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Milken Archive of Jewish Music introduces online multimedia volume
Volume 16:
Heroes and Heroines—Jewish Opera

Murder. Sex. Mayhem.

These are just a few of the topics that have for centuries drawn audiences to the opera. Topics that feature prominently in "Heroes and Heroines: Jewish Opera," Volume 16 of the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience.

All of the works included herein bear a strong connection to some aspect of the Jewish experience – whether that means a libretto based on an episode from Jewish history, characters that express typically Jewish attitudes, or music that draws explicitly on traditional Jewish sources. But they are also operas of the first rank.

This should come as no surprise. From Rossini (*Moïse*) to Nielsen (*Saul and David*), many a prominent European composer of the past three hundred years has turned to the Hebrew bible for gripping and psychologically complex tales. Most, of course, chose to interpret the material through a universal or Christian lens, with only a handful writing works in which the Jewish connection took center stage. (Witness Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, one of the pioneering Austrian composer's finest works, and the last that he completed before emigrating to the United States.) The majority of genuinely Jewish operas are of fairly recent vintage – and of distinctly American origin.

One of the earliest was David Tamkin's *The Dybbuk*, with a libretto drawn from a tale of demonic possession written by the Russian-Jewish writer S. An-Ski. Tamkin began work on the opera in 1931, but An-Ski's story reached much further back – back into the world of Eastern European Hassidic Jewry, a world largely untouched by Westernization and by the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskala. This was the world of Kabbala, or Jewish mysticism; of charismatic religious leaders, or *rebbe*s; of sacred texts and superstitions. The world of the *dybbuk*, an evil spirit that drives its victims mad.

In An-Ski's telling, the victim is a young woman who is possessed by the spirit of her dead lover, only to join him in the afterlife. It's a bittersweet tale of love and loss, one whose twists and turns are mirrored by the variety of Tamkin's musical settings, from the crazed march of "Wedding Music" to the vaguely Eastern European "Dance of the Beggars" and the volatile "Under the Earth's Surface."

Such variety is a hallmark of the volume as a whole. For example, Robert Strassburg's one-act comic folk opera, *Chelm*, draws on a pool of humorous folktales detailing the idiocies of the fictional residents of a very real town in Poland. The work is strewn with references to Yiddish folk song, with Scene 2 based explicitly on the chestnut *Papir iz*

dokh ways (As Sure As Paper Is White). But the latter, cast as a vocal duet with gentle accompaniment by harp and winds, recalls nothing so much as English Renaissance music.

By contrast, David Schiff's *Gimpel the Fool*, based on the best-known short story by the great Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, blends synagogue melodies with cantorial embellishments and klezmer music – all filtered through classical models such as Mahler and Stravinsky. There are hints of a Hassidic *niggun*, or wordless prayer, in the vocal melodies of the "Bread Song," along with intimations of klezmer in the accompanying clarinet and strings; while "Gimpel and the Goat" features a soprano part whose ornate cantorial flights would sound at home in any synagogue pulpit.

Paul Schoenfield, meanwhile – himself no stranger to traditional Jewish music (see his *Klezmer Rondos* and *Trio for Clarinet, Violin & Piano* in "Volume 5: The Classical Klezmer") – takes an altogether different tack in *The Merchant and the Pauper*. There are hints of Eastern European melody in Act II, Scene 4; but for the most part, this opera's Jewish identity derives not from its musical content, but from its libretto – one that enacts a quasi-folktale by Reb Nahman of Bratslav, founder of a major Hassidic sect, and was inspired by the *purimspiel*, a form of Jewish musical theater that dates back to the Middle Ages. There is nothing particularly Jewish, for example, in the contrapuntal choral passages of Act II, Scene 1, or in the flinty harmonies of Act II, Scene 5. Yet their sometimes unsettling beauty perfectly captures the mystical, allegorical content of Reb Nahman's story.

Similarly, in *The Golem*, Abraham Ellstein employs a late Romantic style liberally spiced with 20th-century techniques to animate another fictional tale with deep roots in Eastern Europe. With its sweeping string passages, gusty brass exclamations, and thunderous tympani, it's hard to believe that this work was conceived by a man best known for his contributions to Yiddish musical theater—several of which are included in "Volume 13: Great Songs of the American Yiddish Stage." (For recording session footage of the Schiff, Schoenfield, and Ellstein pieces, visit the "Videos" section of Volume 16.)

Yet folktales and fantasies are hardly the only topics broached in Volume 16.

In *Esther*, composer Hugo Weisgall uses a highly chromatic, and hauntingly ambiguous, idiom to narrate the story of how the Jews of Persia were saved from certain death – a biblical saga in which deception is piled upon deception. Samuel Adler's *The Wrestler* clothes the story of Jacob and Essau in a spiky, rhythmically disjunct style whose thorny instrumental textures and anguished vocal lines reflect the inner turmoil of a man who conspired with his own mother to steal his brother's birthright. And David Amram's *The Final Ingredient* uses brilliant choral writing and grand orchestral gestures to address the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust. (Listeners can view recording session footage for *The Final Ingredient* in the "Videos" section of the Archive, and they can hear an extended audio interview with the composer, housed in the "Voices" section, in which Amram discusses his personal philosophy of Jewish music.)

Finally, Bruce Adolphe (*Mikhoels the Wise*) and Elie Siegmeister (*The Lady in the Lake*) both employ lyrical vocal melodies enlivened by avant-garde flourishes to set stories that possess the kind of psychological and political complexity one normally associates with full-fledged novels.

Adolphe, for example, uses the figure of Solomon Mikhoels, one-time spokesman for Soviet Jewry, to examine the troubled relationship between Jews and the former USSR. Note the quicksilver shift in mood between the beginning of Act I, Scene 4, when a bemused Mikhoels encounters the Yiddish-speaking Korean character of Sin-Cha ("You look very un-Jewish") to the nightmarish cacophony at the end ("Let me not be mad!").

And Siegmeister, himself a former communist with a lifelong interest in socially relevant music, mines a short story by Bernard Malamud for insights into the manifold reasons for which Jews hide their identities. Dedicated to the creation of an authentically American music, Siegmeister rejected the conventions of European opera and instead fashioned a work of endless recitative whose intersecting vocal and instrumental lines evoke a dreamlike quality of constantly shifting tone and mood.

All in all, it is a remarkably varied – and powerful – body of music, one that uses distinctively Jewish material to explore a wide range of universal themes. That is precisely the kind of range one would expect to see among works that plumb the depths of a community with such a rich and complex heritage. But it is also a range that opera, itself the richest and most complex form of musical and dramatic art to emerge in the Western world, is uniquely equipped to handle.

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

http://www.milkenarchive.org/press_releases/view/volume-16-heroes-and-heroines-jewish-opera

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