Singing From the Page:

A Study of Maurice Sendak’s *Brundibar*

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“My most unusual gift is that my child-self seems to still be alive and well” declares the highly celebrated author Maurice Sendak (Lanes, 265). Known for his picture books for children such as *In The Night Kitchen* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sendak has demonstrated a remarkable ability to explore the themes of childhood such as anger, isolation, fear, and growing up. However, there is one work, his picture book *Brundibar* (2003), he describes as his “crowning achievement” (Hulburt, slate.com). To produce his picture book Sendak collaborated with playwright Tony Kushner: Kushner provided the text, while Sendak designed the illustrations. Drawing from his background in set design and the theater, Sendak incorporates elements from the opera into *Brundibar*. Drawing upon the Holocaust, Sendak engages his audience in a discussion of loneliness, fear, and anger, emotions with which he is very familiar. His use of color to portray such a dark subject draws attention to the traumatic events of the past that affected both Sendak’s own family and the children who performed the opera. In this way, Sendak draws attention to social themes that are relevant today to a child audience growing up several generations removed from the Holocaust.

Before beginning a discussion of Sendak’s illustration, one must be familiar with the journey taken by *Brundibar*’s characters. Based on the opera written by Hans Krasa in 1938, *Brundibar* tells the story of two Czech children Pepicek and Aninku who, in order to save their ailing mother, must buy a pail of milk. Unfortunately, the two children do not have enough money to afford the milk. Traveling to a nearby town, they try to sing in order to earn money, but their voices are ignored because the townspeople are consumed with the voice of Brundibar, the town bully. Discouraged, the children seek the help of talking animals and other children, who are then able to defeat Brundibar together. The children are then able to save their mother with milk.

**From the Opera to the Page**
Because this story is based on an opera, Sendak incorporates his experience and knowledge of the theater into his illustrations. As a child, Sendak was introduced to the opera by visiting an outdoor performance of *Carmen* with his sister Natalie (Kushner, 79). From then on, his love of opera would forever be intertwined with his art. In 1975, Sendak was given the opportunity to create the libretto, set, and costume designs for an opera version of his book *Where The Wild Things Are*. He also designed the sets and costumes for other operas such as *The Magic Flute*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and *Love for Three Oranges*. He also designed the set for the screen version of *The Nutcracker* in 1986 (“Maurice Sendak”, www.biography.jrank.org).

In order to have a basic understanding of the method Sendak employs to illustrate and plan his text, one must have a basic understanding of set design in the theater. Sendak translates the methods from designing the set of his productions onto the pages of *Brundibar*, which is fitting because this picture book is based on the opera. In establishing a set, the designer must first decide what kind of set he wants to create, and Sendak chooses a combination of realistic and abstract set. This means that he is recreating a specific location, but he is not specifying a specific time in which the opera is taking place (Francis Calangi, http://liter1no4.tripod.com). Under this type of design, the background location is realistic enough to be familiar, but the background can rapidly change at any point and the characters are allowed to be grander and elaborate in their costuming. Everything from the background to the location allows enough realism to be familiar and enough fantasy to make the audience aware that there are differences between what is being viewed and reality. After deciding what type of set he will use, Sendak as the stage designer must plan where the various backdrops and props must be located on the stage. In translating the opera to the page, Sendak keeps his backdrop located towards the back of the page (upstage), and he keeps his characters separate from the backdrop and closer to the
The uncanny blending of the familiar and the fantastical is evident in Sendak’s set designs as well as his background illustrations for Brundibar. By viewing Sendak’s illustrations in Brundibar, it is easy to see his passion for opera which he eloquently translates to his illustrations. The intricate designs of music combined with scenery and drama holds a captivating spell over his own pen as he creates his own works. According to Tony Kushner, this is because the “fantastical is alive on the stages of opera in a way that it simply isn’t in the contemporary adult dramatic theater repertoire, and Sendak’s stage work has to date been almost entirely for works with a measure of fantasy” (Kushner, 78). Through design and illustration, Sendak can enhance the text and create new worlds that are not specifically prescribed by the stage directions. For example, his design of a dragon for The Magic Flute resembles one that would be appropriate for a Chinese New Year float. Opera and illustration equally enable him to experiment with elements that would not be normally included in a text, such as a Chinese dragon in Mozart’s opera. For Sendak, creating works of fantasy gives him the flexibility to explore the world around him. For example, in his book Outside Over There, Sendak uses mythical goblins to kidnap his heroine Ida’s baby sister in order to explore themes of loneliness and courage—themes that recur within his other works. In the same way, opera uses fantasy to explore the world and all of its chaos and emotions, which is why Sendak has been drawn to opera. Its influence and his obsession with it is found throughout his illustrations.

Drawing upon his background in opera and fantasy, Sendak incorporates these elements into his illustration of Brundibar. The background illustrations within his picture book serve as the
set design, transporting the audience from a world that is familiar and comfortable to one that is unfamiliar and therefore causes discomfort and a sense of heightened awareness to these changes for his audience. He understands that just as the set design of the play or opera sets the overall mood of the play, the design of his illustrations set the mood for the story as well. They prepare the audience to be open to the themes that will be introduced in the story, and give the audience an idea of what to expect.

This understanding of set design is most greatly viewed through Sendak’s use of color. In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud describes the powerful use of color to affect the mood and understanding of the audience. Color choice first of all attracts an audience, and this is true in set design as well as picture book design. An audience will be more attracted to brighter colors, and their mood will be lighter and more cheerful. When colors are darker, the audience will be more subdued and the mood is understood as being somber and serious. According to McCloud, there is an “intoxicating environment of sensations that only color can give” (192). Sendak’s poster advertising *The Magic Flute* performed by The Houston Opera in 1979, the colors featured are dark greens and yellows over a background of deep blue indicating night time (www.childlit.com). The poster’s colors advertise a world of mystery and intrigue which amplify the fairy-tale narrative of the opera, which involves a young adventurer’s quest to save a kidnapped princess. Likewise, Sendak’s illustrations in *Brundibar* also draw attention to the fantastical, fairy-tale like quality of the story and foreshadow its happy conclusion. The overall design and mood is playful and happy, so the audience will be able to look forward to a story that no matter the plot, will yield a pleasant and triumphant outcome.

Although he is incorporating fantastic and unfamiliar through his illustrations, Sendak allows the setting to be familiar enough to keep his audience engaged and allow them to remain
involved in the plot. This idea is apparent as Sendak establishes the first scene inside the home of Aninku and Pepiceck. The two children are standing beside their mother, who is sick in bed. The home is crowded, but there are few objects, indicating their poverty. They are also surrounded by the bright pastels off yellow, pink, and blue, indicating the fields and flowers of the surrounding countryside. This initial setting establishes their isolation from the outside world. It also sets the stage for a set that will continue to be crowded and isolated throughout the text for the young protagonists.

This setting is especially important when strategically placing the characters on the page because the blocking inside of the setting will center the focus of the audience. Blocking is a technique used by the director, in this case Sendak, to determine the positions and movements of the character within a given space (www.plays.about.com). Sendak uses blocking to establish and orient his characters within the story. When the audience meets the two children, they are side by side, as they will be throughout the text. This initial setting not only introduces the characters and conflict, but it also helps the audience understand the isolation the children feel, especially because they are never separated from each other: one child needs the other in order to combat the isolation they feel. There is a sense of claustrophobia in the initial illustrations that, despite the cheerful demeanor of the children, leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable. As an illustrator, Sendak does not create the background to fit the character. Rather, he fits the characters to match the background. His sets are crowded and so the movement of his characters is challenged and must be worked for. Rather than design his sets with his characters in mind, he designs the set and expects the characters to comply within the space he allows.

Despite the cramped spaces of the initial setting, Sendak illustrates the initial background with little detail. There are several elements involved in Sendak’s decision. He is trying to
establish a setting of fantasy, and to include too many details would make the reader more familiar with the background, and thus, Sendak’ desire to keep the reader unfamiliar and aware of the differences between fantasy and reality would be lost. Sendak is also establishing a simple background that shows the isolation of Pepiceck and Aninku from the rest of civilization, and he will later contrast their initial isolation with the isolation they face as they wander through the crowded streets of the nearby town. By keeping the background simple, the viewer’s focus remains on the characters, allowing the viewer to experience the feelings of isolation and claustrophobia along with the characters. A chaotic background would distract the audience from the two children, who are the focus of the text. Later, when the two children are in the city and no longer the central focus of the page, the audience will be able to understand their feelings of being helplessly lost in a crowd because they will have to search for the characters on the page.

Until this point in the story when the children move from the countryside into the town, the background has been sparse and safe with the colors bright but separated. The children are inside the home, separated from the bright yellow, blue, and pink of the countryside. They are isolated, but safe, and everything is in its proper place. Yet when they reach the town, that safety and separation is lost, and the children themselves are lost in a world of chaos. To underscore this sense of isolation, Sendak draws the buildings and steeples that make up the skyline as crowded and close together. The people likewise are smashed against one another, pushing and shoving to their various destinations, once again forcing his characters to work through the spaces allowed by Sendak in the design. Every movement is a struggle. Because of this, it is easy to see how two simple country children would be lost in the hustle and bustle of townspeople. It is not until the end of the story when the children are finally able to bring milk home to their mother that the background becomes more clearly defined and less crowded. Pepiceck and Aninku run from the
town back to the countryside, still pushed by a sense of urgency. In the final scene of the children with their mother, the frame of the home occupies more space than when the home was first viewed. Thus, the reader is reassured that the home is not as initially crowded and small as it first might have seemed. The children are still isolated from the outside world, but they are now safe and calm, and the audience is allowed to feel a sense of safety and security as well. The claustrophobia is no longer threatening and uncomfortable, but it is secure and peaceful, the threat of danger allayed at last.

In the picture book, as well as opera, the setting also suggests the time period in which the story takes place. Each of the different backgrounds represent a moment in time and the characters must move within their given space in that time period. The setting is especially important in a work of fantasy such as Brundibar that exists outside the conventional indicators such as the illustration of night and day. Because he does not use dark colors to illustrate night times or a sun and clouds to indicate daytime, Sendak uses changes in scene and setting to indicate movement through time. McCloud discusses time when he explains the “duration of that time and space are defined more by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself” (McCloud, 99). While McCloud refers specifically to the comic book in this instance, the same concept can be applied to opera and the picture book in regards to set design. In both the opera and picture book, the audience relies on cues given by the background to discern the time of day in which the story is taking place or the duration of time in the story. By leaving the background and setting vague with his use of color and design, Sendak removes the conventional cues the audience would have relied on, and instead, they are forced to pay attention to the movement of the characters. The children are in a race against the clock to fetch milk and save their mother.
They do not know how long they have, and in the same way, the audience is left helpless like the children because they do not have a clear indication of time either.

While timing and set design are important elements, it is the excess and drama of the opera that is most apparent in *Brundibar*. Everything from the set design to the movements of the characters is overwhelming and elaborate. For example, Sendak’s design for *The Magic Flute* contains grand palm trees, historical figures from ancient Egypt, and images of the Orient. There are no microphones in opera, and the opera is performed inside of large multi-storied theaters. As a result, everything from the setting to the costumes and the voices of the characters must be large enough to travel to the very back row of the theater: thus the actors’ inflection must be exaggerated. The purpose is to create an array of splendor for the audience that everyone can equally enjoy. It is a combination of music and drama, serving as not only an audible but a visual display as well for the audience to feast upon (http://www.metmuseum.org). With his set design, Sendak is calling attention to this spectacle. The design of the background for *Brundibar* is a departure from other works of Sendak such as *In the Night Kitchen*. Instead of using the full page to illustrate his backgrounds, Sendak instead chooses to juxtapose them against a white background. This alludes to a set design that can be easily rolled away to make room for another set and change of scenery. An elaborate opera consists of many scene changes, as *Brundibar* does.

In doing this, Sendak is also limiting the movement of his characters. They are required to remain within the confines of his colored space and cannot move easily from one part of the page to another. Opera differs from other works of theater in that the movements are not as grand as those of a play or musical theater. Rather, it is the voice of the singer that is the central focus and is enhanced by the background setting and costuming of the character. The movements of the
character are constrained within the setting. Sendak illustrates his characters with this concept in mind. His characters, specifically the children, are held captive and their movements are limited by the background setting and staging. In the book *Singing, Acting, and Movement in Opera*, the authors state, “Singers are trained in the studio to avoid any hand or body movement that would be distracting to an audience” (Clark and Clark, 81). Sendak, in illustrating his characters, shows an understanding of this concept. His characters are already elaborately costumed, which will be discussed later in this section, and so to add elaborate movements by his characters would be a distraction to his audience. He designs with a balance in mind between the grand background and the movement of his characters. For example, as Aninku and Pepiceck are trying to sing over Brundibar, they imagine themselves as dancing bears. When illustrating their imaginary transformation, Sendak places them on a white background. However, when the characters are in front of the busy setting of the town or countryside, then the characters do not make any grand movements and remain limited by the background.

What his characters cannot do in movement, Sendak makes up for with his elaborate costuming of the characters. While the movements of the characters may be limited, they, like the characters in an opera, are depicted through the means of excess and exaggeration. His characters are not simply drawn, but costumed: their appearances are ornate and decorated with bright colors which stand out against his backdrop of pastels. In this manner, Sendak establishes a contrast between Pepiceck and Aninku, two simple country children, and the comparatively more lavishly-costumed townspeople who turn a deaf ear to their cries. His characterization also draws attention to the isolation the children feel because although they are surrounded by masses of people. It is obvious they do not belong, and there is no one to welcome them. Sendak also uses costuming and props to suggest that Brundibar resembles the townspeople with his military
uniform. He is not one of them, but he resembles another police officer, and thus, he is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” of sorts. It forms as elaborate disguise, the recognition of which depends upon the audience’s ability to interpret the codes attached to different modes of costuming.

Aside from Brundibar himself, the most dramatically designed characters are an ice-cream seller, a baker, and a milkman, whom the two children meet on their journey. Sendak’s choice in illustrating these characters depends upon their individual props, once again bearing Sendak’s signature that the character must fit to the design and not the other way around. The ice cream seller is clownish with her red lips and sharply pointed red nose, striped pants, and colorful patchwork skirt. The colors of her costume match the various bright reds, blues, greens, and other colors that make up her ice cream cones. In contrast to her pointed nose, face, and long tongue, the baker’s appearance is round and jovial, matching the rolls, buns, and cakes he is selling. The final character in the trio, the milkman, is a mixture of the baker and ice cream seller. Like his milk bottles, the milk man is tall and slender, and his full beard adds to his length. He also has the sharply drawn nose, red lips, and red boots like the ice cream seller. All three characters are overwhelmed by the excess of their products. For example, the ice cream seller has cones poking from her shoes and the baker must carry a basket on his head. Thus, the lavish and excessive “costuming” of this trio suggests a literal excess: obviously, there is more than plenty that can be spared for the children, but, nevertheless, not one of the trio will listen to their pleas for help. Moreover, each of these scenarios features animals who steal food from the colorful venders, even as the children are unable to touch it. While the exaggerated pictures of animals stealing food might be funny to children, it serves the greater purpose of showing the reader that children are given less consideration than animals.
In this way, the costuming of the vendors and townspeople places into relief their apathy to the children, and thus underscores the unjust—and wholly artificial—divisions of class that Sendak’s text subtly critiques. Outfitted with heels, pearls, fancy hats, and fur coats, the women of the town are elaborate and richly decorated in contrast to Aninku’s simple dress and kerchief. These women carry purses overflowing with cash and walk dogs with collars made of money. Aninku carries only an empty milk pail. Likewise, Pepiceck is dressed in a simple shirt with two buttons, trousers, and a hat. In his arms, he carries nothing, unlike the men of the city who can barely manage to hold onto their stuffed wallets and walking canes. Just as the vendors were outfitted with excess, the townspeople are as well; thus, Sendak demonstrates the absurdity of the townspeople’s apathy by showing how they can comfortably spare a little change to help the children instead of doing nothing. Through these illustrations of contrast, Sendak is using the excesses of opera to showcase the separation between the poor, country children and the wealthy, apathetic townspeople. According to Kushner, the “fantastic has always been for Sendak a transparent and economical means of expressing basic human truths” (Kushner, 86). His elaborate costuming further illustrates that the townspeople do not turn away because they were unable to help, but rather because they are interested in their own personal comfort. Thus, Sendak employs the symbolic medium of costuming to draw the audience’s attention to actual class disparities that exist within their own, contemporary moment.

It should be noted in this juncture, that no character is more elaborately costumed than the evil Brundibar. In brown military fatigues, Sendak designs this character with sharply pointed black boots and a matching pointed chin. His eyes are a psychotic ice blue, and his gaping mouth is framed by a mustache resembling rat whiskers, similar to the rat whiskers Sendak designed for the rat king in the “Nutcracker”. On his head hangs a large Napoleon-style hat with decorative
feathers, establishing him as the little dictator of the village. His prop is an organ grinder, but rather than designing Brundibar to resemble his prop as the other characters do, Sendak uses the prop to enhance Brundibar’s image as the town’s source of entertainment to which the people pledge their allegiance with their coins. He is the ultimate restriction of the characters’ movement, more so than any set design or other character. His elaborate costuming establishes him as the authority over the town and the ultimate controller over the actions and movements of everyone else. It is because Aninku and Pepiceck are complete outsiders to the village in every way that they are able to resist and ultimately overthrow the control Brundibar has over the village. In speaking of Sendak’s work in opera as well as illustration, Kushner states the “animated stage before you ceaselessly translates itself into the pages of a book” (Kushner, 98).

Indeed, in creating Brundibar, Sendak is able to translate the attitudes and personalities of his voiceless characters from the stage to the page by the use of costuming.

Yet, besides the setting and costuming, there is another element of opera that must be included in the discussion of Sendak’s creation of Brundibar. Despite the grandeur of the opera with its elaborate costuming and setting, it would be pointless without the music. Music is of great importance to Sendak, who considers Mozart to be one of his heroes (Kushner. 193). Through his illustrations, Sendak had to be able to transport—or, in effect “translate”—the music of the opera onto the pages of his book. However, when attempting to transport the music, Sendak runs into a problem because the characters of the picture book cannot sing as the characters of an opera do. Within Sendak’s creation of Brundibar there is music; however, it is expressed not through traditional means by hearing, but instead by seeing and perceiving. This is a concept called synaesthesia. Glen O’Malley calls synaesthesia a “metaphor of the senses” (2). The idea is that the five senses are not separate but instead intertwined. According to Jeffrey T.
Saletnik, Richard Wagner incorporated this method into his composing of his operas. Saletnik further elaborates, “The viewing subject was to be enveloped by sound, vision, and text, creating an experience not in which one sense was replaced by another, but rather an experience in which the senses intermingled and perhaps ultimately became one” (Saletnik, csmt.chicago.edu). Opera is an experience of the senses in which the music combines with the visual spectacle to create an emotion in the audience. In Brundibar, Sendak uses color within his text to create the music. The bright colors invoke an emotion of cheerfulness and the audience can perceive a triumphant melody of loud and boisterous music. In this case, the music is not about sound as much as it is about perception. Although the audience cannot hear a sound, they can perceive the sound through the use of color.

In keeping with this theme, Sendak uses color to establish, synaesthetically as it were, the melody. The foundation for the musical piece, melody is the succession of sounds that forms the base of the music. The use of pastels and bright colors is found on everything from the countryside and buildings to the costuming of the characters and their props. More specifically, a bright yellow hue runs throughout the text. Yellow initially appears in the hills surrounding the children’s home and it recurs in Pepiceck’s hair and Aninku’s kerchief. Furthermore, Sendak chooses to surround the speech bubbles placed within his text and this same bright yellow. Likewise, yellow is interwoven through the yellow stars worn by the doctor and children. As a result, Sendak is establishes a color-based pattern and consistency that functions like a melody or musical leitmotif. When this bright yellow does not appear, moreover, the melody is disturbed. For example, when the street children sing together in an effort to defeat Brundibar, the bright yellow color that has throughout the text significantly does not appear in this illustration. As a
result, the audience can see that something significant has occurred at this point because the melody— that is the pattern of color-choice— has been disrupted.

Even though melody forms the foundation of a musical piece, it is nothing without the rhythm. In music, the rhythm sets the pace of the music and determines the speed of the piece. Without the rhythm, then the music is just instruments moving about in a cluttered and chaotic mess. When translating music from the stage to the picture book, Sendak uses the background setting to form the rhythm of the story. Without the framework of the background setting, then the illustrations would just be a chaotic mass of color splotched upon the pages. It has already been demonstrated that the background is important in helping the audience orient themselves within the duration of the story. Now, the background plays a very important role in establishing the rhythm and pacing of the story. According to Neil Hawes on his website “Basic Music Theory”, it is common to refer to rhythm in terms of note lengths (www.neilhawes.com). These different note lengths define the rhythm as a longer note length slows the pacing of the melody. A shorter, more staccato note length means a faster melody. Sendak uses this same idea in illustrating. For example, as the children run home with their milk for their mother, the scenes change quickly as the pages turn from the town to the country and finally their home. In another example, the rhythm of the story is slower, or the notes are longer, when Sendak chooses to illustrate within the same background for several pages. This is the case when Sendak chooses to illustrate the children as they move through the setting of the town square for several pages. The rhythm combines with the melody, just as color and background combine together, to form a solid foundation upon which the opera and the picture book can be established.

Another element of the opera Sendak incorporates with his illustration is the use of aria. An aria is a section of the music designated for one character to sing apart from the other characters.
In Marcia Landy’s book *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, she states, “Orchestral and choral music also functions as a means of distinguishing between the individual and the collectivity, especially of distinguishing the great individual from the masses” (111). By choosing to focus his illustrations on one character at a time, Sendak is establishing these characters as separate from the group. In this his way, his illustrations serves as an aria, which distinguishes that character from the chorus of the other characters. Sendak depicts aria by illustrating the character singing the aria at the center of the page, and thus depicting them as larger than the other characters. For example, as the ice cream seller sings her aria about her goods, Sendak places her at the center of the page. Had she been on a stage, the ice cream seller would be downstage, or closest to the audience at the front of the stage, so the audience remains focused on her character. With her bright colors, she is more elaborate than the other characters, and she is also illustrated as bigger than the rest. Pepiceck and Aninku are beside her, the bright yellow of their hair and kerchief carry on the melody of the story, while the visible buildings in the background establish the setting and maintain the libretto. This same pattern is repeated with the baker, milkman, and later when the audience is first introduced to Brundibar.

Music also has the power to interact with the audience, and Sendak interacts through intraiconic text. According to Carole Scott and Maria Nikolajeva in *How Picturebooks Work*, intraiconic text is, “the uncertain division between text and image” (74). In *Brundibar*, Sendak uses intraiconic text to incorporate word and image together, rather than keep them separate. Above Sendak’s illustrations is the separate narration written by Tony Kushner, but then within the illustration is dialogue between the characters and the audience. It is with the usage of intraiconic text that Sendak is able to completely engage the audience and invite them in to the world of fantasy he has created within *Brundibar*. For example, the townspeople are chasing
Brundibar out of the city, and the narration states that the children, townspeople, and animals are followed by a very curious cockroach. After the narration states this, the cockroach replies within the illustration, “Wouldn’t you be” (49). This response is directed as a question towards the audience. This statement engages the audience, and a simple question can cause the audience to put themselves in the position of the townspeople and children. Now, the audience can ask themselves how they would react in such a situation. In this way, Sendak is engaging his audience in the text. Significantly, moreover, the intraiconic text also serves as a chorus. Within opera, the chorus is a musical section sung by a group of people. It can be sung as a group, as the children do when they sing their lullaby to earn money. Or, it can be used as a call and response, as Sendak uses it in the example above. Rather than characters questioning and responding to each other, Sendak incorporates the use of a chorus to question the audience, and then, as stated before, the audience has a chance to respond based on what they would do if their town was being confronted by a character such as Brundibar.

As an illustrator and lover of the opera, Sendak has been able to incorporate his two passions into one. Successfully, he is able to transport an opera from the stage to the page, thus inviting his audience to experience fantasy in a whole new dimension. The illustrations captivate and seduce the audience, much like the grandeur and spectacle of the opera draw in the viewer. As Kushner says the “kindred inclination of illustrator and theater artist alike is to unearth from written language, and to make manifest, its imagery, its iconography, its obvious or buried harmonic or antiphonic accompaniment” (Kushner, 77). As both an illustrator and theater artist, Sendak creates a work that goes beyond the written text to tell a story, and through this, he invites the audience to experience a world of fantasy they could not have otherwise imagined or explored on their own.
The Meaning Behind the Music

After all, his ability to create a new book by translating the elements of the opera onto the page demonstrates a mastery and knowledge of the opera as well as the picture book. Yet, Sendak’s purpose went beyond providing entertainment and a pleasant story. No, for Sendak, illustrating and creating is far too deep for simple pleasantries. He says, “To me, illustrating means having a passionate affair with the words… it is a sensual, deeply important experience” (Lanes, 109). This deep experience translates passionately into the pages of Brundibar as Sendak creates a work that to him is deeply personal (Fresh Air, NPR). It is personal because of not only Sendak’s childhood experiences, but also the experiences of Krasa, the opera’s composer, and the children who performed it. For Sendak, this is a story that must be told and told well in order to honor those for whom the original opera was created, as well as to call attention to the purpose behind the opera’s original performances.

As a child, Sendak can relate to the feelings of loneliness and isolation that translate into Pepiceck and Aninku. While he was growing up, Sendak’s family was always moving houses, and as a result, he had no childhood companions. Plagued by frequent illnesses and the fear of losing loved ones, Sendak retreated into his music and his illustrations (Landry, 16). It is no wonder that when he discovered Brundibar, an opera performed by children in a desperately traumatic situation, Sendak immediately felt a connection to the work and its performers. As a result of this connection, he wanted to create a work that would provide a means of refuge for his audience, as well as a tool to engage the reader’s emotional and critical response to contemporary traumas.
Transporting this opera to book format provided an opening for Sendak to engage his own personal demons. Throughout his life, Sendak was plagued by poor health which left him painfully aware of his own mortality. At the age of three, Sendak contracted measles followed by double pneumonia. His frail state caused him to spend much of his childhood indoors drawing pictures instead of being outside and making friends. Therefore, it is easy to see Sendak’s connection to the loneliness and boredom children feel. The characters in his stories reflect those feelings and the helplessness children feel in a world where everything is decided for them and they are ignored. He recalls his early years with his grandmother as he says, “My grandmother used to dress me in white clothes so that God passing over would assume I was already dead and angelic and go get some other kid. There was no question I would croak at an early age” (www.townsendcenter.berkley.edu). It was not only his frail state, but also the messages of the adults around him that he would soon die left him with a constant sense of fear that his life would end. In addition to his fragility, Sendak also was forced to deal with feelings of abandonment. Born June 10, 1928, Sendak grew up during the time of the kidnapping of Charles Lindburgh’s son. This event had a profound impact on his life because it served as another reminder that his life could change and he could be separated from his loved ones forever. He felt deeply connected with the child who was near his age and had everything. He felt that if something so terrible could happen to a child of privilege like the Lindburgh baby, then there was no hope for him (www.townsendcenter.berkley.edu). Throughout his life, Sendak has retained these fears as he has lost loved ones and suffered even more through heart attacks and illness (Patricia Cohen, New York Times).

Sendak has channeled these feelings of fear, anxiety, and death into his earlier works such as Outside Over There. In this work, a young girl named Ida is forced to overcome her feelings of
fear and jealousy and rescue her baby sister, who has been captured by goblins. This book falls along the theme that Sendak has often illustrated: “How children master various feelings—anger, boredom, fear, frustration, jealousy” (Lanes, 227). The illustrations of Outside Over There are dark and dreamlike, as if Ida’s battle is not physical, but psychological. She is growing up, and must take responsibility by dealing with her emotions. In the same way, Sendak focuses his anxieties into another work for the stage, The Nutcracker. Rather than allow the main character Clara to disappear after the first act as all the other characters are dancing, Sendak reorchestrates the ballet to include her from beginning to end. He chooses to focus this story on a young girl who is overwhelmed with the feelings of growing up, and she is aware that something is happening to her mentally and physically. In essence, she must respond to this situation by taking captive her feelings and returning home, ready to grow up (“Maurice Sendak’s Nutcracker”, NPR). Plagued by his own insecurities and fears, Sendak creates characters that are able to triumph and tame their own personal struggles.

Sendak carries this theme into Brundibar, in which he deals with a subject that has caused him the most fear and anxiety throughout his life. His parents both emigrated from Poland before World War I. His mother, Sadie, did so in an attempt to work and raise enough money to bring her family to America. Unfortunately, his father Philip journeyed to find and marry a woman he loved but who was married by the time he arrived in America. Philip and Sadie eventually found each other, married, and lived long, full lives. Their family members remaining in Poland were not as lucky. Although his parents never expressly sat down with Sendak and explained the events of the Holocaust to Sendak, he knew terrible things were happening based on the hushed whispers his parents spoke to each other. The events surrounding World War II became even more personal because his brother, a soldier, was missing in action for a time (McGrath, New
While he felt genuine concern for his brother, who eventually returned home, it was the Holocaust that surrounded him with guilt because he was able to survive, and his family members did not. According to Kushner, “Maurice is not an observant Jew, but he is deeply Jewish. Like most Jews, he is shadowed always by the Holocaust. Relatives of his who didn’t make it to America died in the camps.” (192). Shadowed in this case is an understatement: haunted would be a better phrasing.

It was the morning of Sendak’s bar mitzvah that his father was learned about the deaths of most of his relatives, and he had to be supported by Sendak’s mother and brother in order to stand (King, Abrams, Dowling, 190). This was one of the most significant events in Sendak’s life, marking his passage from boy to man in accordance with his Jewish heritage. It was supposed to be a happy time and full of celebration, especially since this frail and sickly child was able to reach adulthood. Rather than feeling compassion or sympathy, Sendak felt anger. “I hated them for dying”, he states in an interview with NPR (Fresh Air, NPR). This is another reason why Sendak has been so focused on creating stories such as *The Nutcracker* and *Outside Over There* which feature children being able to embark on a journey into adulthood to overcome their emotions. A very significant moment in his journey to adulthood was overshadowed by a horrible tragedy, and he could only feel anger and jealousy because of what occurred. Eventually, this anger and jealousy transformed into a feeling of guilt over the fact that he was still allowed to experience life, and his relatives could not (McGrath, *New York Times*).

As a result, it is not surprising that creating *Brundibar* was not just a professional, but a mental and emotional necessity as well. In an article for the *New York Times*, Charles McGrath states, “When he first heard about *Brundibar*, he added, he felt the dead crowding around him—especially the Sendaks who didn’t make it to this country” (McGrath, *New York Times*). Sendak
knew he had to create this work in order to soothe the ghosts he felt had been following him since childhood. Transporting Brundibar from opera to images allowed Sendak a method to discuss and confront his personal demons. In this same article, Sendak says, “I felt that if I could just do Brundibar right, then maybe this would be the end of the fever” (McGrath, New York Times). In order to “do Brundibar right”, Sendak would be forced to engage his own obstacles that had been lifelong companions.

The first obstacle Sendak needed to overcome was his sense of survivor’s guilt he felt for escaping the Holocaust when his own relatives did not. Just as opera transforms the familiar into fantasy, Sendak creates a fantastical illustration of survival to honor his relatives. He does this by dividing his illustrations into two separate parts. In the first part, which is meant to be taken at face value, the children really are on a journey to help their mother and then find themselves in an alley, contemplating their fate. Kushner describes that the second part of the story, or the events following the children in the alley “is possibly real, or possibly it’s merely a victory dreamt by two cold, homeless kids for whom the morning will bring no good news” (Kushner, 214). It is because he has now created this moment of fantasy for himself that Sendak can now comprehend his characters, as well as his relatives, defying the odds and surviving. There is now a possibility of hope, instead of just a definite ending of pain and failure. Additionally, as all three hundred children are singing their lullaby, Sendak illustrates these children being carried away by ravens. This illustration demonstrates they are conquerors over death, as they are riding and in control of the ravens, as opposed to the ravens taking them away without warning. There is a paradox in his illustrations, which Kushner is swift to point out. The first half of these illustrations, are very elaborate and colorful, resembling more folk drawings. Despite the fantastical elements of color and illustration, this is the part to be understood as actually
occurring in the story. However, when moving towards the second half, which is meant to be understood as fantasy and dream-like, Sendak begins to use more elaborate detailing in the faces and clothing of his characters. This is notable especially in the scene where the ravens carrying the children. This paradox is not a mistake or meant to confuse the audience. Rather, Sendak is creating a fantasy world in which hope is possible and good can triumph over evil. It is a way to honor his relatives and the children who died by creating a place where they are allowed to have control over their own fate and decide whether to live or die. Illustrating a world of fantasy in which his characters, and ultimately family members who were constantly on his mind, gave Sendak the ability to honor the dead and their memory. Thus, he was able to work through his guilt.

Illustrating Brundibar also allowed Sendak to confront his fears of his own mortality. Pepiceck and Aninku were two children, innocently going about their own journey through life, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (McGrath, New York Times). In order to overcome their unfortunate fate, these children must demonstrate resilience. As Richard Gottlieb states in The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, resilience “reflects a child’s capacity to transform otherwise crippling traumatic circumstances into his (or her) very means of survival, growth, and positive maturation” (Gottlieb, 186). In writing this book, Sendak was concerned mainly with the child’s ability to survive circumstances over which he or she has no control. Whether it be the death of his relative in the Holocaust, the deaths of his own immediate family members, or even his own health, Sendak has been forced to deal with circumstances beyond his own control. As he illustrates through the characters of Pepiceck and Aninku, there is a choice to be made to be resilient and stand against Brundibar, and thus move from a life of fear to one of control. Referring once again to the illustration of the ravens, Sendak’s fear of death undergoes a
transformation. By illustrating the children perched atop their ravens, smiling and waving to their mothers below as they ride away into the night, Sendak is depicting an acceptance of death. These children are not fighting their fate, but instead have accepted it. After writing *Brundibar*, Sendak’s fear of death seems to have been soothed, much like that of his characters. He tells Charles McGrath, “I’m less hysterical, less bullied by demons. I understand now that it isn’t a question of whether I am going to die, but when” (McGrath, *New York Times*). Illustrating *Brundibar* provided Sendak with an outlet in which he could engage his personal struggles so that he too could overcome them, much like Pepiceck and Aninku.

As stated above, when he first heard the opera *Brundibar*, Sendak could feel the dead crowding around him. These dead were not only his relatives, but also the children who performed this opera inside the concentration camp at Terezin. Their story needed to be honored as well through this picture, and Sendak felt an intense obligation to fulfill that need. Located just 60 kilometers outside of Prague, Terezin was not a typical concentration camp. Approximately 7,000 people lived in Terezin before it became a home for Jews on October 19, 1941. Terezin was organized to be the model Jewish ghetto complete with a post office and ironically, a church. Many of those who lived in Terezin were professors, artists, and musicians who were encouraged to practice their craft. This is evidenced by the performances of *Brundibar* by different groups of children for entertainment within the camp. By allowing artists to practice their craft, the Nazis were promoting the idea that Terezin was the ideal place to live, and the Jews should be grateful to them for such a home. The Nazis even promoted Terezin as “The Fuhrer’s Gift to the Jews”. However, Terezin was anything but a gift. Most of its elderly inhabitants had been deceived into selling their possessions and exchanging their old lives for concrete floors and crowded spaces. Disease and famine were prevalent. At its height, Terezin
held over 41,000 inhabitants, over five times the size of the original town. Unlike other concentration camps, there were no gas chambers. Rather, Terezin was like a holding cell where Jews were kept until they either died of illnesses and starvation or were transported to other concentrations camps such as Auschwitz (“Terezin, www.holocaustresearchproject.org).

In order to project the image of a model ghetto, the Nazis allowed for leisure time, or Freizeitgestaltung, in which artistic activities such as plays and operas could be performed by the inmates of Terezin (Rovit, 111). Krasa, Brundibar’s composer, was now an inmate at Terezin, and he fine tuned his opera which was performed fifty five times by the camp’s children. The text of the opera is very politically charged and critical of Hitler. However, it is possible the message of a story about two children in search of milk could have been lost on the Nazis, or simply might not have cared. However, the opera did provide a source of comfort to the children and inmates who took part in the performances. One survivor recalls, “I remember squeezing into the hall where seats and standing room were all crammed. Lovely, healthy, talented kids they all were, and all of them prisoners. Their eyes shown with excitement at the fall of the wicked Brundibar” (Rovit, 120). For them, the opera was viewed as an allegory of their situation, and the theme of good triumphing over evil provided a source of encouragement as well (Rovit, 112).

Unfortunately, in studying the history of Brundibar and Terezin, one comes to realize the tragic fate that met Krasa and most of the children who performed the opera. Rarely ever did the same cast perform the opera, as most were shipped away to Auschwitz after their performance. Krasa himself was gassed in the chambers of Auschwitz in 1944 (www.pbs.org). In total, approximately 15,000 children passed through the gates of Terezin. Some came with their family members, but many were orphans or the remnants of other ghettos that had been destroyed. Of
those 15,000, only about one hundred survived to see liberation. The rest were gassed or forced to succumb to starvation and disease. It is easy when studying the Holocaust to be lost in the great scope of numbers. The 15,000 children at Terezin are only a small section of the eight million men, women, and children, who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis. It is also easy for such an unspeakable horror to remain unspeakable and impersonal for those who were spared the brutality and violence. When hearing about horrible events that do not directly affect one’s life, the natural human reaction is become detached from the event in order to guard oneself against being too involved and possibly hurt. However, in creating a story about two children, Sendak is putting a face to the 15,000 children who were exterminated. The audience is able to watch as their story unfolds from beginning to end, thus making detachment difficult.

While this story remained deeply personal for Sendak, his job as an illustrator was to first and foremost pay homage to those who died as a result of the Holocaust, specifically Terezin. In paying homage, Sendak is creating a work that does not seek to mock the pain or belittle the trials that the children on Terezin endured. Instead, he is displaying the utmost respect and reverence for his subjects through the way he illustrates them. Sendak has always believed children are tough, and all they ask for is the truth. Children also show a strong resiliency in the face of trouble (Fresh Air, NPR). As a result, Sendak depicts not adults but children who are able to see through the deceptive schemes of Brundibar and come to the aid of their fellow man. These children he illustrates show a strong determination and willingness to ban together in the midst of adversity. It is interesting to note that, as stated before, the children who performed at Terezin were often hauled away to the gas chambers of other concentration camps following their presentations. These children did not go as individuals; moreover, they were sent as an
entire cast, a group. Together, they had sung about defeating evil, and then they were exterminated by that evil.

While *Brundibar* is a story of triumph, it should not be forgotten that young lives were lost in the original translations of this opera from the musical page to the stage. Sendak now is hoping to honor and revere that loss through his translation of the opera from stage to image. There is an irony at play in Sendak’s translation. Opera and the picture book are meant to be forms of entertainment; however, with this knowledge, the text does not allow the reader to merely read, entertain, and be finished. Instead, the text encourages the reader to observe the memory of the children who suffered just as Sendak does in his illustrations. It also draws attention to those in the text who heard the cries of the children and did nothing. Rather than aid Pepiceck and Aninku, the townspeople toss their coins at Brundibar as he grinds out a tune to keep them entertained. In keeping with the melody of the illustrations, the townspeople toss coins in a bright yellow hue, representing the blood of their Jewish neighbors, which they willingly shed in order to preserve their own comfort. Sendak illustrates the townspeople, whom he disdains, in contrast with the three hundred children of whom he has the utmost respect. Like the many Gentile citizens of Germany and other European countries who lives during the Holocaust, the adults prove themselves to be fickle by siding with Brundibar at first, and then switching to the side of the children after they provide better entertainment than Brundibar in that moment. These children were willing to cast aside their own personal gains, something the adults were unwilling to do in the beginning, and it was they who sparked change and were able to defeat evil. These children, and not the adults, are the heroes for taking the initiative to face their own fears and the possibility of death with courage.
Sendak has the utmost respect for his subjects. In order to honor them through his illustrations, Sendak understands the importance of keeping the audience uncomfortable and from remaining complacent. The truth remains that the children of Terezin were being exploited to provide entertainment. Portions of a performance of *Brundibar* appeared on “the Fuhrer’s Gift to the Jews” (www.pbs.org), which was used as propaganda throughout Germany. Their performances were also used to keep inmates complacent. In order to respect his subjects, Sendak has to be careful not to exploit them for the purposes of entertainment as the Nazis did fifty years before. In drawing upon the conventions of opera music, Sendak disrupts the illustration with a method the audience is not familiar with, and therefore, he is disrupting the music of the text. One such example of this is an illustration in which Brundibar and the townspeople are chasing Aninku and Pepiceck away from the town square. Up until this time, Sendak has depicted aria with one character as the central focus of the page and the other characters behind the one featured. However, in this scene, Sendak does the reverse. The townspeople appear downstage, and Brundibar’s face appears behind the townspeople, but it is larger than the other characters and the central focus of the page. This image is disturbing because Sendak is moving departing from his own methods of illustrating aria, which have been consistent up until this point. Now, Brundibar’s aria is more frightening because his voice will have to be louder and more menacing in order to not only scream over the townspeople, but also to still carry its frightening intonation from the back of the stage. This frightening, synthetically-evoked, sound is also evidenced by Sendak’s transformation of Brundibar’s appearance from a cream colored face and blue eyes to a furiously purple face with red eyes. The image is frightening and overwhelming, causing the viewer to pause and sympathize with the children as they run in terror away to the alley.
Sendak allows the audience to become uncomfortable for the purpose of not only drawing attention to the ways the children have been exploited, but also to draw attention to the overall spectacle of the camp in relation to Brundibar. On June 23, 1944, a delegation from the International Red Cross visited Terezin for the purpose of inspection. In the months leading up to the inspection, the camp underwent a reconstruction. Tents were taken down and a park was created instead. Children were dressed in clean clothes, and they also performed Brundibar for the delegates ("Terezin", www.holocaustresearchproject.com). The Red Cross workers were not taken through the barracks where the majority of the inmates were kept. They also did not realize that those children who sang before them would soon be led away and murdered. Opera in itself is a grand illusion and creates a fantasy world. Like many other aesthetic forms—including the picture book—its chief objective is to provoke a suspension of disbelief, and thus to distract the reader’s attention from his/her present moment and conditions. It is easy for realities of the present to be lost in the grandeur and spectacle of opera. In the same way, the Red Cross was deceived by the spectacle and grandeur of Terezin. Just as the townspeople were deceived by Brundibar, the Red Cross was deceived by the Nazis, and as a result, lives were lost.

As this book is written for children, a young audience may not be as aware as an adult would be of the themes of the Holocaust which pervade the story. This raises the question proposed by Kushner, “In a world of trouble and woe and worse, what are children to be told? How much knowledge should they be spared?” (Kushner, 210). Sendak, through his illustrations has had the utmost respect for his child audience, as well as his subjects. He believes children desire the truth, and that they can handle the truth. Through the comparison he draws between the townspeople and the children who are able to rise against Brundibar, Sendak promotes the theme
that children are the ones who not only demand truth, but also who can appropriately come to terms with the truth.

**Music Lessons**

It is this desire to illustrate truth that leads the discussion away from the how and why behind Sendak’s creation of *Brundibar* and moves toward a discussion of Sendak’s overall purpose in transporting the opera to illustration. Had Sendak simply wanted to create a good story for children, then he could have drawn from his reserve of talent and skill. Yet, Sendak understood that *Brundibar* is much more than just a story to be entertaining, as the opera was much more than just another piece of theater. As stated before, *Brundibar* the book was created in 2003. As a result, Sendak was writing a book about the Holocaust for a child audience several generations removed from the event. The challenge facing Sendak was not only how he could translate the story from the book to the opera, but also how to make this story relevant to a child audience that has not experienced such extreme trauma. While this child audience may not have an understanding of the events of the Holocaust, Sendak puts a tremendous amount of faith in them, and demonstrates the themes of this story are relevant even in the twenty first century.

Had Sendak allowed the story to end with the two children safely at home, then the social ramifications that he seeks to discourse through the text would be lost. Instead, allows the final words to belong to Brundibar. Scribbled on the last page is a note from Brundibar which reads “They believe they’ve won the fight, They believe I’m gone, not quite! Nothing ever works out neatly—bullies don’t give up completely. One departs, the next appears, and we shall meet again, my dears!” This line does not appear in the original opera, but instead was written by Kushner (*Fresh Air*, NPR). Sendak chose to illustrate the words on a ticket to visit Terezin. It
features images of three elderly Jewish men resembling the doctor dancing across the page. Underneath Brundibar’s handwriting, the reader notices the words on the ticket inviting the ticket holder to a party thrown by The Council Elders, or the body of elderly Jewish men allowed to rule over Terezin. The ticket is dated July 1942-July 1944, and it is an invitation from the Council to the residents of Terezin to come and watch a performance of *Brundibar*.

Although Sendak illustrates dancing Jewish men, he does not use the bright yellow to represent the stars on their jackets. Instead, Sendak draws the ticket using light brown and cream, giving the ticket an antique look and feel. The ticket is also designed on a plain white background. Because the bright yellow and background setting is gone, then the music of *Brundibar* has ended, signaled by the absence of the melody and rhythm. This last illustration is also a departure for Sendak because there is no featured character beside the words, indicating that this character is singing his aria. Rather, the illustration only features the words. Had this been in the original opera, one could imagine the stage completely empty and these words being sung by Brundibar offstage. It is a powerful moment. On the preceding pages, the audience has been given a great moment of happiness and triumph as the children save their mother with the pail of milk. However, after turning the page, the reader realizes that this moment of triumph will not last forever because Brundibar was not completely defeated, and evil was not completely destroyed. Instead of a “happily ever after” ending, it is now a “happily ever after… for now”.

Yet Sendak’s purpose in adding this illustration is not simply to scare the children or to leave them feeling a sense of despair. Instead, Sendak’s purpose is to warn and prepare them for the future. In an interview with National Public Radio on October 30, 2003, Sendak tells the audience that evil will persist and children need to know that, whether their parents like it or not. Most parents would disagree with Sendak, preferring instead to shield their children as long as
possible from the world around them. Sendak begs to differ, going on to say that “Children are tough. All they ask is the truth” (Fresh Air, NPR). Children are traditionally upheld as delicate creatures. Their lives are fragile, and they are at the mercy of the decisions of the adults around them. Sendak has the utmost respect for his child audience, choosing to inform rather than shelter them. He believes his own problems and struggles as he grew up did not result from being informed, but rather because he himself was only given bits and pieces of the truth. His knowledge was formed by whispers and glimpses into the truth. As a result, his imagination was left to fill in the rest as he believed the truth must have been too horrible for him to handle (Fresh Air, NPR). Sendak places faith in his child audience, knowing that they can handle whatever danger is thrown at them. Instead of running in fear away from their trials and Brundibars, he wants to teach them how to face those fears.

The lesson in facing one’s fears comes at the climax of the story. After being chased away from the village by Brundibar, Pepiceck and Aninku find themselves in an alley. Surrounded by garbage, the children are in a desperate situation, and it is in this moment they are given a choice. They can either continue on in their pathetic attempt to find milk, or they can give up and go home. They know if they continue on in their journey, then there is a possibility they could fail. Brundibar could once again chase them out of town, or do even worse. However, if they decide to go home without the milk, then their mother will surely die and they will be left on their own. In illustrating this choice, Sendak is reminding his child audience that they too will be faced with choices in which they must either give up or press forward no matter the difficulty. Certainly giving up would have been easier for Pepiceck and Aninku. They could go home and spend their mother’s final days with her and hope she can get better without the milk. For all they know, she could have died while they were on their journey, and so their efforts have been in vain. Despite
the odds stacked against them, the children instead take the more difficult road and choose to press on in their search for milk. They have been given a task, and to simply give up and go home is unacceptable. Sendak wants his child audience to understand that no matter how difficult or intimidating an obstacle may be to overcome, it can be defeated with perseverance.

In addition to perseverance, Sendak wants his child audience to learn a lesson that is very countercultural and contrastive to the themes from his earlier works. Up until Brundibar, his picture books such as In the Night Kitchen and Outside Over There feature a solitary hero or heroine who must overcome their own isolation or loneliness. However, in Brundibar his hero and heroine not only work together as brother and sister, but they also defeat Brundibar with the help of three hundred other children and several talking animals. Rather than just one child overcoming his or her fears, Sendak chooses to illustrate a community of children who are able to band together and defeat Brundibar. Had Pepiceck and Aninku acted alone, they might never have been able to defeat Brundibar. However, because they now belong to a much larger group, their needs and desires are recognized. The voices of three hundred will always travel more loudly than the voices of two. As a result, Sendak is pervading a theme of the necessity of community in overcoming evil. This is countercultural because children are taught the importance of independence and self reliance as they grow up—especially children living in the United States, in which a myth of “rugged individualism” is generally privileged. Picture books reiterate this theme. For example, the list “100 Picture Books Everyone Should Know” features many picture books about children who are confronted with problems and must act independently such as Olivia, Mabela the Clever, The Tale of Peter Rabbit, and another Sendak work, Where the Wild Things Are (kids.nypl.org). Rarely, if ever, are there stories about children who must work together in order to solve a problem.
While independence may be important, Sendak wants his child audience to understand they can rely on others to defeat recurring Brundibars. By working together with all of these children to defeat Brundibar, Pepiceck and Aninku have gained friends who will be there to help them the next time Brundibar threatens to destroy their happiness. In addition to the need for community, Sendak is also demonstrating the personal responsibility that children have to help Pepicecks and Aninkus in their lives. Not only did the two main characters have a choice to make in that alley, but the other three hundred children also had a choice to make as well. When summoned by the talking dog, cat, and bird, the children could have chosen not to respond to their needs and instead turned deaf ears to their cries as the townspeople had done. These children are moved by the cries of their fellow man and rush to their aid. These children were aware that there were consequences facing their decision. They could be attacked by the townspeople and Brundibar just as Pepiceck and Aninku had been. Yet, they rise to the challenge anyway, and it is their collective voice that defeats the horrible bully.

When illustrating this mass of children, Sendak designs some, but not all with yellow stars on their clothing, indicating that some, but not all were Jewish. Indeed, when Aninku and Pepiceck return home, an image of a Crucifix hangs on the wall, showing that the two children are not Jewish but Gentiles. Although he himself is Jewish, Sendak illustrates that anyone, not just Jewish children, can be affected by a bully such as Brundibar. In this way, Sendak is providing a message that is applicable to every child. No matter ethnicity or background, a child will face Brundibars throughout his or her life. Moreover, Sendak is teaching his audience that everyone has an obligation to help his fellow man no matter their background or differences. This brings to mind the famous poem written by German Pastor Martin Neimoller around 1946 which says, “First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist”
The poem goes on to describe the Nazis coming for the Socialists, the Trade Unionists, and then the Jews. Finally, Neimoller states, “Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me”. The lesson in this poem is that because he did not stand against the oppression of other, there was no one who would stand for him when the time came for him to be oppressed. This is the lesson the text of Brundibar promotes as well. In order to prevent tyranny from thriving, then people must stand together in opposition at the first sign of harm, before it is too late.

Sendak also chooses to illustrate the children with very little detail in their faces so his child audience can project themselves onto the various images of the children. Thus, the child will be able to put himself in the position of the other children. For Sendak, writing Brundibar was deeply personal, and he understands the lessons learned from this book will last only if they are deeply personal as well (Fresh Air, NPR). In a process referred to by Scott McCloud as amplification through simplification, illustrating an image with fewer details makes the image more universal. McCloud says, “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way realistic art can’t” (McCloud, 30). The viewer can now focus on a few details of the face such as the eyes, nose, and mouth that are illustrated and create the rest of the details through imagination. In this way, the audience becomes part of the story, and the story becomes more than just entertainment. It becomes a shared experience between the author, characters, and audience.

Sendak cares deeply for his child audience, and he suffers deeply over his illustrations (Kushner, 210). This is because he wants his stories not simply to be a form of entertainment, but rather to enable his child audience to develop emotionally and cope when experiencing personal
trauma. Sendak is not only concerned with individual trauma, but collective trauma as a whole due to discrimination because of race, religion, economic, and sexual preference. For example, his picture book *We are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, features two small children confronted with issues of poverty and illness. Sendak was inspired to write this story when he passed by a child sleeping in a cardboard box. The image moved Sendak deeply, and he wrote a *Jack and Guy* as a critique of American consumerism, which he references with such iconic images as Trump Tower in New York City, and its effect on children (Lyall, *New York Times*). This book, like *Brundibar*, is concerned with this trauma the child feels (i.e. homelessness and bullies), and the ability of the child to be resilient in the face of those traumas. By reading books such as *Jack and Guy* and *Brundibar*, a child, regardless of background, will be able to share in the experiences of the characters, and as a result learn to confront their own Brundibars through perseverance and a willingness to seek out community. Through his story, Sendak teaches that it is not a sign of weakness to ask for or give help, but rather a sign of strength. Brundibars will come not just at one time, but throughout life, and in various forms, but these bullies can be defeated.

It is no wonder that Sendak refers to *Brundibar* as his crowning achievement. Through this picture book, Sendak was able to masterfully transform a visual and auditory spectacle such as the opera onto the pages of a picture book. In doing so, Sendak was able to engage himself in a battle to overcome his personal demons, as well as honor those whose lives were lost in the Holocaust. Above all, Sendak created a text that would engage his child audience in the story and seeks to inspire them to confront their own personal obstacles rather than run away. In creating his picture book, Sendak sought to design a text about survival in the midst of struggle (McGrath, *New York Times*). In doing so, *Brundibar* not only survives, but thrives.
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