Volume 10:
Intimate Voices–Solo and Ensemble Music of Jewish Spirit

Intimate. Expressive. Profound.

If you had to pick just a few defining characteristics of chamber music, these would surely top the list. They certainly apply to the music of "Intimate Voices: Solo and Ensemble Music of Jewish Spirit," Volume 10 in the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience.

Written for solo performers and small ensembles, demanding a high degree of technical virtuosity and musical sensitivity, these compact works pack an outsized wallop. Though crafted with great economy, they communicate with such clarity and force that their impact seems entirely out of proportion to their scale.

Chamber music as we know it today came into being in the 18th century, emerging from the string quartets of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Over the next hundred years or so, it came to be regarded as the most subtle, the most intellectual, and perhaps even the most spiritual genre of classical music – one that creates an unusually direct channel of communication between composers, performers, and audiences. Little wonder that so many fine American Jewish composers should have chosen to explore their personal heritage through this unique, and uniquely affecting, medium.

The roots of Jewish chamber music in particular can be traced to Russia; early 20th century St. Petersburg, to be exact. It was there, in 1908, that a group of musicians, folklorists, and assorted intellectuals formed the *Gesellschaft für Jüdische Volksmusik*, a.k.a. the Society for Jewish Folk Music – an organization dedicated to the creation of a new Jewish national art music modeled after the self-consciously Russian concert music pioneered by composers like Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov.

At first, the members of the Society focused on collecting Jewish folk music from the far reaches of the Russian Empire and arranging it for the concert stage. Once that was done, they turned to their long-term goal: using that folk material to create original classical compositions.

Volume 10 contains ample proof of their ultimate success. Composers such as Joseph Achron, Jacob Weinberg, and Lazar Weiner were all Russian émigrés who had either direct or indirect connections to the Society. Most importantly, they all played a seminal role in the birth of Jewish chamber music.

Achron, who joined the Society in 1911 and later lived in New York and Los Angeles, drew early inspiration from Eastern European folk music. After immigrating to America, however, he became more interested in ancient biblical cantillation melodies, and in the music of Mizrahi, or Near Eastern, Jews.

These are precisely the Jewish influences that one hears in both his *Wind Sextet* and *Children's Suite*, albeit filtered through the mind of a man whom Arnold Schoenberg described as "one of the most underestimated of modern composers" – a man with a taste for both French Impressionism and late Romantic harmony, a gift for counterpoint, and a flair for making new music from old sources.

You can hear hints of the same basic materials, along with fragments of synagogue tunes and Hassidic melodies, in Lazar Weiner's *Lag ba'omer* and *Three Piano Preludes*, as well as in Jacob Weinberg's *String Quartet op. 55*. Both Weiner and Weinberg were born in the Ukraine and later emigrated to America; both were affiliated with the Society, Weinberg through his membership in the Moscow branch, and Weiner through exposure to former members like Weinberg in the US; and each found his own way of fashioning innovative art music from traditional Jewish melodies.

Weiner, for example, never quoted an existing tune if he could avoid it: "If I need a traditional melody, I create my own," he told his students. And that is exactly how he approached his delightful piano miniatures, spinning melodies that sound unambiguously Eastern European yet also thoroughly original. Weinberg, on the other hand, didn't mind showing his hand, as he did when directly quoting the famous *kol nidre* melody (from the Yom Kippur synagogue service) in his *String Quartet*. Of course, he then went on to thoroughly transform it in a style reminiscent of Béla Bartók – another great nationalist composer who dealt in chamber music. (John Zorn's *Kol Nidre*, also included in Volume 10, is an altogether different animal. As is often his want, the king of New York's downtown music scene completely deconstructs the source of his inspiration, rendering it completely unrecognizable.)

The programmatic or extra-musical nature of these pieces – *Lag ba'omer* is meant to evoke the sound of wind and rain, along with the image of children studying at religious school; while Weinberg's *String Quartet* is meant to depict the High Holy Days – is shared by several other works in Volume 10. In one of the many oral history videos contained in the Archive's virtual museum, Weiner's son, the composer Yehudi Wyner, explains that his own *Passover Offering* is meant to function as a kind of "pseudo-narrative" illustrating the basic episodes of the Passover story, with modern instruments (trombone, flute) standing in for biblical ones (shofar, or ram's horn; halil, or pipe). Leo Smit's *Tzaddik*, for saxophone quartet, paints a musical picture of a Hassidic religious master – with surprising references to Papageno, the bird-catcher from Mozart's *Magic Flute*. And Paul Schoenfield's *Tales from Chelm*, for string quartet, incorporates Klezmer-inspired melodies to narrate a series of stories revolving around the fictional foolishness of a very real town in Poland.

Yet chamber music is also among the purest and most self-sufficient forms of musical expression, and Volume 10 contains many pieces that communicate with audiences without referring to any kind of extra-musical narrative.

Michael Shapiro's stately *Variations on Eliahu hanavi*, for solo cello, takes a tune that can be traced to 19th century Germany – and that will be familiar to anyone who has ever

attended a Passover seder – and subjects it to a series of elegant permutations that exploit the full range of the instrument, from resonant bass to singing upper register. As Shapiro notes in an online video clip, the piece was premiered at a Holocaust memorial concert in Berlin organized by Gottfried Wagner – the great-grandson of the opera composer Richard Wagner, who was a noted anti-Semite.

Meyer Kupferman dedicated his *The Shadows of Jerusalem* to those members of his own family who perished in the Holocaust. There is nothing programmatic about this work, however; and as Kupferman explains in a video oral history, the "Jerusalem" mentioned in the title is but a metaphor for Jewishness in general. Instead, the focus here is on the expressive capacity of pure sound, as Kupferman's disjunct melodies and dissonant harmonies play out across the "non-blending" voices of soprano, clarinet, cello, and piano, creating an astonishing sense of space and clarity.

Clarity was the quality prized most by the great French Jewish composer Darius Milhaud, and it is nowhere more evident than in his *Études sur des thèmes liturgiques du comtat venaissin* for string quartet. Commissioned by the Braemer Foundation of Philadelphia and premiered in 1973, this work, which draws upon the unique liturgical music of the Jews of Provence, was lost for decades until it resurfaced by surprise in 2000 during an interview with Milhaud's widow. (That remarkable bit of oral history can also be viewed online.)

With its clear, singing melodies, many of which draw upon Provençal prayers and wedding songs; its balanced contrapuntal textures; and its playful dance rhythms, this piece – like all of the other works in this volume – is both a gem of Jewish chamber music in particular, and an archetype of chamber music in general. For while it speaks with a distinctively Jewish accent, it communicates with listeners at the universal level of great art.

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