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Milken Archive of Jewish Music introduces online multimedia volume
Volume 11:
Symphonic Visions—Orchestral Works of Jewish Spirit

Did you know that the musical polymath David Amram—a man who played jazz with Charles Mingus, championed “world music” before the term even existed, and was Leonard Bernstein's choice as the first composer-in-residence at the New York Philharmonic—also wrote *Songs of the Soul*, a three-movement symphony that melds cantorial melodies, Sabbath prayers, and Middle Eastern modes?

Or that the acclaimed German-born composer Ernst Toch, whose score for the Hollywood film *Address Unknown* earned him an Oscar nomination, also wrote a symphony based on the story of Jephtha's daughter from the Book of Judges?

Or that the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Yehudi Wyner has written numerous pieces based on Yiddish literature and Jewish folk music?

If not, don't feel bad. Until the Milken Archive began recording these and many other classical works of the American Jewish experience, hardly anyone else knew about them, either.

More than any other place in the Jewish diaspora, America has witnessed the creation of an astonishing array of Jewish-themed concert music—astonishing for its quality, for the marquee names involved, and for its sheer quantity and scope.

The composers represented in this volume studied with the likes of Nadia Boulanger, Aaron Copland, and Paul Hindemith. They taught at such august institutions as Juilliard and the Manhattan School of Music, hobnobbed with musical titans like Ravel and Stravinsky, and had their works premiered by conductors like Koussevitsky and Bernstein. They wrote music for the concert hall, for Hollywood, for the opera and the ballet.

Yet much of their Jewishly oriented music lay neglected for decades until the Archive began recording it in the late 1990s with major artists in the United States and Europe—artists who were, as often as not, completely unaware of the names Berlinski, Schoenfield, Wyner, and Weisgall. Granted, history has been somewhat kinder to the likes of Achron and Amram and Diamond; but these composers, too, have seen their Jewish-themed works slip from view. Bernstein's *Kaddish* stands out amongst the pieces in this volume simply because it *is* fairly well known. But Bernstein was Bernstein; enough said.

It's a strange turn of affairs, given how well-received these works were when first introduced, and how highly regarded these composers have been within the wider musical world. An

unfortunate one, too, given the high quality of the music.

That quality is evident throughout this volume, from the gorgeous melodies and masterful orchestrations of Achron's *Violin Concerto No. 1* and Jacobi's *Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra*, to the epic narrative sweep of Meyerowitz's *Symphony Midrash Esther* and the intricate counterpoint of "Incantation" from Amram's *Songs for the Soul*. Such mastery is hardly surprising—Achron, after all, was a child prodigy on the violin who studied with the great Leopold Auer; Jacobi was the first professor of composition at The Juilliard School; Meyerowitz was amongst the best-known opera composers of his day; and Amram studied composition with Gunther Schuller, and conducting with Dmitry Mitropoulos—but it does remind us that, regardless of category, this is great music, and not just great *Jewish* music. (For detailed biographies of these and other composers featured in Volume 11, go to the "People" section of the Archive and peruse the series of informative essays by music director Neil Levin.)

As one might expect given the wide range of styles and interests of the various composers, the Jewish connection plays out in many different ways.

The German-born Jean Berger, who professed an almost religious devotion to Duke Ellington, makes use of Hebrew biblical texts in his *Two Songs from Ecclesiastes*, while Meyerowitz looks instead to biblical commentaries on the Book of Esther. Jacobi, who earlier in his career drew inspiration from Native American music, infuses his gentle *Two Pieces in a Sabbath Mood* with original tunes based upon traditional synagogue chants, while Achron instead builds upon biblical cantillation—decades before Bernstein would do the same in his *Jeremiah Symphony*. Weisgall, whose father was a cantor, miraculously makes a shofar, or ceremonial Jewish ram's horn, sound perfectly at home with the orchestra in his *T'kiatot: Rituals for Rosh Hashana*. And Amram draws from sources as far apart as Eastern Europe, Yemen, and Ethiopia. (Compare the cantorial ornaments in "Song without Words" with the tripping Middle Eastern rhythms in the impish "Dance of Joy." And see the Archive's online video documentary about *Songs for the Soul* for Amram's own explanation of how he based the entire first movement on an Ethiopian Passover chant.) From Bible stories to sacred songs, it's all here—transformed into art music of the highest caliber.

But if the composers in this volume worked with a plethora of distinctly Jewish themes and materials, they were not aiming for an exclusively Jewish audience. And their work exhibits the same transcendent, universal quality common to all great art.

You don't need to be Jewish, for example, to feel the emotional urgency of Herman Berlinski's *Symphonic Visions for Orchestra*. You don't even need to know that *Berlinski* was Jewish—that he escaped from Nazi Germany, and later, Nazi occupied France; that he was encouraged by no less a figure than Olivier Messiaen to draw upon his Jewish heritage; or that he returned to Germany in 2000, for the recording of his magnum opus, *Avodat Shabbat* for orchestra and chorus—to feel the visceral power of his work, any more than you need to know any of the admittedly fascinating backstories to any of these pieces in order to appreciate them as works of art.

And now, thanks to the Archive, appreciate them you can.

To view this volume online and download related media, please visit:

http://www.milkenarchive.org/press_releases/view/volume-11-symphonic-visions-orchestral-works-of-jewish-spirit

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