

Cover Art

Jewish Operas, Vol. 2

A MESSAGE FROM THE MILKEN ARCHIVE FOUNDER



Dispersed over the centuries to all corners of the earth, the Jewish people absorbed elements of its host cultures while, miraculously, maintaining its own. As many Jews reconnected in America, escaping persecution and seeking to take part in a visionary democratic society, their experiences found voice in their music. The sacred and secular body of work that has developed over the three centuries since Jews first arrived on these shores provides a powerful means of expressing the multilayered saga of American Jewry.

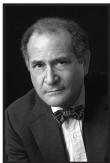
While much of this music had become a vital force in American and world culture, even more music of specifically Jewish content had been created, perhaps performed, and then lost to current and future generations. Believing that there was a unique opportunity to rediscover, preserve and transmit the collective memory contained within this music, I founded the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music in 1990.

The passionate collaboration of many distinguished artists, ensembles and recording producers over the past fourteen years has created a vast repository of musical resources to educate, entertain and inspire people of all faiths and cultures. The Milken Archive of American Jewish Music is a living project; one that we hope will cultivate and nourish musicians and enthusiasts of this richly varied musical repertoire.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lowell Milken".

Lowell Milken

A MESSAGE FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



The quality, quantity, and amazing diversity of sacred as well as secular music written for or inspired by Jewish life in America is one of the least acknowledged achievements of modern Western culture. The time is ripe for a wider awareness and appreciation of these various repertoires—which may be designated appropriately as an aggregate “American Jewish music.” The Milken Archive is a musical voyage of discovery encompassing more than 600 original pieces by some 200 composers—symphonies, operas, cantorial masterpieces, complete synagogue services, concertos, Yiddish theater, and folk and popular music. The music in the Archive—all born of the American Jewish experience or fashioned for uniquely American institutions—has been created by native American or immigrant composers. The repertoire is chosen by a panel of leading musical and Judaic authorities who have selected works based on or inspired by traditional Jewish melodies or modes, liturgical and life-cycle functions and celebrations, sacred texts, and Jewish history and secular literature—with

intrinsic artistic value always of paramount consideration for each genre. These CDs will be supplemented later by rare historic reference recordings.

The Milken Archive is music of **AMERICA**—a part of American culture in all its diversity; it is **JEWISH**, as an expression of Jewish tradition and culture enhanced and enriched by the American environment; and perhaps above all, it is **MUSIC**—music that transcends its boundaries of origin and invites sharing, music that has the power to speak to all of us.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Neil W. Levin".

Neil W. Levin

Neil W. Levin is an internationally recognized scholar and authority on Jewish music history, a professor of Jewish music at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, music director of Schola Hebraica, and author of various articles, books, and monographs on Jewish music.

About the Composers

DAVID SCHIFF (b. 1945) is a highly respected and accomplished composer and a distinguished writer on music and culture. Born in New York City, he began composing as a child, but he elected to major in English literature during his undergraduate studies at Columbia College (Columbia University). During the 1960s, Columbia was a major center of new music and exciting new developments, with such important composers on its faculty as Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky, pioneers in electronic tape music; Jack Beeson, the celebrated opera composer; and, from the younger generation, Harvey Sollberger and Charles Wuorinen, who jointly directed the groundbreaking Group for Contemporary Music, to which Columbia played host. Schiff could not have resisted that influence, and indeed, after earning a master's degree at Cambridge University in England, he returned to New York to study composition at the Manhattan School of Music, where he worked with John Corigliano (a former student of Luening's at Columbia) and Ursula Mamlok. Following that, he earned his doctorate in composition at The Juilliard School, where his principal mentor was Elliott Carter—widely considered one of the deans of serious American composers. Schiff's association with Carter led to his first major literary endeavor, a book about his teacher's work. Published in 1983, *The Music of Elliott Carter* was the first book-length study of Carter's challenging music and the various forces behind it, and it brought Carter to the attention of many outside new music circles.

Although he is one of Carter's most prominent and successful students, Schiff's music bears little if any resemblance to his teacher's style and rigor, intellectual, and nontonal approach. Rather, Schiff has turned, for example, to jazz in a number of pieces, such as *Scenes from Adolescence* (1987), a chamber work for which Schiff acknowledges a composite debt of influence to Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Bud Powell, Sidney Bechet, and especially Charles Mingus; *Shtik* (1992), for bass trombone and jazz ensemble; *Four Sisters* (1997), a concerto for violin and orchestra; *Low Life*, for solo bass trombone and jazz orchestra; and *Pepper Pieces*, arrangements of songs by Jim Pepper for the jazz violinist Hollis Taylor and string ensemble. Schiff's interest in jazz as a powerful

influence to be tapped for concert music extends beyond his own compositions. His second book, published in 1997, is a study of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*: probably the best-known example of a synergy between jazz and blues on the one hand and classical European traditions on the other.

Jazz has hardly been the exclusive influence on Schiff's music, nor the only wellspring from which he has drawn. Major American as well as European modernists have also played a major role in shaping his creativity—especially Stravinsky and Bartók, whose impact is felt in many of his pieces.

Schiff's deep commitment to his Jewish heritage has left its stamp on a number of his works, apart, of course, from the obvious—and still the most famous—example of *Gimpel the Fool*. One of his most important liturgical works is his Sabbath eve service, *Avodat Bet Yisrael* (1983), commissioned for the 125th anniversary of Congregation Beth Israel in Schiff's home city since 1980, Portland, Oregon (a congregation that was founded in 1858, the year before Oregon had become a state). This service is believed to be the first full synagogue service written specifically for the special characteristics of a soprano cantorial voice (in this case, Schiff's wife, Judith, an invested cantor in the Reform movement). The other significant liturgical works are *Hallel* (1988), for cantor, choir, and organ; and a setting of the *k'dusha* (lit., sanctification) liturgy (1991), under that title. He has also written an operatic-dramatic cantata, or chamber opera, *Vashti, or the Whole Megillah* (1997)—based on the Book of Esther.

Schiff began work on a second full opera, *Dubliners*, after James Joyce, but when a Broadway show emerged on the same subject, he abandoned his project, and it remains uncompleted. The work he did on it gave rise to several instrumental pieces bearing the shared title *Joycesketch*. Other significant compositions include *Slow Dance* (1989), written on a commission from the Oregon Symphony; *Stomp* (1990); *Solus Rex* (1992), for bass trombone and chamber ensemble, commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and premiered by bass trombonist David Taylor; *Speaking in Drums* (1995), a concerto for timpani and string orchestra commissioned by the Minnesota Orchestra; *Canti di Davide* (2001), a concerto for clarinet and orchestra composed for clarinetist David Shifrin; and *New York Nocturnes*, a piano trio written for Chamber Music Northwest.

Schiff's music has been performed by many major American orchestras and has been issued on recordings by the Delos, New World, Argo, and Naxos labels. He continues to write, especially about 20th-century music—but often in a wider historical context—and he contributes major articles frequently to *The New York Times*. He is also a contributing editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, where his essays appear regularly.

Schiff has been a professor at Reed College in Portland since 1980, and he has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, ASCAP (the Deems Taylor Award), and League of Composers / ISCM.



GIMPEL THE FOOL

Schiff's opera *Gimpel the Fool*—originally written almost entirely in Yiddish and based faithfully on (or, more aptly, a musical stage setting of) Isaac Bashevis Singer's famous short story of the same title—had a protracted and cumulative gestation. The idea came to the composer in fulfillment of an undergraduate assignment to develop a libretto for a composition class with Nicholas Flagello at the Manhattan School of Music. Schiff, who had read none of Singer's stories either in Yiddish or in translation, was teaching a literature class at the New York branch of Hebrew Union College (along with another in music theory), and he had put some of those stories in their English translation on the reading list for his class—"as an excuse to read them" himself, he later confessed. He was immediately drawn to *Gimpel*. Like Gimpel in the story, his own grandfather had been a baker, but Schiff also had a growing urge to explore some of his ancestral roots in Poland, and this story served as a conduit. At the same time, he intuited the operatic potential of the story and its characters, especially in terms of "the true believer who appears foolish in the eyes of the world." With Singer's permission, Schiff proceeded to adapt a libretto directly from the author's words, returning to the original Yiddish. Singer of course approved the libretto prior to the premiere, but Schiff has explained that it was not a collaborative process: "I can't say I wrote it [the libretto], because it is Singer's words; I 'arranged his words.' But the structure is mine." By the time Schiff actually began composing the music, in 1974, he was a doctoral student at

Juilliard, working with Elliott Carter, and the opera ultimately became his dissertation.

The initial version amounted to a small part of what would eventually become the full opera, and it was first performed, with piano accompaniment, at Schiff's family synagogue, Beth El, in New Rochelle, New York, in 1975. At that point it was, in his words, more like a little cabaret piece. Subsequent performances followed in New York and Boston, each time with additions and refinements to the score and even to the structure and theatrical concept. But it remained unorchestrated until the opportunity came for a full production of the completed work (its "first completed version") in 1979 at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York, more or less inaugurating the imaginative "Jewish Opera at the Y" annual series, which became a formal program the following season and lasted until 1985.

Apart from Schiff's masterful score, colorful musical depictions, and engaging use of melodic and modal materials, that premiere of *Gimpel the Fool* as a full-length and fully staged opera resonated with significance in the general music, operatic, and Jewish literary worlds on two planes. Singer, considered for some time one of the great writers of Yiddish fiction in the modern era, and certainly the most famous Yiddish writer to the non-Yiddish-speaking public in America, had just received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1978. Marking the first—and to date the only—instance of that award given to a Yiddish writer, its citation referred to his "impassioned narrative art, which, with roots in a Polish-Jewish cultural tradition, brings universal conditions to life." Still, although some of his stories had enjoyed stage adaptations as plays, this was the first opera based on any of them. Moreover, *Gimpel* was probably his most widely known story, having been written originally for publication in the largest circulating Yiddish newspaper, the *Forverts* (*The Jewish Daily Forward*) and then published in an English translation by Saul Bellow, another Nobel laureate, in the *Partisan Review* in 1953. Together with the 1950 published translation of Singer's novel *The Family Moskat*, that translation of *Gimpel* was largely responsible for introducing him to the American reading public. There was also the considerable intrigue, even in New York, surrounding the very fact of a serious opera by a classically oriented serious composer—not a commercial musical comedy or Second Avenue "operetta" and not a cantata, of which there were

many—in Yiddish, and in no less an established venue among New York's concertgoing public than the Kaufman Auditorium of the 92nd Street Y. *Gimpel* was not the first opera in Yiddish; that honor is usually—in the absence of documentation to the contrary—accorded to Samuel Alman's (1877–1947) *Melekh akhaz* (King Ahaz; 1912), which he wrote in London, and for which the full score has only recently been found. And there were other sporadic instances prior to *Gimpel*, but none that achieved either artistic success, permanence in any repertoire, or acceptance by the general music world. In that regard, *Gimpel* was a watershed event.

Following the 1979 production, Schiff continued to revise and polish the opera, which was produced again at the Y in 1980. Then, anticipating its third production there, in 1985, Schiff realized that despite clever theatrical measures he had taken and devices he had created to mediate the language barrier for an obviously mixed audience, much of the meaning—and especially the humor—was still lost on those who were not fluent in Yiddish. And even those moments that induced howling laughter from the entire audience at the premiere—such as “Jesus” rendered in the diminutive Yiddish equivalent, Yoss!—would probably not fly elsewhere in the country and, after another generation or two, perhaps not so easily in New York either. Moreover, Schiff felt that even at the Y in 1979, some of the audience was at a disadvantage—although the reaction was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Given the highly idiomatic nature of the Yiddish language and its suggestive expressions, many veiled connotations, and references to ethnic and religious matters, no amount of listener preparation with a translated libretto could compensate adequately. Supertitles had not yet been implemented in theaters, but even those would probably not provide a satisfactory solution.

In addition, there was the complex problem of diction, pronunciation, and inflection, especially for envisioned tours and productions outside the New York area. Even in New York, those issues had required serious attention, but at least at that time there were still a few classically trained veterans of serious Yiddish theater or art who could—and did—participate in the cast. Even so, Mascha Benya, the foremost authority on learned, artistic Yiddish vocal rendition and diction (as well as pretty much everything Yiddish), was called in to coach the cast intensively during rehearsals—not only for the benefit of those to whom Yiddish was entirely foreign, but also to ensure

uniform pronunciation according to accepted standard literary Yiddish. Even for experienced Yiddish-speaking singers (who made up only a part of the cast), that was necessary in view of the many and varied prevailing dialects, which depend on one's family background and European geographic tradition. And there would be no Mascha Benyas in Portland, Omaha, St. Louis, or Houston.

Schiff also knew that as time went on, few singers experienced in or even familiar with Yiddish would remain active. The problems would only become magnified, since some of the particularities of Yiddish—especially with regard to certain specific sounds, vocalizations, and consonant-vowel combinations—are not part of any of the standard languages in which American singers are trained, or to which they might at least be exposed: French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, and so on. These particularities and relative peculiarities can prove difficult if not impossible to teach or absorb, or even simply to imitate—the more so out of any regular aural context or exposure to the emblematic authentic cadences and nuances. And one could not rely on the rare exceptions of naturally gifted mimics. This has been proved by the embarrassing results of most attempts to pronounce even a few words in Hollywood films, where there are virtually unlimited budgetary resources to provide for adequate coaching. Similarly so for recently released CDs by high-powered labels with superstar pop or classical singers, who we know for a fact received substantial coaching by knowledgeable native speakers and even experts—sadly to little or no effect.

With all that in mind, Schiff decided to do an English version for the third production at the Y in April 1985. This represented his own translation—with some untranslatable Yiddish expressions and terms left intact to preserve the flavor—which was used for the Milken Archive recording of excerpts. Although he now considers this the final and principal version (“I would rather have the opera sung well in English than badly—or not at all—in Yiddish”), he has nonetheless expressed the hope that both versions may be produced “as is most appropriate for the performers and the audience.”

For the full-length Yiddish production at the Y, Schiff ingeniously provided organically integrated and connecting narration in, or mostly in, English. This was drawn from Singer's own words but assigned to the stage role of the *badkhn*, the

quintessential wedding jester and bard who typically presided over post-ceremony entertainment in traditional eastern European circles and even early on at immigrant celebrations in America. That role has wisely been retained in the English version, to fill out otherwise unexplained elements of the story and permit the music to focus on dramatic moments.

Gimpel the Fool is infused with many of Singer's favorite themes, fixations, and enigmas: daily life in the lost world of small-town Jewish life in eastern Europe; sexual repressions and frustrations; spirits, ghosts, and superstitions; mysteries that might at first appear to be perfectly transparent; inner as well as outer demons; willing self-deception; blurred lines between fantasy and reality, between fabrication and truth, and between the imagined and the known; and the desire and need to believe, sometimes contrary to rational thought. The story has been cited by some as a parable of faith—not only in God, but in people and in life—and of common goodness triumphing over deceit. It centers around Gimpel, a baker and the supposed town fool in the fictional village of Frampol, somewhere in Russian Poland in the 19th or very early 20th century. The constant butt of the townspeople's practical jokes and pranks, which often involve concocting impossible stories that he, as a fool, believes—or either pretends or chooses to believe—he is also the willing and long-suffering victim of an unfaithful, shrewish wife who berates him for being such a fool. He is mocked relentlessly by the townsfolk for his gullibility, and they cruelly take delight at his expense. They have told him that the Czar was on his way to visit their village, that the moon fell out of the sky, that the Messiah was on his way to Frampol, and even that his dead parents have risen from their graves and are looking for him. And he always falls for the gag. To the one about his parents, he muses that he knows full well that this is both impossible and untrue, but as he says, "What did I stand to lose by just looking [for them]?" Nonetheless infuriated as well as confused, he consults the town rabbi for advice on how to cope, and the rabbi tells him that the deceiving townsfolk are the fools, not Gimpel, for by their deceit they will forfeit *olam haba*—eternal life in the "world to come." "It is written," the rabbi reminds Gimpel, "that it is better to be a fool all your days than to be evil for one hour. For he who causes his fellowmen to be shamed loses paradise for himself." Indeed, deliberately shaming, embarrassing, or humiliating someone without cause is considered a major transgression of Jewish law, as

illustrated in the legend of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, wherein a rich man's unnecessary public humiliation of his personal enemy is said—not literally or historically of course—to have hastened the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Much of this occurs in the first act, during which the townsfolk also organize a match for Gimpel with Elka, the town strumpet, whose out-of-wedlock child she passes off as her brother. He resists, not only for that reason but for other unpleasant features he finds in her, but the townspeople, knowing full well the truth about Elka, nonetheless threaten—as part of their torment of Gimpel—to bring charges of slander against him that could result in a fine by the rabbinical court. In the end, he not only marries her, he solicits contributions so that she may have a dowry with dignity. But on their wedding night Elka refuses to have sex with him and throws him out of bed and out of the house—on the fabricated pretense that she had not been to the *mikve* (ritual bath), a monthly prerequisite for sexual relations.

The scenes excerpted for the Milken Archive recording occur in Act II. Only four months after their wedding, Elka gives birth to a boy. Gimpel knows that the child cannot be his, and naturally he feels disgraced and angry. Yet after being placated by the rabbi, who mysteriously compares Elka to the biblical Eve (the connection is never made clear other than that no particular gestation period is given in Genesis), Gimpel not only pays for the *brit mila* (circumcision) celebration, but he names the boy after his own father as a de facto adoption. In Scene 10, which finds Gimpel singing a lullaby to the baby, Elka insists that he was simply born prematurely, trying to make an even greater fool of him and insulting his intelligence by claiming that the boy was a "Seven-month" birth. Gimpel makes it clear that he knows simple arithmetic: "seventeen weeks is not seven months." Deciding to accept the situation with the ever-so-slight hope that his worst fears might be unfounded, he consoles himself by recalling, "After all, they say that Jesus never had a [human biological] father either."

Scene 11a finds Gimpel actually having come to love Elka despite her incessant mistreatment of him and her lies, and he steals little bits of customers' dough and baked goods for her: a *kikh*l (a hollow type of cookie), a *shtritzl* (a little cake), a *khale* (*halla*—the special bread for the Sabbath, Festivals, and the High Holy Days), and a *bubele a floadn* (a little fruit layer cake). Oblivious to Elka's affair with his apprentice (which

the audience does not realize at that point), he praises the young lad's good heart and sends him home while he remains working at the bakery.

In Scene 11b, Gimpel returns home to jeers of the townspeople, only to hear two sets of snores coming from his and Elka's bedroom. To buy time for the apprentice to escape unseen, Elka sends Gimpel outside to check on their goat, which she claims has been ill.

The white goat, which Gimpel describes as trading in (selling) the symbolic confection of raisins and almonds, is no mere goat, but a ubiquitous motif in eastern European Yiddish folklore—specifically in lullabies. Usually the goat is found either under or near a baby's cradle (in this case, the fact that the goat is left outside may say something about Elka's priorities; or the scene may represent Gimpel's projection onto it out of his concern for the child's future). The goat image has been perceived either as a companion or as a symbol of protection for the baby. Among various probing constructions, however, the goat has been interpreted as representing the father, who, on a metaphoric plane, seeks to ensure not only a sweet future for his child (the raisins and almonds) but also a better world in the form of national or spiritual redemption, or both—all of which may be symbolized in that interpretation by the acquisition of raisins and almonds. In Yiddish folksong, many variants of the archetypal lullaby containing this goat image as a trader of raisins and almonds also go on to express the prototypical hope that the child grow up to be Judaically learned and religiously observant ("study of Torah is sweeter than honey"). This might also refer to the old custom of having a child lick some honey placed on a page of sacred text in order to create a quasi-Pavlovian association between sweetness and study at the earliest possible age).

This goat image is undoubtedly most widely known now from its expression in the theatrical song *Rozhenkes mit mandlen* (Raisins and Almonds), which Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908) apparently stitched together from multiple folk tune sources for his famous 1904 operetta *Shulamis*. One of the principal phrases of that song has an echo in Mahler's sixth symphony.

The goat image itself (apart from the raisins and almonds) may also have been derived from even earlier Judaic sources (predating Jewish folklore), in which the kid symbolizes the Jewish people and its determination for, as well as faith in,

redemption and survival—themes that could have resonated on a personal level with Gimpel. Moreover, the goat in the refrain of the popular Aramaic-Hebrew Passover seder song *Had gadya* (A Single Kid)—although some literary critics insist that the text is simply children's verse based on a popular French ballad—also has been interpreted as a metaphor for God's having taken the people Israel as "His own" through the Decalogue of the Sinaitic covenant. All these things were undoubtedly known to Singer, and it is worth considering that Gimpel has taken Elka's child "as his own."

Gimpel's song to his goat is the only instance in the opera where Schiff used, appropriately for this moment, an actual Yiddish folk tune, *Unter soresle vigele* (Under Little Sarah's Cradle)—unrelated to and preceding Goldfaden's song—that appears in one of the first collections of Yiddish folksong. It is also known in many text variants as *Unter yankels vigele* (Under Little Jacob's Cradle) and *Unter dem kinds vigele* (Under the Child's Cradle).

Elka's diversion is not successful, for Gimpel catches a glimpse of his apprentice fleeing. But Elka's "offensive defense" in Scene 11d is to curse and berate Gimpel for even suggesting what he saw, insisting that he had imagined it and she is the victim ("your mind is possessed"). Her abuse is echoed by the townspeople, who always take her side merely to irritate Gimpel for fun. But this time Gimpel has had it. ("even to Gimpel's foolishness there must be a limit").

In Scene 11e, Gimpel is determined to divorce Elka, which means that he must persuade her to agree to accept a *get* (a bill of divorcement), since under Jewish law both parties must agree to a divorce. Gimpel goes to the rabbi to discuss the matter, and the townspeople once again jeer outside, claiming that Gimpel's charges for the proposed divorce amount to punishable slander. Despite Elka's continued protests that Gimpel has imagined what he saw, the rabbi agrees that he must try to divorce her. The rabbi tells him that if she refuses to appear to accept the *get* in person, he should "declare" a divorce. By that he means a *get zikku'i*, whereby the husband prepares a proper legal *get* and has it delivered to an agent appointed by the court on her behalf, based on the assumption that it would be in her interest to accept it. Since she would otherwise be unable to remarry, and Elka would probably want to find a husband to support her two children. (Gimpel has no financial obligations to them; he has

not adopted them legally.) No sooner has the rabbi expressed his view than Gimpel begins to relent—asking if he would still be able to see the children, of whom he has obviously grown fond. The rabbi replies that he must not, that he must remove himself immediately not only from Elka (“that whore”) but also from her children. (“Bastards” is actually misused here and in the translation of the story. Under Jewish law, a bastard (*mamzer*) is the child of a biblically forbidden union, such as a married woman with a man other than her husband; but both Elka’s children were obviously conceived before her marriage to Gimpel, and it is presumed in the story that she was unmarried at the time.) Clearly, he also has some second thoughts about never seeing Elka again. He begins to back down at the rabbi’s admonition to leave—“Good, Rabbi, I’ll consider it”—to the taunts of the townspeople, who seem to know that the whole matter is painful and not so simple for Gimpel.

In his monologue in Scene 11f, Gimpel rebukes himself for his inability to sustain anger. But then he begins to question his own memory—seizing on the skillful acting in Elka’s denial—believing what he so desperately wants to be the case, trying to ignore that which he would rather not confront. Here we find Singer in his almost mystical merging of fantasy, imagination, and delusion with reality and truth—a subordination of truth itself to the human quest for belief. For in Singer’s mysterious and mystery-filled universe, there can be, as he suggested in a 1963 interview in *Commentary*, something of truth after all in fantasies and self-deception—some revelation about the depth of the human psyche from which such fantasies emerge. And what this might reveal is the human realization that the search for truth cannot result in its attainment—hence, the need to choose belief, even if that choice may be untenable.

Since Gimpel truly loves Elka’s children as his own, his words in the monologue suggest that rather than being the fool he appears to be, perhaps he is possessed of a certain folk wisdom in his retreat to acceptance, his inclination to forgo his dignity for the children’s sake, and his search for an excuse to overlook reality. His conflict, and the way he tries to cope with it, also illustrate what Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, in their *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, have cited as the thematic “sanctity of the insulted and the injured” in Yiddish literature.

Gimpel concludes by reminding himself (through the nudging of the *badkhn* in the staging) what the rabbi once told him about the need for faith and trust in marriage: “If today you don’t believe your wife, tomorrow you won’t believe in God.”

In the balance of Act II, Gimpel, missing his family, returns to the rabbi, seeking permission to return to his wife and home. After prolonged deliberation, the rabbi finds some rabbinic authority to allow the reunion with a sexually faithless and therefore forbidden wife, and Gimpel returns. Over the course of the twenty years of marriage, Elka bears six more children, finally succumbing to a fatal illness. On her deathbed (at the beginning of Act I as a prologue), she confesses to Gimpel that none of them are his. In his shock—which one assumes is possible only for a fool, given all that has transpired—Gimpel grapples with his naïveté in having allowed himself to be deceived all that time.

After the funeral, an “evil spirit” appears to Gimpel in a dream and urges him to seek revenge upon the townspeople—who tricked him into the marriage in the first place—by urinating on the dough for the *hallot* they will be purchasing for the following Sabbath. After he does so, Elka appears to him in another dream and urges him not to go through with his revenge, since she is being punished in the afterlife for all she has done. This is justice enough for Gimpel, who should not allow himself to become an evil deceiver because of her deceit. Why should he, because of her, forfeit the reward of eternal life in *olam haba*? Why should he succumb to the “evil spirit” after all he has endured? In the end—in Singer’s portrayal of her ultimate realization—she had deceived only herself, and on her deathbed she had remarked pathetically that her deception of Gimpel had been the “meaning of her brief life.”

Realizing that surrendering to the evil impulse and becoming no better than the townspeople would be a mistake, Gimpel—after awakening from the dream—heeds Elka’s advice and discards the contaminated dough. He relinquishes all his belongings, leaves town permanently, and becomes an itinerant raconteur and yarn spinner for children, who eagerly run after him asking him to repeat his fantastic stories. He draws on many of the same stories that had been told to him as lies. Now, however, they are not lies, but entertainment for children. And he is no deceiver, but a performer of worthy deeds in the eyes of Jewish law and tradition, since he brings

laughter and joy to the children. He has come to believe that “there really are no lies,” for whatever does not actually happen is—or can be—dreamed, even coming to pass sooner or later.

Gimpel's newfound mission seems to echo an apocryphal story, rooted in a talmudic vignette about Elijah, in which a Jew in a busy public square is asked by his friend to predict which of all the other Jews congregated there will be found worthy of eternal life in *olam haba*—if, for the sake of intellectual exercise, only one could be selected. Looking around, the man notices pious Jews engaged in study and deliberation of Torah and other sacred texts, Jews dispensing charity, Jewish merchants striving to earn a living to support their families, Jews praying the afternoon service, and, finally, a shoeless simpleton street entertainer and clown—to whom he points as his sole predicted candidate. Astounded, his friend asks him why, when there are so many more worthy pious and learned Jews in the square fulfilling so many of God's commandments, he would single out the simple buffoon for God's favor. “Why?” came the answer. “Because *he* brings laughter to sad people.”

Gimpel finds comfort not only in his entertainments for children and the respectful treatment he is given everywhere he goes, but also in his communication with Elka through dreams and, in view of her rehabilitation, his hopes to be reunited with her in the end. In that perfect “world to come,” there will of course be no such thing as deceit, and even Gimpel will not—cannot—be fooled.

* * *

In composing the opera, Schiff sought consciously to evoke through its music some of the vanished world of Singer's story. In part, he relied on traditional cantorial inflections and Ashkenazi synagogue modalities and idioms, but he also wanted to reflect some of the typical sounds, wails, and spirit of traditional 19th-century eastern European Jewish wedding bands—now erroneously often called “klezmer” music. But, as Schiff has pointed out, the so-called “klezmer revival” movement had not quite yet gotten off the ground.

Klezmer simply means an instrumental musician, with the connotation of a band player for Jewish celebrations, rather than a classical orchestral musician. Even by the 19th and

early 20th centuries, such bands of klezmerim played many different styles of music, emanating from various sources and outside traditions: Romanian, Ukrainian, Gypsy, and other musics. “Klezmer” cannot possibly signify a style or genre. Moreover, klezmerim have reflected the musical fashions of their time and surroundings since the Middle Ages in western Europe. Klezmerim in the Baroque era, for example, played music imitative of Western minuets, gavottes, sarabands, and other Baroque dance forms—and with Western modalities and melodic content.

That “revival” is also misnamed, since the 19th-century phrase (viz., the tunes and flavors typical of 19th-century klezmerim) never really died but remained current throughout the 20th century at American Jewish weddings within orthodox—and certainly Hassidic—circles. The continuum stretches back to immigrant bandmasters from eastern Europe who transplanted their craft to American soil beginning late in the 19th century. Only the introduction of such music as exotica to the ethnic “outsiders”—non-Jews as well as younger generations of Jews or Jews from nontraditional backgrounds—awaited the “movement” in the 1970s and thereafter. But, as ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin suggested to Henry Sapoznik, the Jewish band historian, popular music authority, and accomplished klezmer, as quoted in Sapoznik's book *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World*, “[the word] ‘revival’ only makes sense in the case of Lazarus, or in giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitations. Short of that, terms like ‘reevaluation,’ ‘remembrance,’ or ‘reenergizing’—as in lost battery power—are far more appropriate.” Sapoznik agreed in part: “Affixing it [revival] to the active across-the-board performance of klezmer music denigrates the subtle and irrevocable process of continuity that is key to widespread renewal of the music.” Nonetheless, like the confusing, constricting, and even belittling term *klezmer* itself misused as a style or genre, or like many misnomers born of philological or historical naiveté, we may be irrevocably stuck with its popular usage.

Although Schiff had heard music played by such traditional Jewish wedding bands in his youth, it was dormant in his mind and ear by the time he began working on *Gimpel*. He would have had to make a project out of frequenting the then more closed world of orthodox weddings or Hassidic celebrations for other occasions, or else to engage in ethnomusicological

research involving thousands of old 78-rpm records in private hands or still uncatalogued archives—to which access was far more difficult then than now. And the plethora of archival re-pressings onto contemporary formats had barely begun. In addition, he felt that the sounds of the current “revivalist” klezmer groups that he heard in the mid-1970s, some of which used such historically incongruous substitute instruments as electric piano, were “too American.” What he wanted for this opera was “something more European.” So he turned instead, especially for his instrumentation and orchestration, to the perceived sounds of klezmerim as reflected in classical works by such composers as Mahler, Weill, and Stravinsky. The particular ensemble of fourteen musicians on which he eventually decided was influenced by his restudy of certain works by those composers. Schiff also feels that, although the music itself in *Gimpel* was not suggested by those pieces, the opera does exhibit their influence in terms of orchestra and instrumental idiom and style.

Schiff has credited his teacher at Juilliard, Elliott Carter, with good suggestions about the orchestral ensemble. “Start with an unusual ensemble,” he recalls Carter advising, to avoid artificial efforts to produce unusual sounds. “You wouldn’t think Carter [not only a non-Jew, but an avatar of rigorous nontonal music] would be of much help with this kind of music,” Schiff said in a 1999 interview, “but he was!” He also worked on the orchestration with composer Trude Rittman, who introduced him to some Broadway techniques; and he found some helpful hints in Benjamin Britten’s use of a similar ensemble for his opera *The Turn of the Screw*. In 1982 Schiff fashioned an instrumental suite from *Gimpel* in the form of a divertimento, which is scored for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano.

* * *

Over the years since its publication, Singer’s story has been subjected to voluminous literary criticism, analysis, interpretation, deconstruction, and decoding—and even so-called study guides—on numerous levels and from various perspectives and disciplines. Whether because of his faith and capacity for love, his own form of pacifism, his natural urge to believe in goodness, his turning a blind eye rather than taking revenge, his looking the other way, his optimism, his embodiment of potential goodness in the common man (the *yetzer ha’tov*, the inclination toward good, which Jewish teaching holds that God has placed in each person along with

the *yetzer ha’ra*, the inclination toward evil, that man may choose or be educated to choose between the two), most critics have tended toward the assessment that Gimpel was not, in fact, a fool, and that the inclination toward delusion is natural. One critic, Thomas Hennings, posited the notion that the story was based closely on the biblical Book of Hosea. Others, such as Edward Alexander, have raised the issue of a possible parallel to the inability or refusal of many Jews to face reality and confront the truth during and prior to the Holocaust—a failing that jeopardized the survival of many victims out of an ultimate belief in mankind. If so, Gimpel’s naïveté, real or feigned, might not be so benign as a symbol, and perhaps then he indeed represents a fool.

Whatever the critical approach or method, the issues always seem to frame the same essential question: Was Gimpel a fool? At the very beginning of the story he tells us that he is “Gimpel the fool,” but he follows with a rebuttal. He doesn’t think himself a fool—to the contrary, in fact. Had Singer revealed the answer, he would not have been Singer. But the more probing question might be: Did Singer know?

—Neil W. Levin



American-born composer **ELIE SIEGMEISTER** (1909–1991) is best remembered for his lifelong mission to forge a distinctive American compositional idiom consistent with his unwavering political and social commitment—an embrace and pliant idiom that was heavily reliant on American folk music and Americana, but which could be expressed, especially in his mature period, within the framework of conventional concert and theatrical forms. Perhaps even more so than some of his circle—who during the 1930s gravitated with nearly blind faith to varying degrees of the far left in America, but later distanced themselves as “establishment” composers—Siegmester remained throughout his life an emblem of artistic social consciousness and an advocate of art and serious concert music for the common folk.

Siegmester was born in New York City, where he spent his youth in Brooklyn, commenced piano studies at the age of eight, and studied music at Columbia College (Columbia University) from 1924 to 1927. Originally intending to focus on philosophy as

his primary academic pursuit, he began composing while at Columbia, and he studied composition there with Seth Bingham and counterpoint privately with Wallingford Riegger during the summer of 1926. After graduation he joined the procession of many aspiring composers of that time that led to Paris for study with the legendary mistress of composition and counterpoint studies, Mme. Nadia Boulanger—although he later said that his original intention had been to study with Arnold Schoenberg. He remained in Paris for more than four years, but unlike many others in Mme. Boulanger's class, such as Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Walter Piston, he grew disenchanted with her pedagogic approach, methods, and predilections, and he resisted what he later described as her attempt to “force the neoclassical style” on students. He even attributed to her influence a temporary loss of self-confidence as a composer. Moreover, his already leftward perambulating political views, which reflected some of his father's early anarchist orientation, did not endear him to her. Those views were certainly shared by some of her other students, but it seems that Siegmeister was less discreet than they were, at least in her presence.

He returned to New York to find the United States in the throes of the Great Depression—a setting that provided potent fertilizer for what quickly became his obsession with the Marxist rhetoric of so-called class consciousness, not only in purely political terms, but vis-à-vis music. In 1933 he published two articles in the sharply left-leaning journal *Modern Monthly*—“Social Influences in Modern Music” and “The Class Spirit in Modern Music”—in which he considered the engagement of contemporary composers in political and social issues and followed the typical Soviet attitude of the day toward art by defining new music as either “bourgeois” or proletarian (viz., purposeful and thus worthy). That same year, he wrote his proletarian-infused song about social struggle *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*, for baritone and piano, which followed earlier works of his related to social issues and music of “the people” (jazz, for example) and attracted far greater public attention than anything he had yet written. It is based on a text by Michael Gold, a visible personality in the American Communist Party and a columnist for its propaganda organ, *The Daily Worker*, and it concerns “management's” indifference to fatal working conditions in a factory. The song reflects in its musical stridency the mood at typical mass meetings and rallies. It received many

performances in New York during the 1930s, beginning with its 1934 premiere in connection with International Music Week Against Fascism and War.

In that same time frame Siegmeister became associated with the Young Composers Group, an organization loosely shepherded by Copland, whose members included such significant or eventually significant composers as Vivian Fine, Henry Brant, Arthur Berger, Bernard Hermann, and Lehman Engel. The organization was short-lived, but it provided a communal forum for young composers, and four works by Siegmeister were premiered at its sole public concert in 1933. The Young Composers Group became known for its rebuff of French influence (including, specifically, Mme. Boulanger's) on American music—a rebuff that of course resonated well with Siegmeister—and for its “discovery” and championing of the music and *modus operandi* of Charles Ives (1874–1954). Ives's rejection of slavish dependence on European traditions, his revolutionary harmonic and textural treatments, his incorporation of fundamentally American populist (albeit largely New England-centered) rituals and themes, and his interest in American folksong—though hardly the proletarian social-political brand (Ives entered the insurance business and retired a wealthy man)—all offered a composite model for composers such as Siegmeister who were seeking to build upon indigenous American melos and, in the future spirit of 1960s–1970s jargon, to address “relevant” subject matter.

Also important to any consideration of Siegmeister's artistic life is his membership in the Composers Collective, which was connected to the Workers Music League—an outright affiliate of the American Communist Party. Among the Collective's founders were Jacob Schaefer—who had organized the first left-wing workers' Yiddish chorus in Chicago and then later directed the communist-oriented *Freiheits Gezang Verein* (Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus) in New York—and Henry Cowell. Housed at the Pierre Deygter Club—so named after the French worker and wood-carver who, in 1888, composed the tune (to Ezhn Pot'ye's [Eugène Pottier's] words) for “The Internationale,” the hymn of revolutionary and communist movements for more than six decades, the theme song of the Bolsheviks, and the state anthem for the Soviet Union from the October Revolution until 1944—the Composers Collective sought to identify as well as create music that would advance the economic and social struggle of working classes in

America. For its members, that quest represented a social and political artistic responsibility, in the context of the times, as opposed to the pursuit of music for the sake of abstract art, which some of them viewed as inherently bourgeois and even self-indulgent. At the same time, the Collective's Performing Unit offered eminently affordable concerts and postconcert discussions of its composers' works for "the masses"—taking music out of the supposedly elite venue of the concert hall and bringing it directly to workers' organizations.

In 1934 Siegmeister collaborated with other Collective members in publishing *Workers Song Book 1*, introduced as the first collection exclusively devoted to "original revolutionary mass, choral, and solo songs with English texts to be made in America." His music appeared in that book under a pseudonym, L. E. Swift, as did the work of the trailblazing folksong collector Charles Seeger [Carl Sands]. Schaefer, who was better known in Yiddishist circles as a composer of proletarian and social protest choral cantatas, contributed songs as well, along with others. A second (1935) volume had an expanded roster of composers, including Copland, Riegger (under the pseudonym J. C. Richards), Stefan Wolpe, and—probably the most ideologically committed and, later, the most openly unrepentant communist sympathizer of the group—the Viennese Jewish refugee Hanns Eisler, who went to live in communist East Germany after the war.

During those years, Siegmeister also conducted the Daily Worker and Manhattan choruses, and he was one of the editors of *Unison*, the newsletter of the American Music League—the renamed Workers Music League of the Communist Party.

In view of his visibility in the Collective, as well as his outspokenness, the political agenda of his choruses, and some of the company he kept, it is not difficult to see how Siegmeister—along with other prominent American composers of similar leanings—landed himself in trouble by the early 1950s in the wake of congressional committees and investigations.

Knowing what we now know about the Soviet Union's role in support of the American Communist Party, about its brutality vis-à-vis the very proletariat it supposedly championed, about its murderous campaigns against minority groups and entire populations, and about its treatment of composers and writers who flinched at confining their art to the service of changeable

Party doctrine, post-Soviet era and post-Cold War judgments about such American artists can flow easily. It is admittedly simple in retrospect to condemn their naiveté in allowing themselves to be seduced by overt as well as subliminal communist propaganda. The hardships and suffering of the Great Depression, which the Communist Party line identified as emblematic of the inherent and inevitable failure of the capitalist system, are frequently cited as the magnet that enticed sensitive and socially conscious artists.

Not all such American artists under communism's sway suffered equally even during the Great Depression, and some had known the benefits of middle-class and professional families with expectations of yet further rewards of free enterprise for the succeeding generation, even in the arts. (Beneficiaries of American society who flirted with communist rhetoric but declined to put their lives or means on the line could be dismissed as "parlor" or "armchair communists" by their acquaintances.) Also, injustices, inequities, and racial bigotry within American society—in the North as well as in the South—were not new to Depression-era America. Those circumstances had attracted some American artists and intellectuals both to internationalist or pan-national fantasies and to the misperceived model of the young Soviet Union before 1929. So one must look beyond the Depression to understand the communist beguilement.

Moreover, there were politically formal, patriotic, and less radical (including specified anti-Soviet) Socialist and related spin-off or third-party alternatives for addressing societal injustice and heightened Depression-related ills—fully within the framework of the Constitution and, one might argue, in a patently American tradition of progressive reform efforts. Noncommunist socialist-oriented groups spawned choruses too, but their anthem remained "The Star Spangled Banner"—sometimes paired with Irving Berlin's "God Bless America"—not "The Internationale." In the American Jewish context, the nonreligious fraternal organization known as the Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle) provides an instructive illustration. Much of its agenda, as well as that of responsible socialists in general, wound up in New Deal legislation, and in the succeeding string of labor, welfare, and civil rights laws of subsequent decades.

Most voters responded to the dire condition of the nation by resting their hopes on the Roosevelt administration, whose

social and economic programs were designed not to dismantle, but to revive and save the capitalist structure, in part by providing relief for the masses. Others voted for Socialist candidates. But some could resist neither the communist lure of utopian pan-national equality and brotherhood, nor the propaganda organs, which often presented the Soviet Union as the bulwark against Fascism and the instrument of pacifism. It is understandable that especially those creative artists who equated populism with democratic social ideals, and who wanted to emancipate art from privilege, could be drawn in. The enchanting message cannot be discounted altogether, the more so since in most cases the artists' innate humanity, compassion, and sensitivity to injustice was not necessarily matched by academically rigorous studies of political science, government, economics, or history. Still, there were many such artists who, after revelations began to emerge, genuinely disavowed earlier communist sympathies. There were also those who did not. Any post-1980s judgments must take that factor into account.

After the mid-1930s, as members of the Composers Collective began to refocus their energies from the composition of rallying chants to actual American folksong as a logical and appropriately resonant basis for a new national "music of and for the people," Siegmeyer took his cue and began collecting, transcribing, notating, and arranging folksongs from a variety of sources. Apart from notated documents, most of his work with informants was accomplished in the New York urban environment—not, as in the case of other collectors, through cross-country travels to various communities. He did, however, make a few such trips, most notably one to Alabama, where he notated songs as sung by workers on a track gang. He published a series of American song anthologies—some devoted exclusively to anonymous folksongs and others that incorporated songs of a folk nature by identified composers going as far back as the Colonial period. The first of these was his *Negro Songs of Protest* (1935), but his most voluminous contribution to the field was his 1940 *Treasury of American Song*, on which he collaborated with Olin Downes for the text. Unlike both scholarly compilations by ethnologists and more narrowly functional propaganda tools, that volume was intended as a source of viable, organic song repertoires for contemporary singing by the general public. His *American Holiday* (1933) was one of the first compositions to treat and integrate American working songs and common street tunes within an orchestral guise.

In 1939 he was the founder of an ensemble known as the American Ballad Singers, which toured the country with programs of American music—mostly folk or folk-type vocal music, but sometimes early instrumental pieces as well. Meanwhile, his concern for "the people" also manifested itself in his 1943 *Music Lovers Handbook*, which not only addressed American music but also tried to acquaint the average layman with the classical canon in terms he would understand.

Yet despite all his work outside the conventional so-called classical or concert music arena, Siegmeyer did not abandon or neglect his aspirations as a serious concert composer. To the contrary, he experimented successfully in synthesizing his sociopolitical leaning with concert music, injecting it with American folk themes, and then developing those themes with the arsenal of devices available to the experienced composer. The way had been pointed by Ives and Thomson, and was followed not only by Siegmeyer but by composers such as Copland and Roy Harris. *Ozark Set* (1943) was the first of Siegmeyer's successful orchestral pieces based on American folk sources, and it marked a new phase in his acceptance by the mainstream music world when it was performed in 1944 by the Minneapolis Symphony conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos. Among his other folk-based works from the same period are *Prairie Legend* (1944); *Western Suite* (1945), which received its premiere under Arturo Toscanini's baton with his NBC Symphony on a radio broadcast; *Lonesome Hollow* and *Sunday in Brooklyn* (1946); and his first symphony, completed in 1947 on a commission from Leopold Stokowski. In a 1944 statement in a program booklet, he articulated his conviction that "there is no fundamental difference between folk and classical music."

Eventually Siegmeyer stretched his canvas beyond the confines of overt folk tune expression, but much of his later music still reflected his populist predilection in its exposition of memorable melodies and programmatic parameters. His orchestral textures and colors, too, tended to bow to the melody. And as he embraced more traditional forms in the postwar period, he further developed and refined his American idiom into what critics have called a "heightened Americanism." Whatever genre or form he addressed, he retained his fundamental concern for direct communication with the audience and for the music to speak to them on its own merits—without necessary recourse to theoretical

justification. Nonetheless, by the 1960s some of his music was betraying a noticeably greater sophistication than his earlier, more transparent folk reflections. A 1984 retrospective concert that presented his works from the 1960s and 1970s evoked from critic Edward Rothstein the observation that although some of those pieces exhibited “elements of jazz and folk rhythms and recall the cinematic urban sounds of 1930s composition,” Siegmeister had by the 1960s “sublimated Americana into the substance of his work, with a language that is generally tonal and provocative.” What Rothstein heard that night was a composer “at ease with his craft and his past—and sounding distinctly American.” Not all composers achieve their missions so fully.

Lest his passion for musical Americana and his quest for a specifically American idiom be seen as an expression of the very nationalism upon which the universalists of his political bent were expected to frown, he once explained his distinction between cultural and political nationalism—between “nationalism as a political movement and nationalism as the root of art in each particular people.” For him, the greatest art came from an artist who “responds to his own environment, people and tradition.” Certain that this stance would not preclude universality in an artist, he nonetheless thought that a writer, painter, poet, or composer must be “rooted to a time and place.”

Siegmeister’s large catalogue of works includes a clarinet concerto (1956), which mirrors blues elements; a double concerto for violin and piano (1976), which, like the last movement of his 1965 sextet and many other pieces throughout his creative life, leans audibly on jazz features; eight operas; *Shadows and Light* (1975), a five-movement orchestral suite programmatically expressing his reactions to paintings by Degas, van Gogh, Klee, and others; *Fantasies in Line and Color* (1981), similarly inspired by five American paintings; *Five Fantasies of the Theater* (1967), in which each movement portrays the style of a particular playwright; musical theater and stage works such as *Doodle Dandy of the U.S.A.* (1942) and *Sing Out, Sweet Land* (1944); numerous songs and song cycles, of which at least fifty are settings of poetry by Langston Hughes, famous for his capture of many aspects of American black experience (the two commenced a Broadway show together in 1952, but later abandoned it); many choral settings; seven additional symphonies and many

other orchestral works; numerous solo and chamber pieces for various combinations—among them a string quartet (no. 3) on Hebrew themes; and a Hollywood film score, *They Came to Cordura* (1959).

In 1949 Siegmeister began his long tenure on the faculty of Hofstra University as a professor and composer-in-residence, where he remained until his retirement in 1976. At the start, this position might have been chiefly a practical necessity, but in a 1980 interview he explained that while one must make a living somehow, “teaching was more than that to me. It helped me clear my mind, articulate and define my art.” After his retirement from Hofstra, he became the first composer-in-residence at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina.

Siegmeister was fond of pondering the abstract nature of music in terms of relating to an audience. “For some reason, the creation of music seems more mysterious than writing or painting, which offer people recognizable objects,” he said in 1980. “But the musical idea seems effervescent and mysterious. Laymen ... think music is a translation of a literal or verbal scene: a representation of something. They’re always asking me, ‘What does this sonata mean?’ or ‘What did you want to say?’ And I tell them that if I could put it into words, I wouldn’t put it into music.”

In the midst of his postwar partial focus on traditional concert forms and more independent, self-contained artistic expressions, his humanistic political concerns continued to surface. Two works that illustrate that undiminished sense of the artist’s obligation to society are *I Had a Dream* (1967), a setting of the most famous speech by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, delivered at one of America’s ultimately proudest and noblest moments in its history, the 1963 civil rights march on Washington; and *Faces of War* (1968), a protest against America’s continued military campaign in Vietnam.

In addition to his folksong anthologies and writings on music for the layman, Siegmeister published two important pedagogic volumes, *Invitation to Music* (1961) and *Harmony and Melody*, two volumes (1965–66). He served on the board of directors of ASCAP and received awards and commissions from the Library of Congress and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (of which he became a Fellow in 1989), as well as a Guggenheim Fellowship.

In a 1988 retrospective examination of the socially and politically conscious underpinnings of Siegmeyer's American idiom, Carol J. Oja observed that, whereas the so-called new Romanticism had become a recent fashion, Siegmeyer had been "Romantic" all along, letting electronics, dodecaphony, and chance [aleatoric music] go their way." Indeed, in an earlier essay of his own, he rejoiced that he had lived to see the day when what he called the "orthodoxy of the avant-garde" had capitulated to the neo-Romanticism of the new generation of composers.



LADY OF THE LAKE

In the 1980s Siegmeyer turned to his theretofore mostly untapped Jewish heritage for a pair of one-act operas (his last two) on two short stories by Bernard Malamud (1914–86): *Angel Levine*, and *Lady of the Lake*, with librettos by his long-term collaborator for theater and other vocal works, Edward Mabley.

Lady of the Lake, from Malamud's collection *The Magic Barrel*, is an exploration of Jewish identity, and of the inner tensions between acknowledgment and concealment of that identity for social gain and romantic pursuit. In this case, denial of Jewish heritage, even by an assimilated Jew on whom religion appears to have no hold, leads to an ironic and unnecessarily tragic outcome. When he is finally able to come to terms with his evasion and redeem himself by revealing his identity and accepting his lineage—though only for the purpose of winning back his love—it is too late.

A secondary, more general issue here is the inherent danger of mendacious misrepresentation, which becomes a tangled web from which the perpetrator cannot extricate himself, even with the truth.

* * *

Henry Blumberg, a floorwalker at Macy's department store in New York (an employee who directs customers to the appropriate departments or sales personnel), has received a modest inheritance and decides to leave his job and travel in Europe. (In the original story, his name is Levin. Why the librettist renamed him Blumberg, an equally perceived "Jewish

name" in America, is not clear, but it may be that he wanted to avoid confusion with one of the central characters in *Angel Levine*, since the two operas were conceived as a double bill.) In Europe, Blumberg begins identifying himself as Henry R. Freeman, apparently assuming that this name seemed more neutral (even though it too was often a Jewish family name in America, especially by the 1960s—when this story occurs). In the opening paragraph of the unadapted story, Malamud explains that "in Paris, for no reason he was sure of, except that he was tired of the past—tired of the limitations it had imposed upon him; although he had signed the hotel register with his right name, Levin took to calling himself Henry R. Freeman."

Eventually his travels take him to the beautiful town of Stresa, on Lago Maggiore in northern Italy, where he stays in a pensione in a villa. Disenchanted with the commercial tourist atmosphere of the islands in Lago Maggiore that are routinely visited by foreigners, he is urged by the *padrona* of his pensione to visit the little-frequented, privately owned island known as Isola del Dongo—which, she tells him, has an historic palazzo, with tombs and statues of famous regional figures, and where Napoleon once slept. After resisting the idea initially, he hires a rowboat and rows to the island himself. There, he meets the beautiful Isabella, who tells him that she is a princess, the daughter and heiress of the aristocratic del Dongo family, owner of the island. They are instantly attracted to each other, but on the assumption that his Jewish identity would dampen her enthusiasm for romance, Blumberg keeps to his new pseudonym, Henry Freeman. Their love takes root, only to complicate the web of misrepresentations, of which she is part as well.

Scenes 5–7 have been excerpted for the Milken Archive recording. Scene 5 opens with Isabella waiting for Henry to arrive, and when he does, he declares his undying love for her. Intent on finding out whether he is a Jew but reticent to ask him directly, she points to the mountains onshore and asks him if the seven snowcapped peaks remind him of a *m'nora*—the seven-branched candelabrum used in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and a ubiquitous visual symbol of Judaism and the Jewish people (not to be confused with the special Hanukka *m'nora*, or *hanukki'ya*, which provides for nine candles or lights). When his response is withheld by "a what?" she asks him if it reminds him of the Virgin Mary's crown. He replies

evasively that perhaps it does, depending on how one looks at it. Isabella doesn't press the issue, assuming that he is not Jewish, and the two engage in a love duet, swearing they have found permanent love that cannot be denied.

After their avowals of love, Isabella confesses that she has lied—that she is no princess or heiress, but the poor daughter of Ernesto, the caretaker, who is looking after the property while the del Dongo family is away. Angry at having been deceived, Henry—still maintaining his own deception—accuses her of trying to get to America through such a pose, in which he suggests she was in league with her father. Denying that there was any scheme, in a veiled comment she alludes to her suspicion that he is hiding something from her. Henry insists that he is hiding nothing, and her father takes him back to Sresia.

Scene 6 is Henry's sung soliloquy, in which he reminds himself that though he still thinks Isabella's lie was part of a calculated scheme, he has deceived her as well. His conflict centers around the realization that he pretended "to be what [he is] not." He determines that her status or origins make no difference, that his love is undiminished, and he orders a boat to return to the island.

In the final scene Henry tells Isabella that he has come to ask her to marry him, but she says that they must part forever. When he remonstrates, she tries one last time to learn his identity, this time asking him outright, "Are you a Jew?" And once again his reply is a blunt and annoyed evasion: "How many noes make never? Why do you persist with such foolish questions?" Replying sadly that she hoped that he was indeed Jewish, Isabella slowly unbuttons her bodice to reveal concentration camp numbers tattooed on her breast. She was interred in Buchenwald as a little girl. That, she explains, is why she cannot marry him. She and her father are Jews, and since their last meeting, she has realized the importance of her heritage, for which she and her family suffered. As she goes off, Henry finally confesses that he is a Jew, pleading for her to listen. But put off by a Jew who could so easily deny his Jewishness for the sake of acceptance by an aristocratic family, she disappears behind one of the statues. He gropes for her in the mist that has arisen from the lake, only to find himself embracing a moonlit statue. She is gone, and his fantasy has evaporated into the night.

Writing about *Lady of the Lake* (as well as his other Malamud opera), Siegmeyer questioned whether "opera" was the appropriate generic designation. What he had tried to do in his stage works, he said, was to find a new American form of musical theater that would be "as honest and direct as any spoken theater." Thus, as in his other "operas," he shunned what he called "the outworn artifices of old European opera." What he sought instead was a form that would elicit the kind of direct audience response to singing actors as might attend speaking actors in a typical Broadway or off-Broadway play or film. "Singing theater" is how he proposed to characterize this work.

Neither the action nor the continuously flowing recitative lines halt for conventional arias or other self-contained numbers, and even the love duet is not separate. Rather, it flows from, and back to, the sung dialogue—in some ways part of it more than a duet per se. The vocal lines are punctuated by a variety of orchestral effects, timbres, and gestures, but the orchestration is always sublimated within the vocal lines, so that even at its most dissonant or strident—for dramatic reinforcement—it never submerges the singing. The relative ranges of the voices and the orchestra make for a clarity that permits the words always to be heard easily, with little need to follow a libretto. If there are no developed melodies with their own arches that will remain in the audience's memory, there is nonetheless an overall melodic character to the opera, and the vocal lines—which often flow with lyricism despite mildly disjunctive intervallic leaps—are infused with melodic bits and fragments.

Lady of the Lake received its premiere in October 1985 on a double bill with *Angel Levine* at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York, whose innovative but lamentably short-lived "Jewish Opera at the Y" program commissioned both works.

—Neil W. Levin



Although he wrote a substantial body of music for a number of media, **HUGO WEISGALL** (1912–97) is probably best remembered as one of America's most important composers of opera and large-scale song cycles, reflecting his intense

lifelong interest in both western and Judaic literature. "I am attracted by the verbal, I am sucked aside by words," he once said, "and I want to deal ideologically *and* musically with difficult problems." The literary merit of his compositions, their original vocal style, and their serious attention to musical and dramatic detail all mark a significant contribution to American music.

The scion of a highly cultured family that boasts several generations of cantors in the Bohemian-Austrian orbit (and the nephew of the illustrious Zionist leader and producer Meyer Weisgal), Weisgal lent his artistic gifts on many occasions to the expression of historical, literary, biblical, and liturgical Jewish themes and subjects. In a class by himself, he belongs among the highest ranks of the American musical establishment, but he also championed the perpetuation of authentic Jewish musical tradition and of the Central European cantorial legacy. Among serious American Jewish composers, his singularity extended even further to the practical realm. Not only was he fully conversant with the full range of American *and* European synagogue choral repertoire, which he taught to cantorial students for more than forty years, but he knew the intricacies of the modal formulaic system of Ashkenazi liturgical rendition known as *nusah hat'filla*, and he functioned as an authoritative *ba'al t'filla* (lay cantor or precursor) well into his retirement.

Weisgal was born in Eibenschitz (Ivance), a town in Moravia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now the Czech Republic), where he claimed to have begun singing in a synagogue choir at the age of three or four. His father, Abba Yosef [Adolph Joseph] Weisgal (who added the second *I* to his name in America, though his brother Meyer did not), was both a cantor at the local synagogue and a classical lieder and light operatic singer. From childhood, Hugo Weisgal absorbed the Central European liturgical traditions and the western lieder and operatic canons from his father, whom he also accompanied on the piano. The family immigrated to America in 1920 and soon afterward settled in Baltimore, where Abba Yosef served for more than four decades at one of the city's oldest and most prestigious synagogues—Chizuk Amuno Congregation. From his earliest years in Baltimore, Hugo Weisgal became intimately involved in the musical life of that congregation. For many years he conducted its choir; and he also organized and directed a mixed chorus, based there and

known as the Chizuk Amuno Choral Society, which performed concert works as well and—with the esteemed cantor Jacob Barkin—issued one of the most artistic LP recordings of classic and contemporary cantorial-choral repertoire.

Apart from some consultations abroad (he went to Europe shortly before the Second World War hoping to study with Bartók, who was unwilling to take on further students), Weisgal received all of his formal education in America. He studied at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, and then intermittently with Roger Sessions. At the Curtis Institute he studied with Fritz Reiner and Rosario Scalero and earned diplomas in conducting and composition, but his variegated interests led him to pursue a doctorate in other academic areas, and in 1940 Johns Hopkins University awarded him a Ph.D. for his dissertation on primitivism in 17th-century German poetry.

Weisgal's operatic sensibilities and his gravitation to that medium was fueled not only by his natural love for the human singing voice but also by his inherent love of theater. That lifelong love affair dates to his youth. As a child of eleven, he once organized a "production" of a play he had stitched together himself about the "Knights of the Round Table," pressing into service the children in the neighborhood for the various roles. (To no one's surprise, the young Hugo played King Arthur.) Later, while pursuing his musical studies, he acted in small repertory theaters. From the time he began composing operas, he was always intensely involved in a working collaboration with his librettist.

During the Second World War, Weisgal served in the armed forces and for a time was an aide-de-camp to General George F. Patton. His fluency in languages eventually led to assignments of sensitive diplomatic responsibilities. While he was an assistant military attaché in London, and then a cultural attaché in postwar Prague, he conducted concerts by some of Europe's leading orchestras, in which he promoted American music and featured American works. He also managed to compose in those difficult surroundings. In London his discovery of an anthology of war poetry inspired his song cycle *Soldier Songs* (1944–46), considered his first important work. In an air-raid shelter in Brussels after the Battle of the Bulge, he began writing *The Dying Airmen*, to words that had been published anonymously but which Weisgal maintained was actually a Spanish Civil War work by W. H.

Auden. And upon viewing the hospital conditions at Terezin, the former German-built ghetto and concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, he commenced music for the Wilfred Owen poem "Futility," about the earth's ability to regenerate itself but the impossibility of regenerating a lost human life.

Behind the scenes during the immediate postwar years, Weisgall quietly used his military-diplomatic position to help many refugees and German concentration camp survivors. Without the required approval of his superior officer (who later congratulated him secretly), and at the risk of serious reprimand or worse, he took it upon himself to order a delay in the sealing of certain Czech border areas so that as many people as possible would not be permanently trapped behind the communist lines once the iron curtain descended.

After the war, Weisgall declined several offers for permanent conducting posts in Europe. Following his return to the United States, he founded and directed the Chamber Society of Baltimore and the Hilltop Opera Company; directed the Baltimore Institute of Musical Arts; and taught at Johns Hopkins University from 1951 until 1957—all the while continuing his work with synagogue choirs. But dearest to his heart was his forty-four-year involvement with the Jewish Theological Seminary. He established and stewarded the foremost curriculum in America for education and training in cantorial art. From its opening in 1952 until his own retirement in 1996, Weisgall was chairman of the faculty at the Seminary's Cantors Institute and Seminary College of Jewish Music (now the H. L. Miller Cantorial School). In that capacity he functioned as a de facto codirector of the school—especially vis-à-vis its musical (as opposed to Judaica) parameters. He devoted a major portion of his energies to that role, bringing both his broad worldview of Jewish music and his exacting western musical standards to bear upon the Seminary's approach to cantorial studies. He also taught graduate level composition and was the doctoral dissertation advisor for such important American composers as Herman Berlinski and Miriam Gideon. His legacy at the Seminary is permanently etched.

In 1961 he simultaneously became a professor of music at Queens College in New York, retiring in 1983 as Distinguished Professor. And he taught for thirteen years at The Juilliard School.

Apart from the music on this recording, many of Weisgall's other works were inspired by his strong sense of Jewish identity. His fifth mature opera, *Athaliah* (1964), on a libretto adapted from Racine's biblical tragedy, includes texts drawn from the Book of Psalms, and a synagogue chant is used as a cantus firmus toward the end. His next opera, *Nine Rivers from Jordan* (1968), deals with issues pertaining to the Holocaust, collective guilt, the collapse of the European order, Zionism and the State of Israel, and theological conceptions. That score, which drew upon the whole range of Weisgall's personal, musical, and religious experience, incorporates such divergent elements as a well-known Passover melody and his own mock-German song.

In *The Golden Peacock* (1980), a setting of seven mostly familiar Yiddish folksongs, Weisgall used the original melodies as starting points to flesh out a sophisticated art song cycle that presents a genuine Yiddish folk melos within a 20th-century frame of reference. The chromatic piano parts with inventive sonorities are derived from motivic details of the tunes; and the vocal lines are treated ingeniously in order to retain their basic substance, with subtle alterations and extended material in the context of contemporary musical vocabulary and expressionist dissonance. The work, which was recorded by soprano Judith Raskin, has been called a Jewish counterpart to Bartók's Hungarian songs and Benjamin Britten's English songs.

In an open-ended series of perhaps a dozen short chamber pieces that he called *Graven Images*, Weisgall used fragments of music he had written for the 1966 CBS documentary *Of Heaven and Earth*, which dealt with ancient artwork by Jewish artisans. Among the individual pieces are jaunty "Holiday Dances" that refer to Jewish festivals and are scored for a number of instrumental combinations. And one is a charming, Stravinskian setting of Psalm 29, in Hebrew, for solo voice (or chorus) and piano.

Although he occasionally wrote liturgical settings when he first directed synagogue choirs in Baltimore, it was not until the 1980s that Weisgall was commissioned to write a complete formal synagogue service. That work, *Evening Liturgies*, is a Reform Friday evening (Sabbath eve) service according to the *Union Prayerbook*, scored for baritone cantor, mixed chorus, and organ. Prior to the premiere of the entire

work, two orchestrated movements, under the title *Sacred Fragments*, were performed at an international conference in New York. Bernard Holland, in his review in *The New York Times*, observed: "Here, the love of soaring stentorian singing and sweeping string sound served to soften Weisgall's acid, penetrating harmonies." Another of his important Judaicly related works is *Love's Wounded*, a setting of poetry by Yehuda Halevi (ca. 1075–1141) for baritone and orchestra, premiered by the Baltimore Symphony conducted by David Zinman.

No proper consideration of Weisgall can ignore some of his operas outside the Judaic realm—especially *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1956), based on the Pirandello play. Probably more than any other, that work first catapulted him to international attention in the opera world. Among his other important operas are *The Tenor* (1950), based on Frank Wedekind's expressionist one-act play, *Der Kammersänger*; *The Stronger* (1952), written expressly for his Hilltop Opera Company and based on Strindberg's psychological monodrama; and *Purgatory* (1958) to William Butler Yeats's allegorical verse play, in which Weisgall adapted twelve-tone techniques for the first time. His instrumental works include orchestral pieces, a piano sonata, incidental music, chamber music, and several ballets.

Weisgall was an intellectual of broad, high-minded interests. He published articles on American Impressionist painting and on contemporary music and composers, and he lectured widely on Jewish and general musical topics. He was president of the American Music Center (1963–73) and of the League of Composers/ISCM, and he was a composer-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome in 1966. Among his numerous prizes, awards, and honors were three Guggenheim fellowships, the Lifetime Achievement Award from Opera America (1994), the Gold Medal for music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1994), the William Schuman prize from Columbia University, the first award in the arts from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, and several honorary doctorates. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1975, and he served as its president from 1990 until 1993. He also directed the inaugural term of the composer-in-residence program of Lyric Opera of Chicago (1988–97).

Projects on Weisgall's desk at the time of his death included the beginnings of a second set of settings of Yiddish folk melodies; operatic versions of two plays by Jean Anouilh, several scenes

of which were sketched out to libretti by Charles Kondek, the librettist for *Esther*; and a new opera based on John Hersey's novel *The Wall*, about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising (according to Kondek, they had almost finished a draft of the complete libretto), which was to have been produced by New York City Opera. He was also sketching out a group of liturgical settings for the typical format in Conservative synagogues.

Weisgall's earlier style has been appraised as a fusion of nontonal neoclassicism with certain influences of the Second Viennese School of composers, such as Alban Berg, colored by the general opulence of that period. But his later music more closely approaches that Second Viennese School, especially its most lyrical aspects. Even at its most rigorous-sounding moments, however, it is generally more a matter of strident, even severe, chromaticism than actual atonality—although Weisgall himself was never comfortable with such classifications.

In 1958 the eminent American composer George Rochberg described Weisgall's music as leaning "towards free tonality; he is never quite atonal." But nearly twenty years later Weisgall assessed his own approach from another perspective: "Generally my music is considered complex," he said. "It is texturally thick and multifarious; rhythmically disparate; and [it] has harmonic lines that move along on their own. It is what is commonly called *atonal*, but it is not nonmelodic."

Rochberg also astutely summarized Weisgall's basic artistic credo at that time: "Among American composers he is one of the few who remain heedless of the musical clichés which superficialize and debilitate American music. There is strength and hope in such an independent attitude." Weisgall remained steadfast to those principles for nearly forty years more. He never succumbed to popular tastes or the lure of wider acceptance; and he never strayed from his own artistic integrity.



ESTHER

Esther, Hugo Weisgall's tenth, last, and grandest opera, with a libretto by Charles Kondek, is based on the biblical Book of Esther. In many respects it was Weisgall's crowning achievement both artistically and in terms of public and

critical recognition. It was commissioned originally by Terrence McEwen and the San Francisco Opera in the mid 1980s, and preparations for a premiere began with elaborate piano workshops, a major celebration of the announcement, and a press event. But Lotfi Mansouri, who took over the reigns of the company from McEwen before further preparations for *Esther* were implemented, canceled the project in 1990, citing severe budgetary problems—especially in view of the high cost of mounting so large-scale a work, which had eleven major roles, two choruses requiring substantial rehearsal of their imposing and challenging music, and ballet. As well, a production that would do justice to this opera required expensive stage designs and sets. Weisgall was devastated, and for a while he despaired of seeing a production come to fruition during his lifetime.

Fortunately, Christopher Keene and the New York City Opera, which had already produced two of Weisgall's operas, took over the project for a premiere as part of that company's imaginative World Premiere Festival in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, in 1993.

The Book of Esther (*m'gillat ester*; lit., scroll of Esther) concerns the imminent genocide of the Jewish people in the ancient Persian Empire, a triumphant, nearly last-minute reprieve through the intercession of the queen, and victory over its tormentors and would-be murderers.

The biblical narrative begins in the third year of the reign of Ahasuerus, king of the vast Persian Empire. A royal feast and 180-day celebration for the imperial officials, military officers, courtiers, noblemen, and princes from all the provinces—to demonstrate the riches and glories of the empire and the king's own honor and majesty—is capped by another seven-day feast for the entire population of the capital, Shushan. On the final day of that banquet, the king, by then inebriated, orders his queen, Vashti—who is holding her own banquet for the women—to appear before the men as his “trophy bride,” to show off her beauty and thus increase his guests' admiration and respect for him. But the presence of a woman in the midst of a drunken male crowd is entirely inappropriate and inconsistent with the mores of the time and society, and Vashti refuses. In anger over the humiliation of being disobeyed and his publicly observed powerlessness over his wife, the king not only removes her as queen, but, on consultation with ministers, sends a decree to all men of the empire instructing

them to establish and assert control over their households. Then, his advisors assure him, Vashti's example will lose its danger of emulation, and all wives will give honor to their husbands, “great and small.”

In order to select a new queen, Ahasuerus announces, also on the advice of his ministers, a competitive gathering of beautiful eligible women from throughout the empire. Mordecai, a Jewish leader and respected courtier in Ahasuerus' palace, has a beautiful young orphaned cousin, Hadassah (or Esther, which is the name many biblical authorities believe she assumed only on becoming queen), whom Mordecai has reared and adopted “as his own daughter.” Esther is taken to the palace to be presented as a candidate, but on Mordecai's advice, she does not reveal her Jewish identity. Ultimately, Ahasuerus chooses her from among all the others and proclaims her his new queen in Vashti's place. But she becomes more to him: his prized and cherished wife.

Meanwhile, Mordecai learns of a plot against the king by two of his chamberlains. He tells Esther, who then tells the king—letting him know that Mordecai discovered the plot, but not revealing her relation to Mordecai. After a proper investigation that confirms the guilt of the conspirators, they are hanged.

Shortly afterward, the king promotes Haman, an arrogant and egotistic courtier, identified by tradition as a descendant of the Amalekites—archenemies of the Jews, who had attacked the Israelites in the wilderness during their wandering after the exodus from Egypt—to the position of his principal court officer and advisor. Haman becomes besotted with envy and hatred for the Jews because Mordecai, unlike the other courtiers, refuses as a Jew to kneel and bow down before Haman. Haman thus plots the annihilation of the Jewish people not only in Persia per se, but throughout the empire—which, according to the biblical narrative as well as some historical corroborations or approximations, encompassed the area “from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces.” Haman persuades the naïve king (known in Jewish literature as *melekh hatipesh*—the fool king) that the Jews are a subversive enemy in their midst, who must therefore be eliminated entirely. He convinces the king to authorize complete annihilation of the Jewish population throughout the empire, and then, by drawing lots (*pur*), he selects the date of the thirteenth of the month of Adar for the mass murder.

Beseched by Mordecai through an intermediary to intercede with the king, Esther is at first reticent. To appear before the king without a summons—even as his queen—could result in her death according to law. Also, neither the king nor anyone at court knows that she is a Jewess, and she and Mordecai have taken care not to communicate in person—since Mordecai's Jewishness is well-known and, apparently, has been of no detriment until Haman's accession to his present position. But Mordecai reminds her through an intermediary that Haman's decree will apply legally to her as well, despite her assumed royalty, and despite the king's fondness for her: "Think not that you will escape [even] in the king's house.... You and your father's house will perish." Mordecai even suggests that she might have been fated to become queen (as part of some divine plan) "for such a time as this" (*umi yode'a im l'et kazot higa'at lammalkhut*). She agrees to take the risk of interceding, and after asking Mordecai to organize a three-day fast among all the Jews in Shushan as a form of petition for her safety and success, she goes to Ahasuerus to request his and Haman's appearance at a banquet she has prepared that same night. As it happens, Ahasuerus, genuinely enamored of her, is in a mood to please her, offering her whatever she might request—even if it should include half his kingdom. At that banquet ("of wine") the king repeats his readiness to grant whatever she wishes, to which she replies that if he and Haman will come to a second banquet the next day, she will tell him then.

Meanwhile, Haman has a gallows constructed for Mordecai's hanging. That night the king discovers that Mordecai was never rewarded for saving his life by revealing the plot against him, and he asks Haman—who has come to speak about Mordecai's hanging—to advise him on the best way of honoring a man whom the king deems worthy. Thinking that the king is referring to him, Haman suggests that such a man be attired in royal apparel, including a crown, seated on one of the king's own horses, and led on a procession through the streets of the city by a noble prince, who will proclaim aloud, "This is what shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor!" When the king readily accepts the idea and tells Haman that the honoree is Mordecai—and that Haman will be the "noble prince" to lead the procession and make the public proclamation—Haman is left with no choice but to proceed as ordered.

At the second banquet, Esther reveals, in Haman's presence, her Jewish identity and Haman's approved plan for her and her people's imminent annihilation, and she begs the king to allow them to live. Astounded and enraged, the king retreats to the garden, while Haman pleads with Esther to intercede to save *his* life. When the king returns to find Haman on the same sofa as Esther—on which he has fallen to plead with her—he assumes that Haman is attempting to seduce Esther, or worse. At that, he orders Haman to be hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

Mordecai is now a trusted friend and in-law to the king, since Esther reveals Mordecai's relation to her. Ahasuerus even gives Mordecai his ring and seal, which he had earlier given to Haman. But the royal decree concerning the Jews' destruction is irrevocable by law, and the only way to circumvent it and thereby annul it is to permit the Jews to destroy their enemies. Ahasuerus therefore has Mordecai issue an edict throughout the empire in the king's name and delivered everywhere with full royal assistance—to all satraps, governors, and princes of the provinces, and to all the various peoples therein ("in their own languages"), stating that the Jews have been granted authority to defend themselves militarily: to "destroy, and to slay, and to cause to perish all the forces of the people and the province that would assault them." The Jews are bidden to do this on the same day throughout the empire—the very day Haman had determined for their genocide: the thirteenth of the month of Adar. With the cooperation and help of all royal officers as well as imperial and local officials in each province of the empire, a decisive victory is achieved by the Jews. In Shushan alone, 500 enemies are slain on that day; and at Esther's further request of the king, Haman's ten sons—assumed to have been part of the plot—are hanged. The numbers of enemy dead throughout the empire come to 75,000 according to the report given to the king, who authorizes further action on the following day in Shushan, which results in the death of another 300 enemies. Although the king has authorized that Jews everywhere also take the property of their vanquished enemies, the Jews "lay not their hand" on the spoils.

Mordecai ordains that the fourteenth of Adar—the day on which the Jews had "rest from their enemies"—should be celebrated perpetually by all Jews in the empire as a festival of joy and gratitude, with gifts of food to each other (*mish'lah*

manot) and with donations to the poor. The Jews agree, for themselves and on behalf of their progeny, to accept Mordecai's instruction and to keep this annual festival of Purim, so named after the lots that Haman cast to determine the date of the genocide. Mordecai attains a position of high stature as the king's closest minister and advisor ("next unto Ahasuerus"), and he is the accepted leader of his fellow Jews throughout the empire—"seeking the good of his people and preaching peace to all his seed."

Eventually the celebration of Purim became universal in Judaism as a festival of rejoicing, feasting, carnival-like entertainment—including masquerades, parodies, satires, and staged "Purim plays"—and general merrymaking. The entire *m'gillat ester* (Book of Esther in its scroll form) is read aloud in a public forum, to an assigned biblical cantillation that varies from one tradition to another. Among the many Purim traditions is the congregational outburst of noisemaking each time the name Haman is pronounced during the reading. More than usual strong drink—wine and spirits—is also a part of Purim customs in most traditions, after the tradition established in the Talmud (Meg. 7b) by the Babylonian teacher Rava, who is said to have remarked that on Purim one should drink enough to become unable to distinguish between cursing Haman and praising Mordecai.

The fifteenth of Adar became known as Shushan Purim, since the hostilities continued in Shushan for an additional day and the peace did not begin there until the fifteenth. That too is addressed by Mordecai in the biblical account, and it is still observed by Jews living in cities that are—or once were—walled, such as Jerusalem.

Even viewed purely as literature, apart from any historical, theological, archaeological, or other scientific considerations, the Book of Esther is in some ways a loosely drawn synopsis or sketch, akin to a parable not only in content but in form. It is missing, perhaps intentionally, many pieces of basic information, which raises unanswerable questions at every turn. On its own merits—viz., without rabbinical commentary—it can betray both Judaic incongruities and other gaps, as well as implausible military situations, all inviting a degree of imagination along with reasoned interpretation and literary criticism. For example, since Mordecai is portrayed as a proud and God-fearing Jew, why would he even acquiesce in Esther's abandoning her Jewish heritage and obligations

in order to become the queen—before knowing anything about her potential value as an intermediary? How could she live in the royal palace without violating commandments such as the Jewish dietary laws and the Sabbath? Or can this possibly suggest that Mordecai might have known secretly—in advance of Haman's plot—that the Jews were already facing serious danger throughout the empire in terms of public attitudes toward them, and that eventually an embedded intercessor such as Esther might be their only hope. The only hint in the text concerning perceptions of the Jews is Haman's explanation to the king that everywhere in the empire the Jews "have their own laws," which might suggest popular resentment. But later the Jews do find it strategically necessary to defend themselves and ensure their security by military or paramilitary engagements—obviously with the assistance of imperial and local armed forces acting on the instruction contained in Mordecai's edict with the king's stamp. Since nowhere in the empire could the Jews have had their own army, Ahasuerus' instructions include arming them. And those engagements result in the deaths of no fewer than 75,000 adversaries outside Shushan.

Does this in any way suggest local populations foaming beneath the surface with combustible hatred for the Jews, which Haman had only to ignite—not unlike the Germans vis-à-vis segments of Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and other eastern European populations during (and lingering even after) the Second World War? How else to explain the accepted necessity from Jewish perspectives in the narrative of so costly a victory at the expense of civilians? Clearly, the text implies no out-of-control vengeance or bloodthirsty rampage (or "disproportionate response," to borrow from misapplied and misguided 21st-century contemporary usage). To the contrary, the text emphasizes that the Jews declined their rights—according to the king's edict—to enrich themselves by taking the property of their vanquished foes as the spoils of war. Inasmuch as Jews participated in the defensive military action, it would have been impossible for them to have suffered no casualties, yet the text seems to suggest just such a tactically untenable proposition, since none are mentioned.

And why—notwithstanding later kabbalistic and Hassidic literature that interprets God in the story as active "behind the scenes," unlike His direct and visible intervention in the Exodus narrative—is there no religious element? There are no

prayers of petition (not even by Mordecai), no resolutions of faith in God's protection, and no prayers of thanksgiving upon victory. Or does the fasting, rending of garments, and donning of sackcloth and ashes imply accompanying appeals to God through prayer? Are these cited as symbolic acts not only of mourning, but of repentance?

Naturally, Aggadic and Midrashic literature, in the context of its didactic explanations by way of legends and other embellishments, sought to mediate some of these issues by reading into, inferring from, and superimposing onto the story various religious parameters. For example, one source proposes that the three fast days for Esther encompassed the first day of Passover, about which, upon Mordecai's objection, she replied that without the priority of the Jewish people's survival (to which the fasting was related), Passover would have neither meaning nor existence (Esth 4:16). Another source understands Esther's concealment of her identity as a means of precluding the Jews' neglect of prayer on complacent grounds that they were safe with one of their own in the king's palace.

There was some initial rabbinic resistance to the canonization of the Book of Esther as part of the Bible, and the Talmud reflects concerns about whether the book demonstrates sufficient divine inspiration in its writing (Meg. 7a). In addition to its lack of divine references, there was also concern in some quarters over its aggressive and militant tone, which some feared might encourage ill will. Ultimately, the advocates on its behalf prevailed, and the Book of Esther was included in the Hebrew Bible as part of the section known as the *k'tuvim* (sacred writings), or the Hagiographa.

Ahasuerus is often identified as the historical Xerxes (I), who reigned from 486 to 456 B.C.E., and whose name is thought to represent the Greek rendering of the Persian king or emperor's name. In that case the name Ahasuerus could be simply the Hebrew form of the Persian. A tablet discovered at Borsippa from around the time of Xerxes refers to a royal official named Marduka. However, neither the equation of Ahasuerus with Xerxes nor the historicity of the Book of Esther, both of which present chronological, historical, and comparative theological problems, is universally accepted in the world of biblical scholarship—even though many acknowledge that the book's author(s) may have drawn on historical events. Among various hypotheses and conjectures emanating from various schools

of objective biblical criticism as well as research are proposals that Esther and Mordecai are derived from the Babylonian deities Ishtar and Marduk; that the origin of the story lies in a quintessential oriental or Near Eastern romance pattern, with two originally independent plots—a harem and a court intrigue; that Ahasuerus' historical identity is actually that of Ptolemy Evergetes II (reigned 170–164 and 145–117 B.C.E.), and that Esther represents Cleopatra III; and that the author of Esther invented the narrative to accommodate an already existing seasonal festival of a type common in antiquity, in which fictional or mock combat between good and evil sides was accompanied by entertainments that included the telling of stories similar in general contour to parts of the Book of Esther.

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Weissgall's opera added to a long tradition of musical expression of the Book of Esther, in whole or in part, that includes numerous works composed over the past six centuries. Haman is thought to be represented in an early 14th-century motet. Palestrina wrote a five-voice motet, *Quid habes Hester* (1575), for which the text draws on the dialogue between Esther and Ahasuerus as presented in apocryphal additions to the Book of Esther. Among 17th- and early-18th-century works are Stradella's oratorio *Esther, liberatrice dell' popolo ebrae* (ca. 1670); M. A. Charpentier's *Historia Esther*; G. Legrenzi's oratorio *Gli sponsali d'Esther* (1676); and J. B. Moreau's choral supplements to Racine's play *Esther*. Handel's oratorio *Esther* (1732), still performed today, had its origins in his earlier masque *Haman and Mordecai*, with a text by John Arbuthnot, perhaps together, as some musicologists maintain, with Alexander Pope. Based on Racine's drama, the earlier work, Handel's first oratorio-type work in English, was first performed at the palace of the Duke of Chandos in 1720. The full oratorio, with additional text by Samuel Humphreys, was introduced on the stage of the King's Theater, and its libretto was translated into Hebrew by the Venetian rabbi Jacob Raphael Saraval (1707–82). Later in the 18th century, von Dittersdorf wrote his oratorio *La liberatrice del popolo giudaico nella Persia o sia l'Esther* (1773).

In the 19th century there were operatic versions of the Esther story, and Eugen D'Albert wrote an overture to Grillparzer's play *Esther* (1888). Productions of Racine's play at the Comédie Française invited contributions of incidental choral music by

several now forgotten composers. But the most important operatic work prior to Weisgall's is probably Darius Milhaud's *Esther de Carpentras* (1925–27), which draws on an old *purimspiel* (Purim play) from his native Provence, concerning a local bishop in Carpentras intent on converting Jews. Jan Meyerowitz (1913–98) also wrote an opera, *Esther* (1956), with a libretto by the American poet Langston Hughes, as well as an orchestral tone poem, *Midrash Esther*, which was recorded for the first time by the Milken Archive. In the “lighter” realm there are also many works, including Abraham Goldfaden's Yiddish musical *Kenig akhshverosh* (ca. 1885), one of his least-known Yiddish theatrical works, and Israeli popular composer Dov Seltzer's music for Itzik Manger's Yiddish production *Di megila*.

* * *

For dramatic effect in the opera, in which Ahasuerus is assumed to be the historical Xerxes in the capital city of Susa, Weisgall and Kondek took many liberties with the biblical account. Their *Esther* is not claimed as a faithful reenactment of the biblical story, but as a work of art based upon it. Characters are fleshed out in appropriately multidimensional human terms; details of plot and setting are filled in but sometimes changed altogether; motivations are explored; and parallels are drawn to contemporary issues and concerns—especially Jewish identity in modern society and moral reflections arising out of post-World War II sensibilities with regard to defensive war for national survival. The triumphant spirit in the biblical narrative is deliberately muted as well as complicated, and the opera opens as well as closes with a chilling scene in which eleven bodies of hanged men are suspended above a grave digger, with Esther, disguised beneath a hood, hovering in the background.

In the opera, Esther is portrayed as far less sympathetic at first than in the biblical narrative. When Mordecai initially implores her to intercede for her people, she seems to represent the stereotypical overly as well as negatively assimilated Jew in modern perceptions. Not only convinced that maintaining the secret of her own Jewish ancestry will permanently ensure her safety, she seems to have removed herself in her own mind from her people altogether, feeling little of the kinship upon which Mordecai is counting. “No longer!” she replies to Mordecai's reminder that she is still a Jew (“You are one of us!”). “I live in a different way as queen than I did with you.”

Weisgall and Kondek's *Esther*—before the spiritual growth and recovery of her better self that they seek to establish and develop onstage—is, at that moment, eerily reminiscent of those Jews in the modern era who declined to jeopardize newfound social status in a non-Jewish world, completely disassociating with their past, and who are now generally criticized if not condemned. As events of the 20th century have proved, their masks were ultimately futile anyway.

Esther now likes being queen, with all its advantages—even though the opera has altered the circumstances surrounding her original candidacy. (In this libretto, following Midrashic interpretation, she is mysteriously summoned against her *and* Mordecai's wishes to join the group of candidates. Although she resists at first, she complies only because Mordecai assures her lamentably that there is no choice. This, of course, circumvents the difficult question of why Mordecai would have cooperated in her abandoning Jewish life by becoming queen.) It is not only that she fears approaching the king without an invitation, but she is not so ready to forfeit her position by revealing her connection to the Jews—even to the respected Mordecai.

Her selfish attitude, however, is only superficial. She is soon genuinely conflicted, and that conflict is played out during Act II. “Who am I?” she asks repeatedly on second thought—of Mordecai, and of herself. She realizes that while she has ignored her heritage, she cannot continue to repress her bond with it and to abdicate her obligation to her people in its time of need. But her realization requires the persuasion of a crowd representing the people, in addition to Mordecai. After insisting that she can do no more than empathize, she ultimately acknowledges that “we are responsible, each for the other.”

Seeking to explain and explore Haman's motivations, Weisgall and Kondek have presented his genocidal plan within the context of a larger goal that becomes an invented subplot involving his wife, Zeresh. Together, at her constant encouragement, they are planning to stage a coup and overthrow and murder the king so that Haman can assume the reigns of power. Unlike in the biblical account, Zeresh appears with Haman at the banquet, which he thinks is given in his honor (which, in the opera, is a composite of the two separate banquets described in the Bible). There, they converse gleefully about the sure success of their plot.

Indeed, the composer and librettist have carved out an added, quasi-Lady Macbeth role for Zeresh—whose foundation in the biblical account may be found in the scene (5:13–14) where Zeresh, together with Haman's friends, advises him to relieve himself of the agony Mordecai causes him by ordering Mordecai's hanging. In the opera, her role is many times magnified, for it is she who, in addition to being a coconspirator, incites Haman against the Jews and urges him not to stop at Mordecai's execution: "Do not act against him [Mordecai] alone, act against all of them," she tells him—partly in order to camouflage Mordecai's execution, which might otherwise have dangerous repercussions for Haman when it becomes known in the Jewish community. "His death would be noticed," Haman fears, suggesting that the king might be alerted to the role Mordecai played in uncovering the earlier regicidal plot, and thus might blame Haman for his death. But Haman's momentary resistance to Zeresh's advice about genocide is without foundation in the biblical story, in which Haman is portrayed as the essence of evil who needs no encouragement. In the opera, Zeresh plays on his ego for the sake of her own ambition, assuring him of immortality in terms that, for late 20th-century audiences, might recall Holocaust and post-Holocaust rhetoric such as the resolution proposed at the 1945 postwar Polish Peasant Party congress, posthumously thanking Adolph Hitler—their defeated enemy, conqueror, and tormentor—for at least having annihilated Polish Jewry, and urging that those Jews who might have survived be expelled. (Although that resolution was neither voted on nor adopted, it was proposed to the tumultuous applause of the more than 1,000 Polish delegates.) "To be remembered as the man who rid the world of an insolent race ... you'll achieve the greatness you deserve," Zeresh promises.

Vashti, from whom we do not hear in the biblical narrative after her banishment, is a coconspirator along with Zeresh and Haman in the opera's subplot. From Zeresh's communications with her, Vashti believes that—once Haman takes over—she will be restored to court in some capacity. Yet another new twist to the story comes with Vashti's involvement in the earlier plot that Mordecai uncovers in time to save the king's life. In this new scenario, the two royal chamberlains and plotters, Bigtan and Teresh, are fiercely devoted to the deposed Vashti, who tries to use them as an instrument for her own revenge as well as a means to her return to court.

Perhaps the most glaring and politically charged editorial supplement to the biblical narrative occurs subtly in Scene 10 of the third and final act, where Esther reflects with sadness on the fact that the necessary defensive war, which occurred only as a result of her intercession, took tens of thousands of enemy lives (including, it must be presumed, many so-called civilian casualties). Her dampened enthusiasm for the victory—even as the triumph of survival—and her lament about the necessity of her role may appear to come as a bit of political-historical revisionism in the tradition of postwar amateur reconsiderations about Dresden or Hiroshima—or for that matter the equally civilian-populated and equally deadly if not deadlier bombing of Tokyo or Berlin. But for anyone who knew Hugo Weisgall personally, this would have been, if anything along those lines, a poke at just such revisionist or pseudo-pacifist naïveté. Esther's sadness does not necessarily question the strategic wisdom of the campaign.

Yet this regretfulness of what was nonetheless necessary ("that that day [the thirteenth of Adar] so much had not been avoided fills me with regret ... so much blood, so many dead") has solid roots in Judaic tradition. Probably the most notable example is a Midrashic commentary on the death of the Israelites' Egyptian pursuers as the Sea of Reeds closed in on them and caused them to drown—leaving the former slaves safe on dry land and free from bondage. According to that commentary, the angels in heaven were about to break into jubilant song as the Egyptian hosts were drowning in the sea, when God admonished them sternly: "My creatures [the Egyptians] are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing?" The Passover seder reflects similar sensibilities in the pouring of a drop of wine from the full cup at the mention of each of the "ten plagues," a custom generally explained as deliberately diminishing what would otherwise be unalloyed joy at Israel's victorious exodus, precisely because it entailed the suffering of others. And the Purim tradition of reading in a single breath the names of all ten sons of Haman as they occur in the *m'gillat ester*—while its derivation has been tied to demonstrating that they were executed at the same time—has also been viewed as refraining from dwelling on them and thereby refusing to gloat over the death of enemies.

On a more practical personal plane, Esther is concerned about her future reputation and perception. She is in need of reassurance from the king—which is immediately

forthcoming—that she will be remembered not chiefly as the agent of war and death, but rather as the intermediary for her people's survival.

* * *

The scenes excerpted for the Milken Archive recording are from Acts I and III. In Scene 8 of the first act, Esther, waiting in the harem for her summons, contemplates her chances of being chosen by the king to become his queen. Although beset with mixed feelings at first, her excitement builds at the prospect. Her vocal lines exhibit youthful rapture, accompanied by muted strings. The wide-ranging tessitura, however, suggests the solidity of her character that will emerge later. The musical content relies heavily on chromatically based half-tone melodic cells, a technique that pervades the entire score.

Scene 2 of Act III portrays the dancing at the banquet to which Esther has persuaded the king and Haman to come. A fast-paced scherzo, the music is suffused with propelling energy, foreshadowing the outburst that will occur when she reveals Haman's plot to the king along with her Jewish identity.

Scene 10 of Act III takes place on a palace terrace bathed in moonlight, in the atmosphere of quiet and peace that has returned to Shushan with the Jews' victory. Esther's contemplative aria begins in the lowest part of the soprano register, in darkly colored hushed murmurs. The semitone intervals heard in the first act aria are expanded here. Her three pronouncements of "the thirteenth of Adar"—as the day of bloodshed that will always be associated with her name—are sung to a descending chromatic scale. The Holocaust-tinged mantra of never forgetting and never permitting it to happen again ("Never again!") is recast here in her words: "No one should forget. It must not be forgotten. It must not be repeated." The king assures her (simply and naively, of course, in view of history) that evil and darkness—and, by implication, any further danger to her people—have been eradicated, a hopeful sentiment in which she joins: "No shadow will ever again stain our bright new world again." The scene ends with Esther and the king both reaffirming her identity as he praises her strength and her heart and as they lean emotionally on each other: "We are each other's light."

* * *

Esther was one of the three American operas produced on consecutive evenings in October 1993 for New York City Opera's World Premiere Festival. (The other two were Ezra Laderman's *Marilyn*, about Marilyn Monroe, and Lukas Foss's *Griffelkin*.) Inasmuch as Weisgall's unrelenting modernism and gritty chromaticism render his opera more stylistically and harmonically complicated than those two works, and in view of the sometimes reactionary trend toward accommodating the public with what is condescendingly called "accessible music," it came as a welcome surprise that *Esther* was widely adjudged the most successful production of the festival—in terms of public as well as critical acclaim. All three performances were sold out, and the audience reaction at each was wildly enthusiastic, even from those usually resistant to so-called dissonant vocal music. "You would have thought," wrote critic Anthony Tommasini with reference to Weisgall's reception at his curtain calls, "that Verdi had risen from the dead."

Writing in *The New York Times*, Edward Rothstein observed that the composer's triumph "could not have been more complete." He saw *Esther* as a compelling case for not shying away from difficult music in the service of serious purposes—a case for Weisgall's "acidic melancholy and muscular dissonances" and his "rhythmic verve, sharp contrasts in texture, and a youthful energy that belies the composer's eighty years." *New York* magazine considered *Esther* "a work that can now be placed among the very finest American operas," and another New York critic predicted that the opera "might well go down as a masterpiece of the American stage."

Among the operagoing public there has been a steady call for *Esther*'s reproduction. When a production scheduled by New York City Opera for its autumn 1997 season was scuttled for financial reasons, there was a noticeable cry of general disappointment.

—Neil W. Levin

GIMPEL THE FOOL

Music by David Schiff

Libretto by Isaac Bashevis Singer

Based on the story by Isaac Bashevis Singer

English version by David Schiff

Gimpel

Elka

Rabbi

Badkhn

Wolf-Leib the Apprentice

The Goat

Townpeople of Frompol

[1] Act II, Scene 10 [Lullaby]**BADKHN**

Four months after the wedding, Elka gives birth to a son. Gimpel is humiliated, but the rabbi says that Elka is no different from Eve. There was a circumcision, and Gimpel named the boy after his father, may he rest in peace. After the *bris*, Gimpel asked, "How can he be mine?" but Elka told him the child was born a little prematurely—and the rabbi agreed.

GIMPEL

Lu-lu-lu-lu ...

ELKA

Gimpel, Gimpel, now stop this sulking! You'd think a ship had sunk with all your money. Don't you love your baby?

GIMPEL

Is this any way to treat a poor orphan? If my mother were alive this day, she would die a second death from seeing this.

GIMPEL, ELKA

If she were alive, she'd soon be dead.

GIMPEL

Is this any way to treat a poor orphan?

ELKA

Pick yourself up and stop all this foolishness! The child is yours—look at his face. He was born early, a little prematurely.

A seven-month baby—a slightly premature child!

GIMPEL

But seventeen weeks is not seven months. Is this any way to treat a poor orphan?

RABBI

Adam and Eve went to bed two, and when they came out, they were four. Now every woman is made in the image of mother Eve.

ELKA, GIMPEL

Yes, every woman can be called mother Eve.

[2] Scene 11 [Pantomime]**BADKHN**

But what was the connection between Elka and Eve, or between Gimpel and the baby he loved so dearly?

GIMPEL

After all, they say that Jesus never had a father either.

BADKHN

So Gimpel went back to the bakery, and Elka stayed home, in bed.

[3] Scene 11a [Bread Song]**GIMPEL**

Out of love for my wife I became a thief, stealing from my own customers at the bakery! I'd hide a piece of cake or grab some macaroons ...

A kikh!, a shtritzl, ai dai dai.

A crust of corn bread, a slice of rye bread, ai dai dai.

A khale for Friday night with four braids twisted tight, ai dai dai.

Apprentice! He's such a good-hearted lad.

GIMPEL, APPRENTICE

A kikh!, a shtritzl, ai dai dai.

A loaf of corn bread, a loaf of rye bread, ai dai dai.

A khale for Friday night with four braids twisted tight, ai dai dai.

Some cake with honey, and prunes and apples,
a loaf with farmer cheese, a loaf with poppy seeds,
ai dai dai dai.

A bubele a flodn with raisins and almonds, ai dai dai dai.

APPRENTICE

Good night, Reb Gimpel!

GIMPEL

He's such a good-hearted lad!

GIMPEL, APPRENTICE

Ai dai dai ...

[4] Scene 11b [Night Music]

GIMPEL

A shtritzl, a pletzl ...

TOWNSPEOPLE

Gimpel dope!

GIMPEL

A khale!

TOWNSPEOPLE

Gimpel donkey! Gimpel monkey!

GIMPEL

Two different snores! One, a light snore ... but the other ...
It sounds like a mating ox! My stomach is trembling!

ELKA

Who is there?

GIMPEL

Only me, Gimpel!

ELKA

Only Gimpel! Listen closely, Gimpel! Turn around this instant
and go quickly, very quickly, and take a good look at the
goat. She's been sickly.

[5] Scene 11c [Gimpel and the Goat]

GIMPEL

I forgot to tell you about my goat. I feel closer to her than to
most people!

Under baby's cradle bed [*goat bleats*] lies a she-goat's snow-
white head.

Our she-goat is not like common ones; she sells raisins and
almonds.

Raisins and almonds can bring you money, but study of Torah
is sweeter than honey.

She seems to be all right. Now go to sleep, my little goat.

GOAT:

meh ... meh ... meh ...

Good night to you dearest, Gimpel.

GIMPEL

Where is the lad?

ELKA

Where is what lad?

GIMPEL

What! My apprentice! I saw him sleeping with you!

[6] Scene 11d [Elka's "Gevalt"]

ELKA

May all the dreams I've dreamed this night and every
night curse your bones and destroy your body! Curse and
plague you! You're nothing but a no-good, and your mind
is possessed. You moo-cow, you lazy old donkey brain! You
jackass! Get out of my house before I give such a cry that all
Frampol will leap out of bed. Get out! Get out!

TOWNSPEOPLE

Gimpel jackass, Gimpel dope! Gimpel donkey! Gimpel glump!
Gimpel strawhead, Gimpel dope! Gimpel the Fool!

GIMPEL

No more of being set upon, for even to Gimpel's foolishness
there must be a limit.

[7] Scene 11e [The Divorce]

BADKHN

Gimpel had no choice. He went to the rabbi to get a divorce.

GIMPEL

Rabbi, Rabbi, what can I do? I just saw my wife and my apprentice. The lad and Elka!

RABBI

Ahh ...

TOWNSPEOPLE

A jackass should chew on straw! Just praying ... won't make a baby! His apprentice! The helper! Elka! He is bringing shame on a good Jewish woman! He is slandering her! She has to sue him!

ELKA

It's just lies and slander. I should sue for libel. He is lost in visions, dreams, and nightmares. He is out of his mind!

GIMPEL

Rabbi, what should I do?

RABBI

You must surely divorce her!

TOWNSPEOPLE

Divorce her!

GIMPEL

Rabbi, Rabbi, but what if she won't grant a divorce?

RABBI

Then you must, yourself, declare it!

TOWNSPEOPLE

Declare it!

GIMPEL

Good, Rabbi, I'll consider it....

RABBI

There is nothing to think about.

TOWNSPEOPLE

Stop!

RABBI

Get yourself away from her and no longer see her!

GIMPEL

Rabbi! Rabbi, but can't I see the children?

TOWNSPEOPLE

Gimpel!

RABBI

You must never see the children! Get away from that reeking whore and all her bastards too!

TOWNSPEOPLE

Reeking whore and bastards! Gimpel! You'd better run far away—out of town!

[8] Scene 11f [Gimpel's Monologue]

GIMPEL

I should have gotten angry, but that is just my problem. I can't get angry. First, anyone can be confused. Second, since she's so insistent, perhaps I did accuse her unjustly? It happens sometimes you see a shape like a little man, but when you come closer, it's just a branch. In that case, I owe her an apology.

BADKHN

And what did the rabbi say about believing your wife?

GIMPEL

If today you don't believe your wife, tomorrow you won't believe in God.

LADY OF THE LAKE

Music by Elie Siegmeister
Libretto by Edward Mabley
Based on the story by Bernard Malamud

Isabella
Blumberg
Ernesto

[9 Scene 5 *The garden. Isabella sits quietly on a bench, waiting. Blumberg enters. Isabella rises.]*

ISABELLA

Welcome, Mr. Freeman.

BLUMBERG

Thank you for your kind letter. I have been looking forward to seeing you again.

ISABELLA

Shall we go into the palazzo or stay outside and watch the sun go down?

BLUMBERG

As you wish. It is a lovely garden. *[They sit.]* I envy you, Signorina, living here amid such beauty.

ISABELLA

You envy me, Mr. Freeman?

BLUMBERG

Can't we be less formal? Call me Henry.

ISABELLA

Henry ...

BLUMBERG

Yes. And may I call you Isabella?

ISABELLA

If you like.

BLUMBERG

I do, I do. May I speak out? From the moment I saw you, I found you most beautiful.

ISABELLA

You are very kind. Don't flatter me.

BLUMBERG

I'm not flattering you. In fact, I should tell you I'm in love with you, Isabella. *[Isabella rises, moves away. He follows.]* Don't go away, Isabella. I want you near me always. *[She looks at him, then turns away.]*

ISABELLA

Look at the mountains. There is Monte Rosa, and at the other end, the Jungfrau. Don't those seven snowcapped peaks remind you of a menorah?

BLUMBERG

A what?

ISABELLA

Are they not like a seven-branched candelabrum holding white candles to the sky?

BLUMBERG

Yes, something like that, I suppose.

ISABELLA

Or is it the Virgin's crown you see, adorned with jewels?

BLUMBERG

Maybe the crown. It all depends how you look at it. But why have you changed the subject? I love you, Isabella. I long for you, Isabella. Can this be truly love, come all in a rush, so quickly, to catch us unaware? I touched your hand and felt a shock of sweet surprise. My fingers brushed your cheek, I looked into your eyes, and suddenly I knew that you were mine alone, my one and only love, my only love.

ISABELLA

What star was smiling down on me that lucky day that brought you to me? Now love is rushing headlong, and suddenly we've found each other.

BLUMBERG, ISABELLA

You are mine, and will be mine forever, forever more.

BLUMBERG

Now you are mine and will be mine forever more. We'll be together always.

ISABELLA

For it is love we've found; yes, it is love that cannot be denied. I wonder what brought you here to me, now.

BLUMBERG

It's love that cannot be denied. I wonder what brought me here to you, now. *[They kiss.]*

ISABELLA

I have a confession to make, dear Henry.

BLUMBERG

A confession?

ISABELLA

You have been deceived. There is little on this island that is what it seems.

BLUMBERG

I don't understand.

ISABELLA

The paintings, for instance. Those Titians, Tintoretos—they are copies, not real.

BLUMBERG

What? Those priceless pictures?

ISABELLA

Copies only, and that's not all. I'm not what you think I am. My name is not del Dongo. It is Isabella Padovani. The family del Dongo is away. We are the caretakers of the palace. Ernesto, who brought you—he is my father. We are poor people.

BLUMBERG

Caretakers?

ISABELLA

Yes.

BLUMBERG

Ernesto is your father? *[Isabella nods.]* Was it his idea for you to say you were somebody else?

ISABELLA

No, mine. He has wanted me to go to America, but under the right conditions.

BLUMBERG

[bitterly] So you had to pretend?

ISABELLA

I wanted you to stay until I knew you better.

BLUMBERG

Why didn't you say so?

ISABELLA

I thought you would be clearer to me after a while.

BLUMBERG

Clearer how?

ISABELLA

I don't really know.

BLUMBERG

I'm not hiding anything.

ISABELLA

That's what I was afraid of. And now you know the truth. My father will take you back to the town. He is waiting.

BLUMBERG

Isabella ...

ISABELLA

Good-bye Mr. Freeman. *[She leaves.]*

[10] *[Interlude—in darkness]*

[11] **Scene 6** *[The pensione, at the water's edge, with the rowboat pulled up on shore]*

BLUMBERG

She lied to me, deceived me. Isabella lied. The dream is past, the fairy tale ended. She thought she found a stupid tourist, tried to trap me. She lied to me. But then, didn't I lie too? Pretend to be what I'm not? If there was cheating, am I not guilty too? What does it matter if she's no princess? What difference if her name is del Dongo or Padovani? She lied to me because she thought that's what I wanted to hear. She's a natural-born queen, Isabella, the one I came for, the one I must have. Signora! The boat. I want the boat! *[He runs off.]*

[2 Scene 7 *The garden. Ernesto is smoking a cheroot, his wrist on the handle of his cane, his chin on his wrists. Blumberg enters.]*

ERNESTO

So you have come here again, Signor Freeman.

BLUMBERG

May I speak with your daughter?

ERNESTO

It is as I tell her: "He will come back."

BLUMBERG

Did she want me to come back?

ERNESTO

Ask her. She is coming.

[He leaves.]

[Isabella enters. Blumberg takes her in his arms.]

ISABELLA

You've come to say good-bye.

BLUMBERG

To whom good-bye? I have come to marry you. *[They kiss.]*
I touched your hand, and once more felt that sweet surprise,
I looked into your eyes ...

ISABELLA

My dearest love, we must now say good-bye.

BLUMBERG

But why good-bye? Have I not said I've come to marry you?

ISABELLA

Are you a Jew?

BLUMBERG

How many noes make never? Why do you persist with such foolish questions?

ISABELLA

Because I hoped you were. *[Slowly she unbuttons her bodice, revealing a bluish line of numbers on her bare breasts.]* My number, tattooed into my flesh—Buchenwald, when I was a little girl. The fascists sent us there. The Nazis did it.

BLUMBERG

[Staggered, he moves away from her.]
God, oh my God!

ISABELLA

I can't marry you.

BLUMBERG

Isabella!

ISABELLA

We are Jews.

BLUMBERG

Isabella!

ISABELLA

My past is meaningful to me.

BLUMBERG

Isabella ...

ISABELLA

I treasure what we suffered for.

BLUMBERG

Jews? You? Oh, God, why did you hide this from me?

ISABELLA

I thought at one time perhaps you were a Jew. I hoped, but was wrong.

BLUMBERG

Isabella, listen, I ... I am ...

[She steps behind a statue and disappears; he gropes for her in the mist that had risen from the lake, but remains embracing only a moonlit stone.]

BLUMBERG

Isabella!

ESTHER

An Opera in Three Acts

Music by Hugo Weisgall

Libretto by Charles Kondek

Esther, Queen of Persia

Xerxes, King of Persia

Act I

[13 Scene 8] *[Esther, with the harem, contemplates becoming queen.]*

ESTHER

Did any queen have more? Did Vashti? Did one have more than the promise of heated thighs or the bait of burning lips, wealth, wisdom, power, or love? Would he choose someone shy, someone who, though she may try to be otherwise, is awkward, unknowing—only now, only now glowing from new excitements not found in the shade of a garden wall? But who is beginning to believe she is more, more than she was, because I do dream of being queen now and then. The thought comes often uninvited, forcing itself into my heart, leaving me uneasy yet strangely excited. For I know it nourishes me, and I grow. Only a queen may taste mountain snow. Only a queen may command the clouds, change the look of the sky, may feed gazelles. What else do queens do?

Act III

[14 Scene 2] *[Great hall of the palace. HAMAN and ZARESH are seated prominently among a large throng. A wild dance begins.]*

[15 Scene 10] *[The terrace of the palace: ESTHER bathed in moonlight, XERXES stands by her side.]*

ESTHER

Susa sleeps a sleep it hasn't slept for months, since it wept the day that tears and blood mixed and flowed from the Indus to Ethiopia. A day forevermore fixed in time, in history! The thirteenth of Adar ... At last, there is a quiet, the horror long past. Yet, that this day could not have been avoided fills me with grief, with regret. Yet I cannot forget. No one should forget. It must not be forgotten. It must not be repeated. So much blood, so many, so many dead.

XERXES

Many survive! Many survive!

ESTHER

And know me, thank me, and call my name!

XERXES

You healed their aches, quelled the riot in heads and hearts. They will forever call your name, Esther.

ESTHER

Esther. Esther of this time and for all times, because of who she was, because of what she became. Am I that Esther?

XERXES

Yes, yes, no one but you! Who has your heart, your strength, your love? Esther, come. Hear your sister—your sister, the moon—weep envious tears! You gleam; you glow with a light a thousand moons shining a thousand years could not equal!

ESTHER

It's you who shine and brighten the way, you who allow no sunless day to dawn. If I am moon, then you are sun!

ESTHER, XERXES

We are each other's light, each other's light! No murky day, no gloomy night, no shade, no shadow will ever stain, will ever stain our bright new world again!

David Schiff: *Gimpel the Fool* (excerpts)

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Suzanne Pekow, Lindsay Pettitt, Kindra Scharich, Lindsay

Shipp, Sara Taetle, Amanda Thomas, Kimberly Walton,

Betsey Williams. **Tenors:** Ryan Banar, Brandon Brack, Joshua

Breitzer, Hugh Floyd, David Fryling, Michael Gallant, Brent

Hegwood, Jeremy Nabors. Eugene Rogers, Jr., Eric Stinson.

Basses: Jesse Blumberg, Ian Eisendrach, Scott Hanoian,

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Elie Siegmeister: *Lady of the Lake* (excerpts)

Publisher: Carl Fischer

Recording: Batsry University Chapel, Seattle, May 2000

Recording Producer: Adam Stern

Recording Engineer: Al Swanson

Recording Project Managers: Richard Lee / Neil Levin

Hugo Weisgall: *Esther* (excerpts)

Publisher: Theodore Presser

Recording: Benaroya Hall, Seattle, May 1999

Recording Producer: Adam Stern

Recording Engineer: Al Swanson

Recording Project Managers: Richard Lee / Neil Levin

**NOTE: Biographical sketches of the performers on this recording can be found
on the Milken Archive Web site: www.milkenarchive.org**

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