Friedenstag: a work extolling the union of peoples[1].

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Stefan Zweig came up with the idea of the opera *Friedenstag*, which he outlined in a letter to Strauss following up a meeting between the two at the Salzburg festival in 1934. Strauss was due to conduct at Salzburg in celebration of his 70th birthday, but due to the presence of anti-Nazis such as Toscanini, Strauss was forbidden to conduct by the German government, so he just went to attend in the audience. The basic plot remained the same as outlined in Zweig's letter except for a few minor changes. Strauss and Zweig were occupied with the lead up to the premier of *Die Schweigsame Frau* in June 1935. The opera was banned after two performances, as Hitler himself decided that the partnership of Strauss with the Jew Zweig could not be tolerated. Strauss was devastated, and more ominously he was made to retire from his position as president of the Reichsmusikkammer on grounds of "ill health" in July. Strauss was vulnerable: his "Jewish" connection extended not only to his librettist, but also his family, since his daughter in law and grand children were Jewish. Strauss himself thought that his composing years were over: "*My life-work seems to have come to an end*". However, in the end Strauss worked with Zweig's idea. Zweig persuaded Strauss (reluctantly) to work with his friend, the Aryan Joseph Gregor as official librettist (although Zweig remained involved at a distance).

Strauss complained to Zweig that he found the subject matter hard-going: "*The whole music is after all a bit too everyday – soldiers, war, hunger, medieval heroism, people dying together, - it really does not suit me. I would have liked to a little joy in my work for the last years of my life. Friendestag is too wearisome*." However, Strauss persevered and in the end came up with some of the most original and distinctive musical passages from his late operas. These include the opening chord sequence, with a series of three tritones

[1] Published *Richard Strauss Society Newsletter*. April 2017, London (63): pages 5–8. (This was used as the basis for part of the Wikipedia page on the opera).

descending in major thirds to make a whole-tone scale, perfectly expressing the bleakness of war. Again, he conjured up the feelings of helplessness of the starving population when they approach the commandant with the chords A flat minor and D minor superimposed to generate open dissonance not seen in his music since *Elektra*. Work proceeded quickly: the libretto and music were completed by January 1936, and the orchestration by June. After its completion, he recognised that it was a "*work in which I put the best of myself*". Strauss himself described it as a work "*a work extolling the union of peoples*".

Strauss was by nature not one to get involved in politics. Indeed, in 1914 he had refused to join the war-hysteria and did not sign up to the Manifesto of German Artists in support of the war effort, declaring that "Declarations about war and politics are not fitting for an artist, who must give his attention to his creations and his works". However, in the case of *Friedenstag*, he made an exception. Perhaps out of loyalty to Zweig, or perhaps due to his disgust with the Nazi regime. Certainly, both Zweig and Strauss were united in their common opposition to the growing militarism and anti-Semitism of the Nazis. In the two years after its completion to its first performance in 1938, Strauss put a lot of effort into rehabilitating himself with the regime to ensure that the work would finally be premiered in Germany. Strauss was himself surprised at the acceptance of the opera by the Nazis. He expected it to be taken off the stage at any time: he wrote to a friend: "*I fear that this work in which I put the best of myself will not be performed much longer. Will the cataclysm which we all fear soon break out*?" Musicologist Pamela Potter argues that Zweig and Strauss constructed an opera whose surface aesthetic was acceptable to the Nazis, but had within it a clear pacifist and humanist message. It was an opera dealing with German history (the end of the thirty years war in 1648), with the central character of a commandant who appealed to the Nazi ideal of the loyal and dedicated soldier. "*The message of peace thus shone through the masquerade of a National Socialist work*". Part of the masquerade involved the use of Wagnerian style music. However, there is also a Mahlerian aspect – a march theme in particular is regarded as recalling Mahler 2 (one of Strauss' favourites as a conductor). The German critic Alexander Bersche hailed the work as "the first opera born from the ethos of the National Socialist Spirit,"

and “inescapable reflection of ourselves is the most convincing proof of the artistic merit and human truth of the work, which shows courage and self-sacrifice, fear and denial, for what they are!” Foreign reviewers were able to see more clearly the essentially pacifist and humanitarian nature of the work.

The German and Austrian audiences of the opera I 1938 would mostly have lived through the First World War and its aftermath of poverty, hunger and chaos of the defeated. Some would have fought in the war. Most of them would have had sons, fathers, husbands, relatives and friends who were killed, maimed or suffered from “shell shock”. The pacifist perspective is put into the mouths of the Mayor and townspeople who come to beg the commander to surrender. The townspeople express the hopelessness and desolation of war:

Tell him what war is,
The murderer of my children!
And my children are dead,
And the old folk whimper for food.
In the wreck of our houses
We must go hunting Foul rats to feed us.

The Lord Mayor makes the pacifist argument:

Whom do you hope to defeat?
I’ve seen the enemy, they’re men like us
they’re suffering out there in their
trenches, just as we are.
When they tread they groan like us –
and when they pray, they pray like us to God.

Zweig’s skill as a librettist is shown by his having the soldiers describe the approaching “rabble” of townspeople using the Nazi terminology used to denigrate Jews:

There’s a few grey rats swarming.
Two thousand, three thousand, storming the gate!

From the town!
The enemy? Trouble.
The enemy within. Arm yourselves!
Who wastes powder on rats?

It was standard terminology in Nazi Germany to use the terms “rats” and “enemy within” to refer to Jews. He calls on the audience both to empathise with the historical plight of the townspeople in the light of their own post-1918 experience and the plight of Jewry in contemporary Germany and Austria.

The opera was performed about 100 times in Germany, Austria and Italy and its popularity stemmed from the fact that it allowed people to openly express the preference for peace over war in a politically acceptable and safe way. Performances were only halted after was well under way. Part of the reason the Nazis were willing to allow its performance was no doubt to reinforce the image their propaganda was seeking to promote that Germany did not want war. The premier was just after the Anschluss when Austria was annexed by Germany and a few weeks before the signing of the Munich agreement between Germany, Britain, France and Italy, hailed as “peace in our time” by the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin. Adolf Hitler and many leading Nazi figures attended the opera in June 1939 in Vienna, when plans for the invasion of Poland a few months later would have been well under way.

The opera drew comparisons with *Fidelio* from its first performance. Strauss of course had conducted *Fidelio* many times during his career. In both there is a moment when everything seems about to end in death (Pizzaro, Florestan and Leonora in a stand-off, the commandant is to blow up the citadel), when a sudden intervention from outside resolves the tension (a trumpet in Fidelio heralding the arrival of the minister, a distant canon shot followed by bells ringing in *Friedenstag,* signalling the end of the Thirty years war). However, in *Friedenstag* the unwinding of the tension takes much longer: the commandant refuses to believe that the war is over and takes a lot of persuading that peace is indeed at hand. There then follows a hymn in C major: in *Fidelio* the focus is on the coming of justice, whilst in *Friedenstag* it is on the coming of peace.

Whilst the musical parallels may end there, are there other similarities between the two operas in their political nature?

Beethoven's opera was completed in its final version in 1814 and in Beethoven's time the opera was seen by audiences as being about of the ending of the "tyranny" of Napoleon. However, the young Beethoven had been an admirer of Napoleon for sweeping aside the aristocratic privilege of the *ancienne regime* and bringing a much needed opening up of society to the talented. His attitude may have changed in 1804 when Napoleon was crowned by the Pope as Emperor. However, Beethoven probably never lost his admiration for what Napoleon stood for: on hearing of his death in 1822, Beethoven remarked "*I have already composed the proper music for that catastrophe*." Many of Beethoven's patrons were from the aristocracy and it did not pay to openly support the "Great man" who had been their nemesis. Thus the focus of Fidelio is more on the personal struggle of Leonora to free her husband: in its early drafts, Beethoven used the working title "*Leonore, or The Triumph of Married Love*". Indeed, the imprisonment might be seen as spiritual: evil imprisons us and human endeavour frees us. This was Furtwangler's view expressed at Salzburg in 1948: "*Fidelio has more of the Mass than of the Opera to it; the sentiments it expresses come from the sphere of the sacred, and preach a 'religion of humanity' which we never found so beautiful or necessary as we do today, after all we have lived through*". Thus, in Fidelio, whether we see Pizarro as Napoleonic revolutionary or aristocratic reactionary does not matter.

In contrast, *Friedenstag* was written under a totalitarian regime. It called for peace in a country heading for war, waiting for "*the cataclysm which we all fear*". It was premiered 4 months before *Kristallnacht* on 9-10 November 1938**.** On November 15th, Strauss rushed back from Italy to Garmisch because Pauline had telegraphed him to return because daughter-in-law Alice was under house arrest. Strauss managed to obtain her release, but from then on the position of Alice and grandchildren Christian and Richard became perilous. In December 1941, Strauss moved to Vienna, where the Nazi governor was an admirer of Strauss and offered some protection. Strauss was to experience at close quarters what was happening to Alice's family. In 1942, Strauss became

involved in the attempts of his son France to get Jewish relatives out to Switzerland, including an ill-fated visit to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt (the greeting "I am the composer Richard Strauss" did not impress the guards who sent him packing). In all, 26 relatives of Alice died in the holocaust. Franz and Alice were put under house arrest in Vienna in 1943 and until the end of the war the position of Alice and her children was never without fear. Zweig's books had been banned and burned soon after the Nazis came to power and he spent most of his time in London. On the verge of becoming a permanent resident, with the outbreak of war he suddenly became an enemy alien and had to give up his dream of living in Britain. He moved to the US and then Brazil. Depressed by the growth of intolerance, authoritarianism, and Nazism, feeling hopeless for the future for humanity, he committed suicide with his wife on February 23, 1942.

When Zweig and Strauss had first conceived *Friedenstag* in 1934, the extent of the terrors that lay ahead could not have been anticipated. Thus the opera conceived of war in terms they understood from their experience of the previous world war. Zweig well understood the anti-Semitism of the Nazis, whose rise to power in Germany he had been watching closely from Salzburg. However, the reality was to be far worse than could have been conceived of in 1934.

Friendenstag was written as a direct critique of the Nazi world-view, yet was also on the surface acceptable to the regime. We are used to interpreting Shostakovich's orchestral music written at the same time as being subversive. However, with *Friedenstag* the subversion is even more amazing, since it is done with words. Words have meanings that it is harder to hide. It is perhaps a monument to Zweig's clear understanding of the Nazi mind-set that enabled him to achieve this so successfully. After the war, *Friedenstag* has become one the least performed of the Strauss opera's. The universal message of peace has been lost and its political context forgotten. Perhaps it is time for a new look at the opera, to think of it more as a creation of two great minds reacting to their times who shared a vision of art and humanity triumphing over war and destruction. When we listen to it, we should recall the terrifying backdrop of world-events and personal misfortunes - "*the cataclysm which we all fear*" - that was beginning to unfold.