July 2, 2013

Go Big or Go Home
The Milken Archive presents Volume 17 — Odes and Epics: Dramatic Music of Jewish Experience

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, 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 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 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.

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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. 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 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*.

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.