Global Jewish music project comes to Madison

How do you piece back together lost generations of creativity?

Scripts that languished for decades in old trunks in attics. Scores that went missing, or that no one knew existed. Works by performing artists displaced, threatened or killed in the Holocaust during World War II.

They’re parts of the puzzle of “Performing the Jewish Archive,” a three-year international research project designed to uncover and perform lost 20th- and late 19th-century works by Jewish artists.

The project lands center stage in Madison on Aug. 30, with a full day of performances and lecture/demonstrations. Audiences can experience — for free — little-performed works just being brought to light, ranging from early 20th-century chamber music to a cabaret act written by four young Czech Jews in the Terezin ghetto. Shows will take place in UW-Madison’s Mills Hall, the First Unitarian Society Meeting House and at Overture Center.

The cultural event is a prelude to a week-long festival scheduled for May 1-5, 2016, which will also involve groups such as Madison Youth Choirs.

“I hope we can pique Madison’s interest in what was, at one time and at times still today, a marginalized and repressed group of people,” said Teryl Dobbs, an associate professor of music education at UW-Madison.

“This is artwork of an active community ... that refused to be silenced. They were laughing in the face of the devil.”

Madison is the only U.S. site for “Performing the Jewish Archive.” The project originated at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, and aligned well with the work of Dobbs, whose academic focus has included children’s musical experiences in the World War II Jewish ghetto at Theresienstadt, now known as Terezin.

Dobbs came on board as a co-investigator for the Jewish archive project, which is backed by a $2.5 million grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in England.

That helped lead to the Aug. 30 event, which includes a free “Sound Salon” at 12:20 p.m. in
Mills Hall, which will explore the holdings of the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture. As part of the lecture/demonstration, the collection’s founder, Sherry Mayrent, will perform on clarinet joined by Henry Sapoznik on tenor guitar.

At 2:30 p.m., the chamber music series Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society will perform music at First Unitarian by two composers who died at Auschwitz, another whose work was repressed by the Nazis, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s Suite for piano left hand, composed for a musician who had lost his right arm in World War I.

The performances will move to Overture Center's Promenade Hall for two cabaret shows at 7 p.m.: “Laugh With Us,” based on an original cabaret written in the Terezin ghetto; and “I’m a Stranger Here Myself,” with music written by French or German Jewish or gay songwriters during the age of the Weimar Republic.

All events are free, with the exception of a welcome brunch that starts the day at 10 a.m. ($12). Local partners include the UW-Madison School of Music, the Mosse-Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture, the Arts Institute at UW-Madison and Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society. International scholars who are part of the project will be traveling to Madison for the event.

“This one-day festival at Madison, our first major event, is key,” Lisa Peschel, a co-investigator on the “Performing the Jewish Archive” project, said in an email, “because we will be trying out new repertoire, new performance approaches and methods of audience response testing that, if successful, will help shape our plans for all the following festivals: a five-day festival to be held in Madison in May of 2016 and similar festivals in the UK, the Czech Republic, South Africa and Australia.”

Peschel, a UW-Madison graduate, translated some of the cabaret scripts to be performed at Overture Center. Today she is a lecturer in theater, film and TV at the University of York in the U.K.

“These (performance) events are important because, with them, we are trying to right a great historical wrong,” Peschel said.

“The various catastrophes of the 20th century tore gaping holes in the cultural fabric of Europe by displacing Jewish artists and depriving musical, theatrical and literary movements of some of their most talented members.

“With our performances we aim to re-knit certain threads back across those gaps by bringing rediscovered musical, theatrical and literary works back to the attention of scholars and the public, not only to restore them to their rightful place in history but in hopes that other artists and teachers in the present and future will engage with them as well,” she wrote.

 “Performing the Jewish Archive” focuses on the period of Jewish displacement between 1880 and 1950. A special interest of Dobbs is Terezin, a fortified city near Prague that was converted by the Nazis into a transit camp for thousands of educated and prosperous Jews, including many well-known artists, writers and composers.
Many ultimately were killed in concentration camps. Their creative work was destroyed, lost or given away to survivors and often forgotten.

In Terezin, “There were lectures given. The full Verdi Requiem was performed there. Adult music, cabarets — it was the creme de la creme of central European intelligentsia and culture,” said Dobbs, who is Jewish and a member of Madison’s Congregation Shaarei Shamayim.

“Because the composers were in prison or didn’t survive, we’re trying to re-situate them in a larger context,” she said.

“Many of these composers and theater artists have been in the niche of ‘Holocaust music.’ We’re trying to experiment and see if we can push those boundaries and make them more porous.”

**If you go**

**What:** "Out of the Shadows: Rediscovering Jewish Music, Literature and Theater," part of the "Performing the Jewish Archive" international project

**When:** Aug. 30

**Events:**
- Welcome Brunch, Nosh, Kibitz and Schmooze! from 10 a.m. to noon, Alumni Lounge, Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St.
- "Sound Salon," from 12:20-1:40 p.m., exploring sounds from the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture; Mills Hall, 455 N. Park St.
- Concert by Bach Dancing and Dynamite Society, 2:30-4:30 p.m., First Unitarian Meeting House, Atrium Auditorium, 900 University Bay Drive.
- Two-act Cabaret Evening, from 7-10 p.m., Promenade Hall, Overture Center, 201 State St.

**Admission:** Pre-registration for all events is required by Aug. 24 at http://eepurl.com/bttx_9. Brunch is $12; all other events are free.

**Websites:** ptja.leeds.ac.uk; www.music.wisc.edu