

BRUNDIBAR

October 29, 2003

Meet the artists:

[WNYC's afternoon talk show about music and culture, Soundcheck 93.9 FM](#)
[hosted by John Schaefer.](#)

[The WNYC Young People's Radio Chorus](#)

[Members of the Young People's Chorus of New York City](#)
[Francisco J. Núñez, conductor](#)

[Tony Kushner, Special guest](#)

Here is some information about Brundibar - its story and history. We've also included some follow up questions that you can use to stimulate discussion.



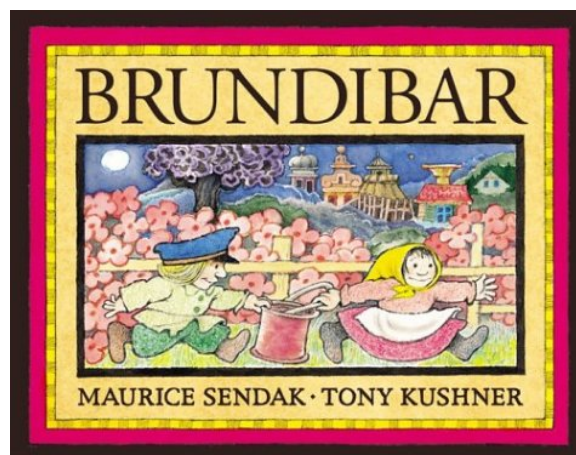
Photo of original cast of *Brundibar*. Ela Weissberger played the part of the cat and can be seen in the front row dressed in black.

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF *BRUNDIBAR*

When the Nazis came to power in the 1930s, Jews from Germany and surrounding countries, sensing the impending danger, began sending their children to Prague as a means of ensuring their protection. Prague was a relatively distant city full of culture and education for their precious children. The orphanages in Prague quickly exceeded capacity, as hundreds of children would arrive each month. In 1938 the successful Czech composer Hans Krása and librettist Adolf Hoffmeister wrote *Brundibar* for children to perform as a means of entertaining and occupying the thousands of children in Prague's orphanage system.

The opera made its way to Terezin, where it was performed 55 times by the children of the concentration camp under the direction of Jewish music teachers. The Nazi command permitted concerts at Terezin in order to deceive the outside world into thinking the Jews were being treated humanely. In 1944, the Nazis filmed a performance of *Brundibar* for their propaganda film, "The Fuehrer Presents the Jews with a City." Nearly all of the children who performed in the opera were deported to Auschwitz and died in the gas chambers. Hans Krása met the same fate.

The history of *Brundibar* is brutal, but the opera itself is a parable of hope and justice. Its the tale of a poor family whose children seek money to buy milk for their sick mother, only to have their quest thwarted by an evil organ grinder named Brundibar. With help of three intelligent animals, the children defeat the unjust bully and return home in triumph.



The cover of the new Brundibar book

When Maurice Sendak agreed to design the sets for the Chicago Opera Theater's summer 2003 production of *Brundibar*, he enlisted his friend Tony Kushner to create a new English-language libretto for the production. Their work on the opera grew into their collaboration on the children's book.

During the WNYC radio show Tony Kushner narrates portions of the story of *Brundibar* as The WNYC Young People's Radio Chorus, directed by Francisco Nuñez, punctuates the narrative with songs selected from the opera.



NYC production of *Brundibar* with the YPC

Opera Synopsis

(The Barnes & Noble Review of the new Sendak/Kushner book)

Legendary children's author Maurice Sendak and Tony Award winner Tony Kushner team up for a remarkable, thought-provoking retelling of a classic Czech opera with inspiring historical overtones -- the opera was performed 55 times by children in the Nazi concentration camp of Terezin. Along with Sendak's rich illustrations that hearken back to his classic style, Kushner recounts the story of Aninku and Pepicek, who go to town in search of milk for their sick mother. Unfortunately, the two children can't pay for the milk, but when they spot a singing Brundibar -- an organ grinder -- garnering lots of attention and raking in coins, they decide to try their own performance. The trouble is no one can hear them, "all because of bellowing Brundibar." Forced into an alley after a frightening confrontation with the bullying organ grinder, they meet up with three animals who end up recruiting 300 children to help drive Brundibar away. Beginning with a bright atmosphere that soon turns dark and foreboding, Kushner and Sendak's tale is a solid, intense tour de force that weaves together Jewish history, hope, and the struggle between good and evil. (The last word is a note from Brundibar: "Bullies don't give up completely. One departs, the next appears, and we shall meet again, my dears!"). Kushner's language is bold and fluent, while Sendak never lets readers forget the broader

significance of this tale, peppering the pages with Stars of David; signs and newspapers in Czech, German, and Hebrew; and Brundibar's companion monkey, who wears a German spiked helmet. A soul-stirring book that will touch readers of many generations on many levels. -*Review by Matt Warner*

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Tony Kushner's plays include "A Bright Room Called Day"; "The Illusion"; "Angels In America, Parts One and Two"; "Slavs!"; "Hydrotaphia"; "Homebody/Kabul"; and adaptations of Goethe's "Stella", Brecht's "The Good Person of Setzuan", and Ansky's "The Dybbuk". His work has been produced at theatres around the United States and in over thirty countries around the world. He is the recipient of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1993 and 1994 Tony Awards for Best Play, among other awards.

Maurice Sendak received the 1964 Caldecott Medal for "Where the Wild Things Are." In 1970 he received the international Hans Christian Andersen Medal for Illustration, in 1983 he received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award from the American Library Association, and in 1996 he received a National Medal of Arts in recognition of his contribution to the arts in America. In March 2003, Sendak received the first Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, an annual international prize for children's literature established by the Swedish government.



The Young People's Chorus in concert at the 92nd Street Y April 2003

Follow up questions:

1. When you listen to the music at the beginning of the opera, how does the composer create a sense of a market place?

2. Why do you think that the composer uses soloists for some songs and ensembles for others?

3. How do the dynamics and tempo impact the story?

4. How does the music enhance the text?

5. What is the function of the lullaby?

6. Has anyone ever sung a lullaby to you? When?

7. What is a famous lullaby in your culture?