



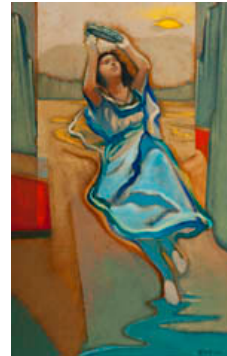
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## ***Odes and Epics: Dramatic Music of Jewish Experience*** **Milken Archive Introduces Volume 17**

Go big, or go home.

That could well be the unofficial motto of Volume 17 from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. The Archive, which marks the release of the 17<sup>th</sup> of its 20 volumes on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, contains plenty of works with a dramatic component, from Yiddish musicals to full-blown operas. But if it's spectacle and grandeur and sheer artistic ambition you're after, [\*Odes and Epics: Dramatic Music of Jewish Experience\*](#) is the place to find it.



"Spectacle" is one of many terms that have been applied to [Kurt Weill's \*The Eternal Road\*](#)—along with "pageant," "extravaganza," and "Jewish passion play." Produced in 1937 by the American Zionist impresario Meyer Weisgal, the work comprises a series of Bible stories told by a rabbi to a group of Jewish villagers as they hide out during a pogrom, and was intended to serve as an allegory of Nazi aggression that ends on a hopeful note. The original production, which was mounted on a five-story stage at the Manhattan Opera House and called for no less than 245 actors, ran for only 153 shows and wasn't revived for 63 years. Yet Weill's score, which veers from wistful lamentation to triumphal bombast in a language that blends classical composition with theater music, speaks for itself whether onstage or off.

The [Genesis Suite](#) is one of very few works that can match Weill's underperformed masterpiece in terms of both ambition and neglect. Lost for decades before it was reconstructed and recorded anew by the Archive, the *Suite* contains seven multi-sectional movements, each dealing with a different episode from the Bible and each written by a different composer. The list of contributors reads like a roll call of 20th century masters: the *Suite* is bookended by offerings from [Arnold Schoenberg](#) and [Igor Stravinsky](#), two of the most famous composers of the past one hundred years (Stravinsky also had the distinction of being the only non-Jew, and probably the only anti-Semite, in the group); and it includes sections by the likes of [Ernst Toch](#), [Alexandre Tansman](#), and [Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco](#), all of whom enjoyed dual careers as film-score composers and internationally renowned purveyors of concert music. Not suprisingly, the suite itself has a persistently cinematic quality, almost as if it were the soundtrack to an epic film that was never made.

Some of the composers who participated in the *Genesis Suite* appear elsewhere in this volume as well. [Toch's \*Vanity of Vanities\*](#) and [Cantata of the Bitter Herbs](#), for example,

further illustrate the sophistication of his orchestral writing, along with his capacity to move from tenderness to violence in a heartbeat. And the French émigré [Darius Milhaud](#), who wrote "Cain and Abel" for the *Genesis Suite*, also composed one of two versions of the score to the ballet [The Man from Midian](#), which traces the life of Moses—the other having been penned by the German émigré [Stefan Wolpe](#). Milhaud and Wolpe were both musical adventurers who drew inspiration from a wide range of sources (jazz, circus music, Middle Eastern melody). Despite that ideological kinship, however, there's no mistaking Milhaud's surging waves of sound and emotion for Wolpe's long trains of musical thought. The Italian-born Castelnuovo-Tedesco, meanwhile, tackled the story of [Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth](#), who converted to Judaism and became great-grandmother to King David. Castelnuovo-Tedesco felt a strong connection to the source material—his own mother was named Naomi, and he saw a kinship between the character of Ruth and his wife, Clara—and the piece is imbued with a palpable sense of warmth, along with the quality of clarity that his friend Milhaud prized above all else.

Volume 17 isn't all Sunday-school tales, however. There are nods to Hassidic culture and to the now-vanished European *shtetls* where it once thrived in [Sholom Secunda's \*If Not Higher\*](#) and [Lazar Weiner's \*The Last Judgment\*](#), both based on short stories by the great Yiddish writer Y.L. Peretz, as well as in [Leon Stein's exuberant \*Three Hassidic Dances\*](#). And there are *sui generis* works like [Thomas Beveridge's ecumenical \*Yizkor Requiem\*](#), which fuses the ancient Aramaic Jewish prayers for the dead with the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass; and [David Diamond's paean to American values, \*Ahava-Brotherhood\*](#).

Diamond was commissioned to write *Ahava-Brotherhood* in 1954 in honor of the 300th anniversary of the birth of the American Jewish community, an event that sparked a series of celebrations highlighting the many contributions that Jews have made to American society. For his part, Diamond chose to focus on the American ideals of brotherhood, equality, and freedom that made those contributions possible—contributions such as *Ahava-Brotherhood* itself, not to mention every other work in *Odes and Epics*.

It's only fitting that those works should in turn reflect the peculiarly American talent for finding the universal in the particular. For though grounded in Jewish culture, the music of Volume 17 speaks to all of us. Though rooted in Jewish thought and experience, it could only have been made in America.

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](http://www.milkenarchive.org) is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

***For information or interviews, contact [media@milkenarchive.org](mailto:media@milkenarchive.org).***

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