

The Zekelman Holocaust Center Hosts Free Concert May 22

By **Suzanne Chessler** - 05/12/2022 11:00 AM



Oriol Sans

“Music From Auschwitz: A Concert” will feature a U-M student orchestra conducted by Oriol Sans, music director of the Detroit Symphony Youth Orchestra, who has worked with prestigious instrumentalists in the U.S. and Europe.

A concert that sounds out contrasts defines an upcoming program planned by The Zekelman Holocaust Center (HC) in Farmington Hills in partnership with the University of Michigan (U-M) School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

The contrasts, presented on the afternoon of May 22, involve the vast differences between the essence of the music and the essence of the narrative.

While the 10 short pieces are representative of upbeat popular music composed by non-Jewish Germans during World War II, the narrative consists of published testimonies about daily experiences as expressed by political prisoners (Jewish and non-Jewish) forced to arrange and perform dance band pieces to entertain Nazi captors at Auschwitz I.

“Music From Auschwitz: A Concert” will feature a U-M student orchestra conducted by Oriol Sans, music director of the Detroit Symphony Youth Orchestra, who has worked with prestigious instrumentalists in the U.S. and Europe while holding teaching positions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and U-M.



Patricia Hall

“Audiences will hear what music at Auschwitz actually sounded like,” said Patricia Hall, an award-winning author, U-M professor of music theory and academic researcher who found the music manuscripts at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland.

“We didn’t know what that music sounded like down to the specific instrumentation of the ensembles [until it was found in the archives] so I’ve written a short concert introduction, which I think is very necessary for people to understand how the program is structured.

“Our vocalists will be playing the parts of the musicians and arrangers. They’ll be sitting at a table together, and it will look like they’re copying music as they recite their lines. Even though it’s explained in the program, I thought it would be helpful for me to explain that context.”

Hall’s interest in the music (foxtrots, tangos and waltzes) as well as testimonies by surviving musicians was motivated by the book *Music of*

Another World by Szymon Laks, a conductor of the men's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau I.

“Laks described an odd notation that he resorted to because so many members of his ensemble would suddenly be missing,” Hall said.

“Members would be killed by the SS or they would die of illness, and he had to constantly substitute in parts to make up for these missing members.”

Hall, who felt emotionally connected to the music because of the tremendous irony, made her first visit to the collections of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in 2016 as she became curious about whether there might be any manuscripts there.

The first studied piece, “The Most Beautiful Time of Life,” premiered in 2018 at U-M, and it got vast media attention.

Hall was interviewed way beyond radio stations in Ann Arbor, answering questions for National Public Radio and the Canadian Broadcasting Corp., a conversation shared with the British Broadcasting Corp. An Associated Press article about her research appeared in more than 1,100 news outlets in 22 countries.

The foxtrot that premiered in 2018 has just been part of a film that debuted on Holocaust Remembrance Day — *The Survivor*, a Barry Levinson film about Harry Haft, who took part in [boxing matches at Auschwitz](#).

“In 2019, I decided to go back to the archive and find more pieces so we could do an entire program of this repertoire,” Hall said about the concert to be presented in Ann Arbor days before being performed at the HC.

“As soon as we heard about the amazing discovery of these pieces, we reached out to U-M about hosting a concert,” said Sarah Saltzman, HC director of events and public relations. “To offer this program to an audience that understands its significance is incredibly special.”

Hall considers the text a critical component because she believes audiences should know the details of the daily lives of the musicians. The addition of testimony was the suggestion of her U-M colleague, Eugene Rogers, director of choral activities, who said the music needed context as soon as he heard it.

“The narrative is from the very beginning in 1940 and early 1941, when they began to get an ensemble of musicians together in Auschwitz I, all the way to the very end, when these musicians were going on death marches in late 1944,” Hall said. “Hearing these popular dance band pieces by themselves — some of them in isolation — seems almost bizarre.”

Suzanne Chessler

Suzanne Chessler’s writing-editing career has spanned many years, and her articles have been featured in secular and religious publications across the state and around the country. There was a period of time when she maintained three regular columns in three different publications – one appearing weekly to spotlight metro volunteers, another appearing weekly to profile stage enthusiasts in community theater and a third appearing bimonthly to showcase upcoming arts programs. Besides doing general reporting, she has had continuing assignments involving health, monetary subjects and crime. Her award-winning work builds on majors in English-speech and journalism earned at Wayne State University, where instructors also were writers-editors on Detroit’s daily newspapers.

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