

Treptow

for String Orchestra or String Quartet



Treptow is a district in east Berlin. The district gives its name to a park by the river Spree, home to an immense and awe-inspiring war memorial. Hewn in granite, limestone, marble and bronze and occupying ten hectares, the memorial commemorates the soldiers of the Red Army who fell in the Great Patriotic War* of 1941-1945. The Treptow memorial is also a war grave: five thousand Soviet soldiers are buried beneath its lawns and mosaic walkways – a small fraction of the 30,000 who died in the final days before Berlin fell to Stalin’s troops.

At one end of the 500 metre-long memorial park stands a three-metre-high statue of Mother Russia, grieving for her lost children. A promenade flanked by weeping birches leads through two massive, stylised Soviet flags in red granite to the memorial plaza itself. Beside each flag there is a kneeling soldier - one young, one old. The plaza is lined on either side by eight limestone sarcophagi, symbolising the 16 Soviet Republics of the time and bearing images from the war and quotations from Stalin in German and Russian. The memorial culminates in a burial mound with steps leading up to a huge stone plinth crowned with a 13m-high bronze statue of a Red Army soldier. Carrying a rescued child and bearing a massive sword, the soldier tramples a shattered swastika underfoot.

Treptow is synonymous with ambiguity and contradiction, its meaning indefinite, multi-valent and shifting. Its surface meaning has probably never been credible of itself: heroism there certainly was in 1945, but also brutality, looting and rape - bitter revenge in all its forms. While it stood on the territory of the German Democratic Republic, the Treptow monument was the emblem of an occupying force, yet its centrepiece was always festooned with flowers. In 2004, the Federal Republic of Germany spent millions of Euros on its renovation, to clamours of disapproval from parties of the right.

This piece is about the memorial in Treptow Park - about the stone, about the trees, about the grass, and about the statues. Half-remembered musical fragments serve as building blocks from which this “musical monument” is constructed.

Thus the work is also about meaning - its mutability and its elusiveness. Finally, it is a hymn of thanks to human beings I never knew, who laid down their lives for a vision of human brotherhood which was denied to them in their lifetime. This vision finds its apotheosis in the little girl leaping from the soldier’s grasp, running gleefully down the steps and into the park, skipping, running, smiling and jumping for the simple joy of being alive.

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Treptow was the winner of the 2005 Emre Araci Prize. The first performance was given by the Edinburgh University String Orchestra, conducted by James Lowe, in the Reid Concert Hall, Edinburgh on 29th April 2005.

*As the Second World War is known in Russia