Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum
Introduces Volume 11, Part 2

Two New Symphonic Albums by Bernstein, Bloch, Foss and More

When the Editorial Board of the Milken Archive began deliberations about a volume on orchestral music of Jewish spirit, they had no idea how “voluminous” it would turn out to be. Later, when recording sessions began, musicians and conductors were equally surprised at the number of high-quality, Jewish-themed orchestral works—many by major American composers—that had been composed. Looking back with the 20/20 vision that hindsight allows, it’s equally surprising that so many of them fell more or less into obscurity.

The two new releases in Volume 11—featuring symphonic masterworks by Leonard Bernstein, Ernest Bloch, Lukas Foss, Mario Davidovsky, and Joel Hoffman—offer a remedy for this.

From Bernstein, a recording of his Symphony No. 1: “Jeremiah” featuring mezzo-soprano Helen Medlyn and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra conducted by James Judd. Inspired by the biblical prophet’s premonitions of impending doom and destruction
for the people of Judea, its early performances led many critics to dub it the best new
work of the year (1944). In addition to its ingenious use of Judaic material, it also
displays the intenseness and highly charged energy that characterizes much of
Bernstein’s trademark.

Works by Bernstein contemporary Lukas Foss (whose works Bernstein often conducted)
and electronic music pioneer Mario Davidovsky explore the Song of Songs with settings
for orchestra and voice. The Foss recording features mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel;
soprano Susan Narucki performs on the Davidovsky. Predating his more experimental
phase, Foss’s setting bears traces of neoclassicism throughout. (Foss also pays tribute to
the Renaissance Italian-Jewish composer Salamone Rossi with a suite of Baroque-
inspired instrumental settings.) The Davidovsky settings, titled Shulamit’s Dream, are
stark, shocking, and dramatic—more in the vein of a miniature opera.

Ernest Bloch once remarked that his “Jewish” works were inspired by an “inner voice”
rather than any external sources—which is to say that he approached “Jewish” music
more as an expression of personal identity than an exploration of putative Jewish modes and
rhythms. Hear his unique approach on two fantastic performances featuring the legendary
Zina Schiff on violin. Named after the moniker of the founder of the Hassidic movement
(Baal Shem Tov: Owner of a Good Name), Baal Shem: Three Pictures of Hassidic
Life draws on prayer melodies and niggunim (ecstatic melodies) to convey the spirit of
Hassidic devotion and commitment. From a later period, Suite Hebraique was composed
as a token of appreciation for Chicago’s Covenant Club (founded in 1917 for Eastern
European Jews), which had sponsored a festival in honor of the composer’s 70th birthday.

Joel Hoffman’s cello concerto, Self-Portrait with Gebirtig, explores the ins and outs of
the Eastern European tradition of the klezmorim. Using melodies from three songs by the
famous Polish-Jewish poet and songwriter Mordechai Gebirtig, Hoffman has crafted a
work of stunning character and charm that is by turns moving, poignant, and just plain
fun.

In an exclusive video documentary also featured in the volume, Hoffman comments on
the difficulties surrounding the performance of orchestral works: “Like so many
composers who’ve been lucky enough to have performances of orchestral pieces, I was
one of the many composers who also suffered the problem of having many orchestra
pieces being played once.” To what extent Jewish-themed orchestral music might become
a more common part of the standard repertoire cannot be foreseen. For now, great works
like these have a permanent home in the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American
Experience.

Founded in 1990 by philanthropist Lowell Milken, the Milken Archive of Jewish Music
reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America. The Archive’s virtual museum
www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos
and essays.

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