1943 to 1944, as an overture to *Brundibár*, although if true, that plan was never realized. The overture is scored for the same forces as the opera, including a large part for piano (Krása was a pianist). It is a nice little piece that would make a good introduction to the opera, for anyone out there thinking about performing *Brundibár*. The disc concludes with Lori Laitman's *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, a cycle of six songs for soprano and clarinet offered here in its world premiere recording. The songs are set to poetry left behind by the children of the Terezín ghetto, preserved with their drawings. These precious documents, reproduced in a famous book from which this song cycle takes its title, are now housed in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum here in Washington. The poems have been set to music many times, and as in most settings, the power of this cycle comes principally from the tragic tone of the words of children forced to understand horrible things.