

BOOK REVIEW

David Fligg. *Don't Forget About Me: The Short Life of Gideon Klein, Composer and Pianist*

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Reviewed by Josh Healey

Presenting the life and works of a Holocaust composer is no straightforward task; navigating the minefield of Holocaust narration, platitudes of remembrances past, while keeping the subject in full light are just some of the challenges David Fligg has overcome in *Don't Forget About Me: The Short Life of Gideon Klein, Composer and Pianist*.¹ Gideon Klein (1919–1945) was a Jewish composer and pianist who was interned, and later murdered, by the Nazis during World War II. Klein is often overshadowed by his Theresienstadt peers: Victor Ullman, Pavel Haas, and Peter Kien, to name a few.² Fligg synthesises privately held collections, testimonies from survivors and those prosecuted at war crime trials, archival research, genealogy reports, and personal correspondence with those close to Klein to present a new biography that benefits from his decade of dedicated study of the composer. Fligg succeeds in engrossing the reader in stories of Klein and those around him, but also, by interrogating a source or offering a simple 'perhaps', he acknowledges that there are alternate perspectives on—as well as inevitably some lingering doubt about—Klein's life story.

Until now, Milan Slavický's 1995 book *Gideon Klein: A Fragment of Life and Work*, commissioned by Klein's surviving sister, Lisa, was *the* reference work when beginning any

¹ First published in Czech in 2019. David Fligg, *Dopis Od Gideona*, 1st ed (Prague: P3K, 2019).

² Theresienstadt is the Germanic name for Czech town of Terezín. The names are used interchangeably.

research specifically on Klein.³ He and other authors have tended to gloss over Klein's younger years, perhaps dismissing them simply as juvenilia or merely supplementary to their study. By revisiting Klein's personality, actions, and oeuvre, Fligg presents an updated and more comprehensive biography. He guides the reader chronologically through Klein's performances, compositions and life moments, and contextualises this narrative with the political and social upheaval of mid-twentieth-century Europe and the chaos and violence of World War II—all without giving the Holocaust a totalising presence. It is a difficult balance to strike.

Klein's early twentieth-century childhood in the Czechoslovak town, Přerov, is told by images and stories of family, religious celebrations and schooling, and is coloured by Fligg's suggestions of the roots of Klein's manifested identity in later life. Details of the tension between his maternal and paternal grandparents, the 'pragmatic Kleins ... and the liberal minded Marmorsteins' (p. 47), chronicle his conflicting exposure to the arguments and ideologies for and against diasporic assimilation and inter-war Zionism. Fligg signposts the weight of his insight: 'All of this activity made a lasting impression on Klein, for during his internment in Terezín, his engagement with Zionism was to be expressed through his education and compositional activities which supported fellow prisoners, and especially youngsters' (pp. 46–47). Klein's Jewishness was of course a cornerstone of his identity, but Fligg substantiates and enhances our understanding of Klein's childhood by examining his earliest exposures to Zionism, a theme that reappears during his later internment. Quotations from the late Peter Ambro's 1994 recordings of Lisa Klein, made public for the first time, bring a sustained tone of familiarity with Klein throughout the book.

Following Klein's permanent move to Prague in the autumn of 1931, aged 11, he began his education at the Jirasek Grammar School alongside a part-time course at the Prague Conservatoire, continuing his tuition with a well-known pedagogue of talented young pianists, Růžena Kurzová. Beyond Klein's formal education, Fligg takes the reader through what Lisa describes as their 'universities' (p. 65): the cafés of Prague, his concert outings, moments of boyhood fandom over Sergei Prokofiev, and details of the foundations of relationships with Prague's polemical authors, thinkers, artists and musicians. Here Fligg traces Klein's and Rafael Schächter's first meeting; later, Klein and Schächter were to write some of their first pieces of music in Theresienstadt in 1942. Fligg then foreshadows the violence described in later chapters, citing texts Klein would have read in the synagogue on his bar mitzvah, poignantly commenting, 'Of course, Klein and his family had no idea that by the end of the decade they would be caught up in the modern manifestation of Amalek's hatred' (p. 62).

Nazi Germany's 1939 annexation of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia contributed to Klein's world 'rupturing' (p. 156). Fligg details how Klein navigated the ever-tightening implementation of the Nuremberg Laws in Prague in the late 1930s and early 1940s, providing the reader with glimpses into the normalised chaos of Klein's anxious world. While it is well known that Klein took on the pseudonym Karel Vránek to continue performing, Fligg posits that this may have been a choice beyond clear 'Czechness'; perhaps 'non-Jewish' would have been a more apt description of Klein's chosen pseudonym, a choice Fligg suggests was made because Karel is a derivative of 'free man' (p. 130). Building on

³ Milan Slavický, *Gideon Klein: A Fragment of Life and Work*, trans. Dagmar Steinova (Prague: Helvetica-Tempora Publishers, 1995).

his initial brief comments on Klein's pseudonym, Fligg uses the adjective 'enigmatic' to describe Janáček's *The Diary of the One Who Disappeared* (p. 138). In this instance, the use of 'enigmatic' is particularly conspicuous. In his songs *Cizinec* and *Siesta*, written six years previously in 1934 and setting the poem *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Klein features the protagonist of the poem asking: 'Whom do you love the best, enigmatic man? Tell me. Your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?'. This question is never answered, and while Fligg's use of 'enigmatic' may be totally incidental, in the context of discussing the subtext of Klein's choice of pseudonym, it is likely that his word choice was intentional.

As Fligg draws the narrative of Klein's life in Prague to a close, he brings to light a letter detailing 'something of a *cri de cœur*, which reveals much about how [Klein] engaged with non-familial relationships' (p. 148). We read of the string quartet that Klein was 'something of a coach' for, and later made music in Theresienstadt with, and the story of a friend not returning from a simple expedition to buy cigarettes (p. 140). However, a humanising detail that Fligg foregrounds is the romantic relationship Klein had with Frantiská Edelsteinová, adding figurative colour to a black and white image two pages later (p. 150). Fligg intertwines observations offered about Klein by Edelsteinová in 1941, and Hana Žantovská after the war in 1946. Both women criticise Klein's ability to form close relationships with others. Until now, perspectives on Klein's inter-personal relationships have remained supported almost solely by his inscriptions on his manuscripts and testimony of his musicianship, and are mostly 'adulatory' in tone (p. 151). Fligg deepens our understanding of Klein not only as a musician, but also a young man navigating society.

Notional narratives that simply follow the waves of post-Holocaust testimony dominate the representation of Klein's internment in the Theresienstadt ghetto between December 1941 and October 1944. Fligg brings nuanced perspectives on Klein's activities in the ghetto that challenge some established narratives. He uses the origins of Theresienstadt's first legless piano to highlight the inherent unreliability of testimony; was it really Klein who led the clandestine acquisition of the piano from outside the fortifications? Was it already in the attic, like Adler describes, or was it in the nearby L417 building? We will never know for sure, but Fligg's commentary colours our understanding. Fligg weaves the testimony of those closest to Klein into a tapestry that narrates Klein's deterioration through his internment. It is well understood that Klein worked in the Youth Care Department, led the Instrumental Music Department of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Free Time Administration), and wrote an ideologically charged essay *On the So-called Political Education of Youth*, in which he explored how 'youth might receive a Jewish education, how to reconcile Jewish identity based on faith and culture, and identity based on the Zionist cause' (p. 190). What is not known, until now, was the nuanced detail of Klein's impact on the ghetto. Klein was something of a celebrity whose enthusiasm and positivity left an impression on those around him. For example, Fligg quotes Hana Posseltová-Ledererová, a fellow ghetto resident, from her book *Máma a já: Terezínský dení*. '[Klein] tells us, with undying fervour, that there is joy in the world ... It is too bad we cannot remain or die in this state of bedazzlement' (p. 212).⁴

The circumstances of Klein's death have been somewhat elusive, but Fligg deepens our understanding of what happened after Transport Er, the train that carried Klein and 1500 other

⁴ Hana Posseltová-Ledererová, *Máma a já: Terezínský dení* (Prague: G Plus G, 1997).

internees from Theresienstadt, arrived at Auschwitz on 16 October 1944. Fligg uses publicly inaccessible statements recorded at the war crime trials, as well as surviving administrative records, to piece together Klein's life in Auschwitz and final moments in Lager Süd, a coal mining sub-camp near the town of Wesoła. While the end of Klein's life ultimately had no bearing on how he had lived it previously, impacts from his final months on his posthumous narrative are powerful. Fligg recognises that the details of Klein's time at Lager Süd 'are often sketchy' (p. 267), but, in spite of this fact, manages to present a series of testimonies from those likely to have known him there. We read a recollection of what was most likely his final performance, and the lyrics of 'Glück Auf,' probably the last song he sang. Fligg's efforts to present Klein's final moments are clear, and ever so convincing.

Before his deportation, Klein left a significant number of compositional manuscripts of his pre-internment works with a friend. Alongside those that eventually found their way from Theresienstadt to his surviving sister Lisa, these works form the foundation for research into Klein's oeuvre. Klein's compositions are often interrogated in isolation of his other works. Slavicky presented the first detailed musical analysis of Klein's corpus; however, if the reader does not have some theoretical knowledge of music, it is largely inaccessible. While Fligg's book is primarily a biography, it takes the time to analyse and contextualise each of Klein's extant compositions, positing how they may have been influenced by concert halls, informal interactions with the Prague avant-garde and, later, the circumstances and personalities of Theresienstadt. Through alternate focuses on biography and musical works, Fligg's study of Klein's corpus integrates a number of analytical approaches, creating an accessible platform for new investigations.

In Fligg's own words, he sets out to 'present the first comprehensive evaluation of Gideon's childhood in Prague, Přerov, and his engagement with the artistic milieu of Prague' before '[unravelling] the complex circumstances surrounding his murder' (pp. 14–15). He achieves exactly this. Fligg shepherds the reader through Klein's works and performances in a way that will no doubt reshape his posthumous identity. Toccata Press must also be commended on the immaculate hardbound and colour illustrated presentation of Fligg's work, as well as their publishing on, and purveyance of, recordings from other Theresienstadt internees. Fligg's new biography is teeming with detail on Klein previously unavailable in the English language. *Don't Forget About Me: The Short Life of Gideon Klein, Composer and Pianist* is, for newcomers and seasoned researchers alike, a foundational text on a musical man murdered in the Holocaust.

About the Author

Josh Healey is a Master of Music (Research) graduate of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. His research focuses on the music and musicians impacted by the mid-twentieth-century rise of fascism.