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## **Milken Archive of Jewish Music**

### **Introduction to Volume 11 Symphonic Visions: Orchestral Works of the Jewish Spirit**

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#### **"Classical" Concert Music of American Jewish Experience: The Greatest Surprise?**

Of the categories of music contained in the Milken Archive, none is likely, by virtue of its very existence as well as its scope and abundance, to be so consistently revealing as that of classical and concert music—even to those well versed in the classical canon and intimately familiar with 20th-century music as a whole.

That the American Jewish experience has yielded vast parochial repertoires of all types of synagogue music, as well as ethnically circumscribed (especially Yiddish) theatrical, folk, and popular music, should come as no surprise, although the extent of those repertoires, in terms of sheer volume, has also been enlightening in the course of the Milken Archive research. But following the preliminary round of recordings prior to 1993 that addressed primarily Reform synagogue music and only some classically based concert choral pieces and songs, when the Milken Archive Editorial Board and this writer began our deliberations and meticulous team research in order to design the contents of the Archive (a task to which we devoted nearly three years before recommencing recording in 1998), none of us had any idea just how voluminous the classical arena would turn out to be. Nor, apart from the obvious internationally known works by some of the most high-profile composers (Leonard Bernstein's two Judaically based symphonies and his Chichester Psalms, for example, or Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, together with at most another dozen or so works of Jewish connection familiar to the music world), did we imagine the scope, the varied range of styles and media, the gamut of Jewish subject matter, the length of the roster of composers involved and their span of generations, and—hardly least—the quality of so much of the music that could fill this division.

While many additional works for symphony orchestra are found throughout the Milken Archive, Volume 11 is devoted to general symphonic concert repertoire that is not expressly related to the specific Jewish historical or cultural themes addressed by some of the other volumes.

The Jewish or Judaic identity of such classically informed or oriented works can result from one or more of several preconceived properties, intentions, or other factors. For instance:

- It may be based purposefully and consciously on musical materials traditionally perceived as belonging to a specifically “Jewish melos”—sacred or secular.
- It may incorporate actual liturgical melodies or secular folk tunes from any one of numerous distinct geographic or cultural Jewish traditions.
- It may be based on Jewish historical or biblical subjects, events, or characters, Jewish legends or literary themes.
- It may include or be founded upon Jewish texts or Jewish literature (prose, poetry, or drama).
- It may incorporate specifically Jewish languages such as Hebrew, Yiddish, or Ladino.
- It may depict in musical terms, with or without sung or spoken text, visual images of Jewish connection (landscapes in the land of Israel, for example) or scenes of Jewish religious or folk life (a Hassidic gathering, a Yemenite Jewish wedding, or daily life of Jews in an eastern European market town, or shtetl, to cite three examples).
- It may express moods of Jewish life-cycle events or holy days.
- It may give voice to Judaic ideas or concepts.
- It may have been composed expressly for a Jewish commemoration, celebration, ceremony, or other occasion—conceived in some way to represent the nature of that occasion.

### **The State of Awareness**

As we proceeded to record with major artists and ensembles throughout the United States, in England, and in several European cities, we found that often even the most seasoned and conversant conductors, as well as aficionados of serious contemporary music, were almost completely unaware of this Jewish classical repertoire and were at first curious and then frequently amazed, especially by the symphonic works. Though Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s reputation is well established (especially for his classical guitar music), most, including one of England’s most prominent and most knowledgeable conductors, were unaware that this composer not only was an affirmed Jew committed to Jewish identity, but also that he had written important works of Jewish connection (a violin concerto concerning the biblical Prophets—though violinists were familiar with it—an entire synagogue service, a biblical cantata on the story of Ruth and Naomi, and numerous other Judaic pieces, beginning with synagogue settings in his teen years). Similarly so with regard to Darius Milhaud. Many admirers of Kurt Weill, who knew his larger stage works as well as dozens of his songs, had never even heard of his extravagant 1937 quasi-operatic pageant, *The Eternal Road*, which, until the Milken Archive’s project, had never been recorded in its entirety. Those Weill buffs who did know about it (including acknowledged Weill scholars) had no idea of its Zionist origins, its significance as a Zionist vehicle, or its abundant use of traditional synagogue melodies and references. Despite a recent revival of interest in Central Europe concerning the émigré composer Ernst Toch, especially in Vienna, no one there knew of his

Passover cantata, *Cantata of the Bitter Herbs*, another cantata based on Ecclesiastes, or his symphonic work on the story of Jephtha's daughter in the Book of Judges. (In England, his name appears to be known almost exclusively for a single miniature choral piece, *Geographical Fugue*.) For all Stefan Wolpe's international fame within serious music circles, his extraordinary Jewish ballet, *The Man from Midian* (based on the life of Moses), much of which reflects musically his pre-American sojourn in Mandatory Palestine, was unknown to the 20th-century music world in Europe and England; nor was there any knowledge of his several other Jewishly related and Hebrew-language works.

Abroad, nearly total oblivion surrounded the names of such accomplished and recognized American Jewish composers active in the wider music world as Paul Schoenfield, whose music is suffused with idioms of the klezmerim; Pulitzer Prize-winner Yehudi Wyner, some of whose most important works draw upon Yiddish literature and eastern European Jewish folk melos; Herman Berlinski, whose sophisticated work was devoted in large part to music on Jewish themes; or Hugo Weisgall. In all fairness, however, we must also acknowledge that some of the most visible contemporary English composers, to cite one example of unintended "national secrecy" or circumspection, are all but unknown in the United States.

About the distinguished émigré composer Joseph Achron, not a single one of the numerous conductors and violinists whom we interviewed, in the United States as well as in Europe, knew anything about him other than his famous Hebrew Melody for violin—the one piece that is part of the standard repertoire. None knew of his three violin concertos—much less that the first (1927), whose long-forgotten premiere, played by the composer with the Boston Symphony under the baton of Serge Koussevitzky and met with much critical acclaim, is a virtuoso exposition and development of traditional Hebrew biblical cantillation motifs, other liturgical tunes, and two Jewish Yemenite folk melodies. And an air of near disbelief usually greeted the disclosure of the body of American operas on Jewish themes and subjects—even though Hugo Weisgall's *Esther* had been hailed by critics in 1993 as one of the most significant American operas of the postwar era.

It is one thing for the vast bulk of serious American concert music to have escaped European or British attention—or, for that matter, recognition and programming in Israel or elsewhere beyond American shores. We have already alluded to the analogous situation in reverse with regard to 20th-century or contemporary music in general. This notwithstanding, of course, the fact that most American symphony concert programming continues to rely primarily (and in some respects perhaps even more so now than during previous decades) on 18th-, 19th-, and early-20th-century composers firmly enshrined in the European classical tradition. It is quite another thing, however, for the bulk of the continuum of works by American symphonists dating to the 19th century—to cite one generic example—to remain for the most part the victim of perpetuated neglect on American shores. That neglect might carry with it its own share of irony when one considers that much of this American repertoire can be seen as

an American extension of the European art tradition. Appropriately viewing our corpus of classically oriented music of Jewish association as a bona fide component or subdivision of American cultivated music per se, Henry Fogel, past president and executive director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the American Symphony Orchestra League and currently dean of the College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University in Chicago—as well as a valued member of the Milken Archive Editorial Board—remarked at the outset of our project that no country treats its own musical heritage as shabbily as does America. “The Milken Archive will go a long way toward correcting this situation with regard at least to one part of that heritage,” he predicted.

### The Milken Archive and International Concert Programming

The astuteness of Henry Fogel’s prediction has been demonstrated even before the present inauguration of this complete series, and even with the relatively limited publicity attending the introductory set of fifty CDs on the NAXOS label. Consistent with one of its missions, the Milken Archive, by promoting awareness of the breadth of Jewish music and by calling attention to so many composers and works heretofore virtually unknown to the music world, has already started to effect that kind of welcome change. A number of the artists and ensembles with whom we have collaborated in the course of our recordings, and who thereby discovered this “new” repertoire, as well as others who have been drawn to music on the preliminary fifty-CD release, have begun to program some of those works on their own. As England’s esteemed conductor Sir Neville Marriner observed during one of our recording sessions under his baton in London:

I found it strange at the beginning, you know, the Academy, St. Martin in the Fields, this parish church in the middle of London, involved with part of the American Jewish tradition of music. And I think they’re fascinated by it. They’ve suddenly found a whole new repertoire. I think it’s going to make a lot of difference to them in the future. They’ll probably get away from just playing Mozart and Verdi requiems.

Having been introduced by the Milken Archive to Darius Milhaud’s *Service Sacré*, Ernst Toch’s *Cantata of the Bitter Herbs*, and Joseph Achron’s *The Golem Suite*, the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and chorus devoted one of its concerts in Prague to all three works. In 2008 Maestro Gerard Schwarz and the Seattle Symphony gave the world premiere of the Milken Archive’s reconstruction of *Genesis Suite*, a sui generis seven-movement work by seven composers: Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, Ernst Toch, Alexandre Tansman, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, and Nathaniel Shilkret.

These individual instances may be seen as a composite harbinger of directions to come. As the impact of the Milken Archive grows and broadens its base, as it proceeds to reach significantly greater numbers of people and to introduce them to the richness and variety of music of Jewish experience, we can expect many more orchestras and conductors to turn to its constituent repertoires for

innovative concert programming of Jewish content or connection. We would also anticipate that increasing numbers of composers will be inspired by their discoveries of the endless creative possibilities inherent in Jewish culture, and that they will be thereby encouraged to turn some of their own energies and gifts toward expanding this heritage through the orchestral medium.

### Artistic Expression of the American Jewish Experience

It should be self-evident and readily accepted that categories of music in the Milken Archive outside the classical orbit—liturgical or sacred, theatrical, folk, and popular—are to be understood as direct products or expressions of American Jewish experience. It is not merely that such music originated in American environments, imagined and fashioned by composers or arrangers—amateur or professional—whom we consider American; nor simply that this music is a function of Jewish life in America. Those factors are certainly significant, but even more defining and more telling is the fact that nearly all such music was intended originally and primarily to resonate parochially with specific Jewish audiences of one orientation or another. That Jewish as well as non-Jewish outsiders to those originally targeted religious or ethnic cultural circles also can—and indeed have come to—appreciate the aesthetic, emotional, and artistic (and, for some, exotic) appeal of those musics does not alter the circumstances of their conception and birth.

The rationale for also viewing the American Jewish experience as encompassing equally the Jewish-related classical sphere, however, which by its very nature implies the universal dimensions and ultimate transcendence of high art as a Western phenomenon, may be less readily apparent. For we must assume that most such music is conceived not for any specifically Jewish audience (and not, for that matter, intentionally limited to American performance or appreciation). Rather, its desiderata is the ability to communicate on its own as art—to translate to universal humanistic messages, or to speak to the listener on purely musical terms. (One would hardly think to limit performances of a Mahler or a Dvořák symphony to Czech, Moravian, or other Central European audiences, for example, because of their references to folk material from those traditions. Nor would only Russian audiences be expected to respond to Mussorgsky or Borodin, owing to their inclusion of Russian folk melos. And of course, no one would think of Verdi as having geared *La Traviata* to French audiences because of the French literary foundations of the libretto or the French setting of its action. To the contrary, it remains by any standard Italian opera with universal appeal to opera audiences of any ethnic or cultural background.)

Were classically informed, Jewishly related pieces by American composers to represent isolated incidents—as has been the case in other Diaspora societies—we might not be so inclined to see them collectively as an organic part of, or emanating from, the specifically Jewish experience within American culture. And in that case they would not necessarily justify our identification of a separate such category. However, the magnitude alone of such repertoire over the course of the

20th century does justify this. Considered together with its range of genres, subjects, themes, musical materials, and stylistic approaches; its arching continuum; the unabated proliferation of interest and participation on the part of composers on the one hand and, on the other, of funding and commissioning agencies without particular Jewish connections or missions; and, most significantly, the attention to Jewish themes not only by a host of first-rate composers already dedicated principally to Jewish endeavors, but also by so many towering musical figures in the general classical music world, this musical activity is a Jewish cultural phenomenon unique in the Diaspora to the American experience.

Among Diaspora societies, it is primarily in America that the symphonic medium was first addressed on a significant scale—and in substantial volume—by composers who wished to express Jewish themes. It is primarily in America that so many composers of high visibility in the general, non-Jewish music world have felt motivated to do so. And, with the understandable exception of modern Israel, no other society has hosted the creation of anywhere near the number of Jewish orchestral works of enduring objective artistic merit as has America.

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