



Testaments of the Heart:
A Conversation with Honora
and Dahlan Foah

By **Mary Davis**
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The Foahs live in a big, older home in a historic Atlanta neighborhood. Their front door is wide open to catch the breeze on this day in September when the intense heat of summer has broken. I walk right in and find Honora and Dahlan in their light filled kitchen surrounded by tall, leafy trees outside. We take our espresso and tea and sit around the kitchen table by the windows for this conversation.

Several weeks after this interview, Honora and Robert Dahlan Foah and the Mythic Imagination Institute team, in partnership with Emory University's Center for Ethics are producing a concert at Emory University featuring works collected by Professor Francesco Lotoro, an Italian pianist, composer, conductor and professor. These works are original music written by composers during their imprisonment in concentration and internment camps during the Holocaust. Many of these composers were murdered in these camps.

The major theme for this Mythic Imagination Institute initiative is "Creativity in Captivity." The title of the initial concert and its accompanying art exhibit is "Testaments of the Heart." The goal of today's conversation is to discuss the source of the Foahs' inspiration for this initiative.

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Mary Davis (MD): *What was your starting point with Professor Lotoro?*

Dahlan Foah (DF): About three years ago, I was the Assistant Conductor of the Atlanta Community Symphony Orchestra, and Conductor Juan Ramirez gave me an article from the press (I think USA Today) about Professor Lotoro, and at the same time, my father, Mario Foah, sent me the same article.

I was going to Italy soon, and I tried to contact Professor Lotoro. He lives in Barletta, south of Rome. I contacted Lucio Ivaldi, a choral conductor in Rome, and asked him to set up a dinner meeting in Rome with Professor Lotoro. So, Honora and I, Lucio, and Daniel Schene (Honora's brother who is a concert pianist and professor in the U.S.) had dinner with Professor Lotoro two blocks away from Vatican City. Lotoro's publisher (KZ Musik) was located nearby. It is an interesting coincidence that the Vatican was a few steps away. So, we met with him and decided we wanted to bring him over to the United States.

MD: *Why were you interested?*

DF: I have known many survivors, I was brought up with many survivors. But the idea of the music drew me in; the seeming impossibility of writing music under these circumstances.

And Francesco Lotoro is a very animated and impassioned scholar. He studied piano with Aldo Ciccolini.

MD: *Will you tell us something about your Italian and Jewish ancestry?*

DF: My great grandfather was the Rabbi of Naples. On my maternal side, my grandmother was a concert pianist who was employed as a sort of court pianist for Mussolini. Her husband was Secretary to the Ambassador of the King of Afghanistan. Their world was featured in the film, "The Garden of the Finzi - Continis."

My mother was first in her class in art at Cooper Union in New York City.



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Honora Foah (HF): I liked Francesco Lotoro from the first moment we met. I also grew up around survivors, so I thought, "I don't know if I can deal with this"... but I thought what he was doing was amazing; I was glad someone was doing it.

One of the things that was true to me about survivors from my upbringing (in an unusual way) is that it is very clear how complex the stories are...

For instance, one man who was among my parents' best friends had been in the concentration camps when he was young for a long time. The numbers were tattooed on his arms. As a young child, I learned quickly that survivors didn't want to talk about it...there was silence. When this man, Sasha, was released from the camps, he had no one and he wandered around Europe trying to survive. So, he became a cunning, wily operator. He knew something about the dark side of human nature that other people in the U.S. did not know. He was always nice to me, but scary. He was good in sales, always looking for the "main chance," and his son was confused, eventually getting on the "wrong side of the law." Morality became different, all confusing for them, after their experience.

So for me, I was always aware of how complex the situation was.

As a teenager, I became politically active, both in a Jewish group and in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and it was very clear, even then, in the 60's that if you wanted to have conversations about peace in the Middle East, very quickly the Holocaust came up and stopped the conversation cold...because one has so little standing in the face of people who had been in the concentration camps. You cannot simply plow over their experience. It is too disrespectful. But it also means that the conversation is always held hostage to this horror and grief. Some kind of measured conversation and accommodation with the Palestinians is not very possible.

Israel as a Jewish state in the Holy Land is a direct result of the Holocaust and the export of centuries of European anti-Semitism and evil plunked down in the Middle East. Europe is not facing its own shadow. They exported it to Palestine.

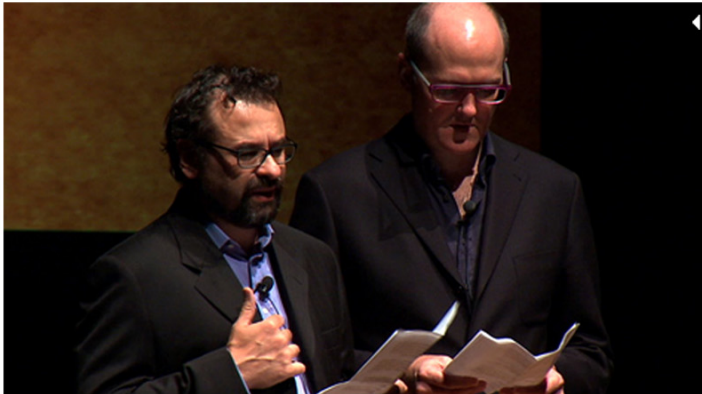
Zionism became a Jewish issue at the turn of the century because Jews were desperate to escape from European anti-Semitism and to end the centuries of the Diaspora. One of the ways Al Qaeda and Muslim dictators foster hatred now and in the past is by blaming Israel and the tragic relationship with the Palestinians for all the woes of Muslims all over the world. So much of what we are living with in "the clash of civilizations" is a direct result of the European anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust and the consequences of the Holocaust. It is a clear, visible, traceable case of the sins of the fathers being visited on the children unto the seventh generation.

At the end of the War, many of the Jews who survived could not bear to be in Europe any more. They were displaced and did not have homes or lives or families to return to. Nor were they wanted anywhere. The ugly truth is that many people were not unhappy with Hitler's "solution" to the "Jewish problem." They may have disapproved of his methods, but within their own communities, they were not unhappy with the result that all of the Jews in their town were gone.

I just read a story of a young Jewish boy whose family was moved to the ghetto in Poland. One day, as the Nazis came into town, he hid and saw other children who had hidden in the branches of trees, falling through the sky as the Nazis shot them down from their perches...Then his mother and sister were taken to the camps and killed. He was disguised by a Catholic family as one of their own. Then, when the war ended, and here he is eleven years old or so, trying to find a place to live, a Polish woman shouts at him, (You Jews), "filthy animals, you came out of your holes, too bad they didn't finish you off!" He emigrated to Israel.

So, "the world" decided to send the Jews to Palestine. During the war, Jews fleeing from Hitler were turned away from many countries, including the United States, and they were turned away after the war as well. The displaced Jews had no home and so the international community, such as it was, "gave" them Israel. Unfortunately, there were already people living there.

But here is something that speaks to the possibilities of the human spirit. The man I was talking about who emigrated to Israel, Zeev Sternhell is his name, has been a leader of "Peace Now" and a supporter of Palestinian rights.



Dr. Francesco Lotoro
and Dr. Richard Keatley

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MD: Please continue... will you discuss the relationship of the tragedy of the Holocaust with our work here at Mythic Imagination?

HF: At the Mythic Imagination Institute, we are working with personal stories and the huge cultural stories. The story of the Holocaust has all these different ownership committees: from the Israeli side, from the Arab side, from the German side, from the French side, and so on. They are all stories of profound hatred and of things going massively wrong.

And so, what can we set against that?

When Francesco Lotoro came into our lives, being an artist, I suddenly saw an opening, *a possibility, a hope, a method...* of how one can deal with these things.

As I began to work with the music, I began to see, as an artist, what you can set against it. These people, the composers show the way, and there *is* a way. It's a way the soul can survive --- through creativity.

I could talk for three hours about this, but here it is: when I met Francesco Lotoro, it was an answer to a question I've been working on for forty years. *This* is actually a language for going forward for peace, and maybe, activated, it could even penetrate into the political. The problems we face cannot be solved in simplistic political terms because that isn't where the pain is. The pain is in the soul. Experiences of violence, injustice, terror, humiliation have to be addressed where the wounds are. And though we must do our best with justice, that is usually not a real healing because earthly justice is not even possible. No matter what, one is not healed of the deaths and tortures by a court of law. But if one can be kept alive by the recompense of beauty and meaning, a deeper kind of healing is possible. The dead do not return, the scars are still there, but the trauma can be balanced, the trauma can even be a fertilizer for the growth of new fruit.

MD: This concert will be the world premiere for three of the composers – Heilbut, Goué, and Schul. Can you give us more details about bringing this forward?

DF: After our dinner in Rome with Francesco Lotoro, those of us present discussed the possibilities for moving forward. He had edited and recorded the first twelve CDs of the music, and the costs of recording the orchestral works were especially high. Six more with choral music (and Lucio Ivaldi's choral group) were being pressed, and Francesco and Lucio were becoming trusted colleagues.

Two years ago, in September of 2008, we brought Francesco Lotoro here to the United States, and introduced him to Maestro Lucas Richmond of the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra and Maestro Michael Palmer of Georgia State University and the Bellingham Music Festival in Washington state. We met to discuss how to program some of Professor Lotoro's collection into the season to defray the cost of recording. We also introduced Lotoro to the Mythic Imagination Institute team.

Then our friends, Eve Hoffman and Sal Brownfield held a "friend raiser" for about forty people at Eve's home and there we met Paul Wolpe, Director of Emory University's Center for Ethics. Dr. Lotoro told his story of the collected music. When most of the people left, Paul Wolpe, Trudi...(a survivor), and Lucas Richmond stayed and we talked in detail and with great interest.

Over the next year, these people remained active. Paul Wolpe called us for collaboration with Emory University.

HF: What is really happening with all this is that the program began to shift and change, and what evolved is a series, instead of a single event.

When we became involved with Emory University, at first it was the concert only, and then Paul suggested including the work of a woman he knew, Ann Weiss, who had collected photographs from Europe showing Jewish family and community life in several Polish communities before the Holocaust (Ann Weiss had by chance found these photos set aside at Auschwitz, although the Nazis thought they had systematically destroyed all pictorial evidence of the prisoners' lives pre-Holocaust). We named our partnership, "Testaments of the Heart." And so now out of the fusion of these different elements and the Mythic Imagination Institute, "Testaments of the Heart" is the first event in a series, called "Creativity in Captivity."

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The Center for Ethics is interested in ethics and the arts, so this project speaks to both streams.

MD: *Speak to the lives of these people.*

HF: The images, the photographs are so moving because they are so ordinary, they show daily life...and then these people are thrust into a horrific experience; and the music is about an extraordinary response to a horrific experience. In these extreme circumstances, sometimes "ordinary people" have an extraordinary response.

MD: *Please tell me about Robert Heilbut.*

HF: Listening to the music at night, I was very much aware of what a *good* composer he was, his ability to develop a theme...and suddenly I realized, they murdered him, and not only did they take his life from *him*, they took it from *me*! For me, I became connected to Robert Heilbut, who often wrote this joyous, even whimsical music. The idea of writing whimsical music in a concentration camp gets to me. So for me, recently, after we chose the music, the concert became about Robert Heilbut. Through working so closely with his music and what I know of his life, I suddenly have a personal relationship with him, and through him to the other composers and prisoners.

MD: *How did Francesco Lotoro find this music?*

HF: Lotoro's interest in the music began in 1991. He began his collection on a visit to Prague. He also had been to Munich to find a survivor who was a composer. The composer told Lotoro that he could have copies of all of his work, but Francesco didn't have enough money to copy it, so he went home, saved money and returned, only to discover that the composer had died with no surviving relatives and all of his four hundred works of jazz were gone. This mightily impressed upon him that time would run out.

Francesco found out that many years back, his family had been Jewish, but had converted to Christianity. After working with the music and the stories of the composers, he converted to Judaism, returning to his family's roots. He was also approached by a German man whose father, a composer and a German soldier in World War II had been captured and interned in Great Britain. He asked Lotoro to include his father's music. Francesco had to really think about this, and he decided that his first loyalty was to his



fellow musicians, so despite his inner resistance, he included the work. He said, "I'm a musician...music is a universal language."

And that is the entire point of what we are working on here – that there is a language that transcends the wounded part of our souls and connects us universally. Having access to that stream and its language is a way through the intractable problems that have been caused by hatred, violence and trauma. There is no "solution." There is only a doorway through the common courtyard where compassion and acceptance create a space of air and light enough for us to breathe and see each other. If we can just stand in that courtyard peaceably together, we might be able to walk back into our lives differently.

DF: I find several exciting things about this project: first, bringing this music to life, and second, the idea of live performances of this music. We have a difficult task of bringing forty musicians together under Honora's direction and then to do justice to the music. All of the performers are professional. I am excited about being a partner with Honora in this effort and also with the musicians. I am an "amateur."

HF: Dahlan is only "amateur" in the truest sense of the meaning of the word: "from love." The flow of love is so activated by music...we find a way in through music.

DF: Honora and I sort of "re-wrap" things in a different way. Honora's idea is to make this a theatrical experience, and I get excited by that idea. I see the growth potential of live performance pieces brought out into the open, plus the interdisciplinary aspects (with other arts –including poetry and the visual arts) I find exhausting and exciting!



Notes:

Dahlan Foah is the music director and producer, while Honora Foah is the director of "Testaments of the Heart." Professor Lotoro's interview by Bo Emerson for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution may be read at <http://www.accessatlanta.com/atlanta-music/concerts-music-composed-in640751.html>

The concert was presented September 28, 2010, to a full house at Emory University's Schwarz Center for the Performing Arts and the audience response was enthusiastic acclaim. Professor Lotoro announced plans to house his collection of music in Atlanta at Emory University. The concert was filmed and will be available to the public in the future.

