

Composer-turned-filmmaker preserves musician survivor testimonies

Israeli composer Nurit Jugend comes to Pittsburgh to discuss "They Played for Their Lives"

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Nurit Jugend isn't a filmmaker, but the purpose of her upcoming visit is to present and discuss "They Played for Their Lives," a 50-minute documentary about eight Jewish musicians whose lives were saved in the Holocaust by playing music.

Jugend is an Israeli born composer who holds a doctorate in music composition from Stanford University and teaches regularly at the university's continuing education program.

"My life, career-wise, is about music on a day to day basis," she said.

Even so, the composer, whose works have been played by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Calwarts Contemporary Ensemble, Slovenian Symphony Orchestra and others, spent almost a decade creating the documentary.

Originally, the idea was to present a series of lectures on music in the Holocaust, but as Jugend became more invested

in the material, and spent greater time with the survivors, she felt it was necessary to preserve the stories on film.

The first-time documentarian found the necessary funding and recorded eight survivors whose musical abilities facilitated their survival.

“The film touches a lot on the power of music in saving people’s lives,” she said.

Jugend’s work, which will be shown on Oct. 15 at Rodef Shalom Congregation, will include an opportunity for discussion with the filmmaker and the ability to hear Frank Grunwald, one of the Holocaust survivors featured in the film, playing a few songs on his accordion, explained Tsipy Gur, of Classrooms Without Borders.

“This is a different way of bringing the Holocaust and its stories and history to life,” said Gur. Apart from the public program at Rodef Shalom Congregation, Classrooms Without Borders is bringing Jugend and Grunwald to different schools throughout the city. “We want to inspire students to really understand how helpful music is to their life and to the survival of the soul,” said Gur.

Jugend, who grew up in Haifa and got a Ph.D. at Stanford, said she has better appreciated that concept since starting work on the film.

“Until I spoke to the survivors, and we were in the process of making the film, I never imagined that music can be as powerful as saving lives,” she said. “Normally, we think about music, or we listen to music actively or passively, and we are exposed to music mostly for pleasure, and that makes sense. For me, music was about pleasure but mostly about self-expression, and it was there throughout my life. But I do admit that until making this film I never realized it had a power of saving lives, and that was a real amazing revelation for me.”



Professionally and personally, music is present in all aspects of her life, but having to imagine it in the context of

such terror was something different, Jugend explained.

“As a composer I know what it takes for me to compose music: the setting, the peace and quiet, the time, maybe I need to go for a nice walk or spend a week in a cabin to find my inspiration,” she said. But for musicians who worked during the Holocaust, the process of creation was obviously quite different. “I was fascinated,” she said. “Why did they choose to compose music at a time when they were so occupied in their minds to stay healthy and find food and fight for their lives? The idea of making music in that context and not having that peace and quiet — it really struck me how they were able to compose music under those conditions.”

The music she encountered in her research was varied.

“Some of that music is very strong and dramatic, and you can see the context of its writing, and some of it is very beautiful and dance-like,” she said. The latter pieces were “the ones that were more confusing because how could such beauty and dance-like music come out of such a place? I can only guess, but my feeling is that some people expressed what they were going through, their thoughts and feelings at the time, and some people might have escaped in their minds to different periods of time in their lives, the past, when they were with their family and safe and that was the way to cope with their reality.”

Perhaps, she said, summoning the past with music was a way to travel backward, to better times. “Or the more dance-like and beautiful music was maybe a way of expressing hope for a better future.”

Spending time with the survivors spurred Jugend to consider her own situation. “It was part of the process for me to put myself in their shoes,” she said. “It’s hard to make a film and be as involved on a personal level as I was, pretty much making it on my own over such a long time, without imagining yourself or your family.”

Such a personal connection is why survivor testimony is so vital, said Gur. “This is the last generation to witness the survivors and hear their stories and apply it to now.”

For that reason, Jugend created a post-screening guide for educators with survivor background and categorized topics of conversation to catalyze discussion. “By looking at history, we can learn a lot about what we want for our future,” said Jugend, who hopes the film will be seen by “children and their children way past when I’m gone. That’s the goal of the film.” **pjc**

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