

ENTERTAINMENT

FROM ATROCITY, BEAUTY

Chicago string trio to bring Holocaust victims' compositions to life, complemented by visual art from local painter Kevin Lahvic

BY ERICA THOMPSON,
STAFF REPORTER
ethompson@suntimes.com
@Miss_EThompson

In June 1944, representatives from the Red Cross visited the Theresienstadt ghetto and concentration camp in Terezín, a town in what's now the Czech Republic.

They saw an idyllic environment full of impressive gardens, parks and cultural events.

But it was all a hoax staged by Nazi authorities.

In reality, the Jewish residents were living in horrific conditions, dying of disease and starvation, or being deported to extermination camps.

Among them was Czech composer Hans Krása, whose work will be performed by the Chicago-based Black Oak Ensemble on Wednesday at the Gorton Center in Lake Forest and Sunday at Artifact Events in Ravenswood. Krása is just one of several Jewish composers of the era who are featured on the group's latest CD, "Silenced Voices."

"What's amazing to me is that composing and making music and art was still a priority to them," said violist Aurélien Fort Pederzoli, who performs in the trio with violinist Desirée Ruhstrat and cellist David Cunliffe.

"If I have a bad day, I don't practice. I can't fathom being in a life or death situation where I'm starved, cold, possibly sick, sleep-deprived — where I see my brethren beaten to death in front of me — and still think, 'I should compose something.'"

The Black Oak Ensemble will also play music from French composers during the program, which is presented by Rendezvous Arts. The nonprofit was formed by former Lake Forest Symphony musicians after the orchestra disbanded for financial reasons in 2020. Like all Rendezvous Arts chamber music events, the upcoming show will be complemented by artwork displayed behind the musicians.

BLACK OAK ENSEMBLE AND KEVIN LAHVIC

- 7 p.m. Friday, Gorton Center, 400 E. Illinois Road, Lake Forest, \$36.75 (\$15 for students)

- 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Artifact Events, 4325 N. Ravenswood Ave., \$30

- rendezvousarts.org

The featured artist is painter Kevin Lahvic, known for infusing humor and uplifting themes into his often brightly colored work. The combination of his art with the music from the Holocaust may make for an interesting juxtaposition, but the pairing works, Cunliffe said.

"You can hear the angst and depression [in the music], but at the same time, you do hear joyous moments," he added.

The Black Oak Ensemble was inspired to record "Silenced Voices" after Ruhstrat and Cunliffe discovered some of the works in a shop in Budapest. They learned the composers were imprisoned during the Holocaust and worked with foundations to find similar pieces.

Eventually, they were able to



The Black Oak Ensemble — cellist David Cunliffe (from left), violinist Desirée Ruhstrat and violist Aurélien Fort Pederzoli — will perform selections from Jewish composers who died during the Holocaust at concerts presented by Rendezvous Arts. AYAKA SANO



Kevin Lahvic's colorful artwork, which he says is known for "uplifting themes and humorous takes on the human condition," will be featured at a concert by the Black Oak Ensemble. Pictured: "Crusaders of Love," mixed media on canvas.

PROVIDED

perform Krása's music in Terezín, where he lived (before being killed at Auschwitz), and even befriended the families of some of the composers, who demonstrated tenacity under harrowing circumstances.

For example, while in a concentration camp, Hungarian composer Sándor Kuti made his own paper and ink and composed a solo violin sonata, which he got to his wife via a guard, before he was murdered.

All but one of the composers featured on "Silenced Voices" were killed.

"I think it is incredibly important to give these composers a

voice," Cunliffe said. "Some of their music has been published, some of their music has been recorded, but there's huge amounts that we are still discovering."

Painter Lahvic said he has been listening to the music in preparation for the show, but still wasn't sure what he might create.

"The human condition is basically suffering," said Lahvic, who lives and works in Schaumburg. "But we all search and strive for those moments of joy and happiness. ... I think the best of what we do is to make something beautiful out of tragedy."

Rendezvous Arts Executive

Director and Board President Deb Stevenson said the nonprofit has been able to employ 43 local musicians and 11 artists this season.

"That's a lot of work to create for a lot of musicians and artists, and that feels really amazing," said Stevenson, who lives in Horner Park.

It's especially important following the folding of the Lake Forest Symphony, which transferred \$1 million to Rendezvous Arts via the Lake Forest Symphony Endowment Fund at the Chicago Community Foundation, Stevenson said.

The goal of Rendezvous Arts is to create something for everyone, Stevenson said. The nonprofit presents everything from jazz groups to woodwind octets in an intimate setting, where audiences are encouraged to interact with the musicians and artists after each concert.

And each show is performed three times across three venues in Lake Forest, Dixon and Chicago.

"The majority of the audience is there for the music," Stevenson said. "Eventually, half that audience is going to be there for the music, and the other half will come for the artist. And then we'll introduce the art people to the music and vice versa. That's my ultimate dream."