

Memory set to music

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At 95 and nearing the end of her long life, Gertrude Schmones accepted the bedside visits of friends and relatives to recount the things she had seen. She remembered Hitler and the Russian Revolution and pogroms before that.

A woman with a mystical side, Schmones told the stories differently, depending on how many people were in her audience, according to her granddaughter, the composer Joelle Wallach. There was the formal, expansive retelling for large groups. A handful of close family heard the same stories in another way, more interactive, with sharing and joint telling among them. Finally, there was the untold retelling, a recollection within the storyteller's own mind, where fantasy and imagination embellish the truth into something wholly new.

This observation and insight into memory and her family became the structure for Wallach's "In Memory the Heart Still Sings," which had its world premiere on Saturday by the Orchestra at William Paterson University in Wayne. The memory became a musical theme and the retellers the orchestra and solo clarinetist.

Wallach, who was raised mostly by Schmones, trusted her grandmother's voice to the understanding soloist Andrew Lamy in this single-movement rhapsody. He joined the strings, woodwinds and a French horn in a simple theme, stately and instructive. Mark Laycock crisply conducted the soulful piece. Then Lamy broke off with small groups of instruments, playfully tossing the same theme around until his clarinet spoke alone. His solos were contemplative and fanciful, as the internal narrator remembered her own life. "On the meaningful part of the journey (of life), you are alone," Wallach told the audience before the piece was played.

By any measure, "In Memory the Heart Still Sings" was a success. As abstract music, it entertained and intrigued. It was an engaging concert piece. And as family memory, Gertrude Schmones and her stories live on.