



Theresienstadt is nowadays known as Terezín, a crumbling garrison town north of Prague. It became a concentration camp in 1941, housing over 50,000 inmates. Most of its residents were middle class Czech Jews, and the Nazis permitted a range of musical and cultural activities to raise morale, and a contemporary propaganda film presented the camp as a utopian community.

This enlightening documentary is concise and sober, feeling much weightier than the 58-minute running time would suggest. The camp's history is related unsensationally; the surprise comes in seeing contemporary footage of the town today. Visiting it clearly unsettles British violinist Daniel Hope; how can normal life continue in such a place? Short extracts of music composed in Theresienstadt are arresting, and the documentary is followed by an extended concert allowing us to hear the works in full. The performances are excellent, as you'd expect from singers Anne Sofie von Otter and Christian Gerhaher along with pianist Bengt Forsberg. There's a fascinating range of styles on display; Erwin Schulhoff's very cosmopolitan modernism contrasting with lighter items by Robert Dauber and Ilse Weber. Hope makes us appreciate that historical circumstance makes all this music culturally important. He's also perceptive as the reasons why so many of the pieces composed in the camp were relatively brief – “it was as if people had to fight for every note”, alongside the fact that manuscript paper was in short supply. There are riveting interviews with two survivors - guitarist Coco Schumann and the 108-year-old pianist Alice Herz-Sommer, still lucid and now living in London. For her, “living in such a difficult time enriches one”, and seeing her response as Hope plays a Bach saraband to her is deeply moving. Schumann, a sprightly 88-year-old, is a joy – still able to strum a guitar, and musing that he's “the sort of person who makes the best of things... I rejoice that I got out!”

By Graham Rickson - Saturday, 23 November 2013
Published on The Arts Desk (<http://www.theartsdesk.com>)