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Woe to Jerusalem, Praise to God

New Milken Archive album celebrates two distinctive immigrant American composers: Robert Starer and Abraham Kaplan

For composers, Jewish history and the bible are gifts that keep on giving. Case in point: two very different but equally engaging recordings recently added to the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience in [Volume 17, *Odes and Epics: Dramatic Music of Jewish Experience*](#).

Leading off is [Robert Starer](#)'s six-movement dramatic cantata, [*Ariel: Visions of Isaiah*](#). Comprising settings of selected verses from the Book of Isaiah, the piece presents a condensed narrative of Isaiah's vision of the destruction of Jerusalem. It was commissioned by the Interracial Fellowship Chorus of New York and premiered at Town Hall in New York City in 1960. The present recording features soprano Roberta Peters, baritone Julian Patrick, and the Camerata Singers and Orchestra conducted by Abraham Kaplan.

Isaiah is a tumultuous and dramatic episode in which a prophet warns of impending destruction for the people of Ariel for having forsaken their god. (Ariel, "the city where David dwelt," is a symbolic name for Jerusalem). Starer's musical depiction captures and extends this tumultuousness masterfully and expresses a wide gamut of emotions. "Woe to Ariel" bursts with foreboding orchestral swoons. Peters quietly implores God to look away in "Fear, and the Pit, and the Snare." Percussion and brass dominate the ultimate triumph of God's love depicted in the closing movement, "Break Forth Into Joy." At times darkness and loneliness seem all-consuming. The lighter parts, such as the exultant joy of the final movement, provide much-needed respite from this, but on balance darkness overshadows.

[Kaplan](#) stars on the second recording featured here as well, but this time as conductor of his own work. Differing significantly from Starer's piece, Kaplan's [*Glorious*](#) is a compendium of biblical verses—most from the Book of Psalms—set to a spritely and highly rhythmic musical accompaniment. If you've heard *Glorious* before, it's well worth revisiting now more than 40 years after it premiered as his first major composition in

1973. If you haven't heard it, *Glorious* might well be a revelation: folky, vivacious, rhythmically complex yet downright danceable at times, the settings bear all the hallmarks of the mid-20th century American sound.

If the settings in *Glorious* seem bursting with optimism, it's a fitting reflection of the good fortune this Tel Aviv-born artist experienced as a young immigrant in America. Upon coming to the United States with an Israeli chorus for a concert at Radio City Music Hall, Kaplan was offered a position at Juilliard. When his Juilliard chorus later performed at Philharmonic Hall (now Avery Fisher Hall), in an inaugural concert conducted by Leonard Bernstein, many years of collaboration with Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic followed, as did an illustrious career as an educator, conductor, and choral director.

A similar optimistic fate befell Robert Starer. Born in Austria in 1924, he was admitted to the state music academy at a young age. But with the rise of the Third Reich, Starer emigrated—alone, at age 14—to Israel (then Palestine) and later received a scholarship to study at Juilliard with Frederick Jacobi. As he recounted in an oral history with the Milken Archive in 1999, he was so advanced by the time he arrived at Juilliard that he tested directly into the graduate program. Starer went on to teach at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, had his compositions performed the world over, and was a favorite collaborator of Martha Graham's.

As musical depictions of biblical events, *Ariel* and *Glorious* reflect the longstanding role that composers have played in keeping the traditions and legends of Judaism alive and relevant for music lovers of all stripes. Their addition to the Milken Archive of Jewish Music will help secure their legacy as American masterworks of Jewish experience.

Ariel: Visions of Isaiah; Glorious is available on [iTunes](#), [Amazon](#) and [Spotify](#). Learn more at: <http://www.milkenarchive.org/albums/view/134/>

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.

For information or interviews, contact media@milkenarchive.org.

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