

# Composer Biographies and Program Notes

## Lazar Weiner

Lazar Weiner was born in Cherkassy, Ukraine, in 1897. By the time he was eleven, he was a member of the Brodsky Synagogue choir and the Kiev Opera Chorus. In 1914, his family emigrated to the United States where, at seventeen, he earned money playing piano in a New York silent cinema house. Robert Russell Bennett, Frederick Jacobi, and the theoretician Joseph Schillinger were his composition teachers.

In the 1920s, Weiner began affiliations with Yiddish secular choruses, and he was soon appointed conductor of New York's nascent *Freiheits Gezang Verein*, later to become the Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus. When asked to be conductor of the Workmen's Circle New York Chorus in 1931, he accepted on the condition that he be allowed to eliminate regional and colloquial dialects, and to unify the chorus's pronunciation according to literary Yiddish. He remained with this chorus for thirty-five years.

After he left the Workmen's Circle Chorus in 1966, Weiner curtailed his work with Yiddish choruses and—although art song had become his priority—became involved the Reform movement as music director at Central Synagogue in New York. From 1952 until his death, Weiner served on the faculty of the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music. He also taught Jewish art song at the Cantors Institute and, beginning in 1974, at the 92nd Street YMHA.

When Weiner retired from his synagogue position in 1974, he completely abandoned liturgical music. He had become discouraged by the prevalence of lowbrow and pop music in American synagogues, a deterioration of Jewish liturgical music that was parallel to the decline of thoughtful music in American protestant churches. He said, "I want a *m'khitza* [Hebrew for "a division," usually referring to the separation of men and women in orthodox synagogues] between the secular and the profane, between the mundane and the spiritual, and I do not want to bring the musical comedy into the synagogue. Each has its place, but...." For the next eight years, he dedicated himself almost exclusively to art song composition.

It is with his more than 200 Yiddish art songs that Lazar Weiner left his most lasting mark. He elevated the art form to a sophistication and seriousness mirroring that of Schubert, Schumann and Mussorgsky, although he was always conscious of the irony that his devotion to Yiddish was an American phenomenon, not a personal carryover from Europe. A year before his death, Weiner said, "All my life [prior to 1919] it was Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Brahms, Schubert....Here in America I discovered the Yiddish song!"

—*Biography by David Hoose,*  
*based on material by Neil W. Levin, Milken Archive of Jewish Music*

## Lazar Weiner, Sacred Choruses and Yiddish Songs

*Lazar Weiner composed the five works on this program between 1941 and 1973. The solo song texts, in particular, stem either from premonitions of, or from knowledge of, the atrocities of the Second World War. The two choral works are sacred, and the three solo songs, while not strictly religious, are on poems with strong religious roots. In this world, the sacred and secular are inseparable.*

*These five works were originally composed for voice or chorus and keyboard, either piano or organ. I have orchestrated them for this performance, using varying combinations of flutes, oboe, clarinets, bassoon, horn, trumpets, trombone, cello, double bass, harp, celesta and harmonium, an ensemble based on the chamber orchestration of Honegger's *Le Roi David*. These are the first performances of the orchestrations, and they may be the first Boston performances of any version of the choruses and songs.*

Lazar Weiner composed his settings of *Ashrei Ho-ish* (Psalm 1) and *Yihyu L'Rotzon* (Psalm 19:17) during his years as music director at the Central Synagogue in New York. His setting of Psalm 1 begins straightforwardly, a two-voiced declamation (sopranos with tenors, altos with basses) enveloped by austere, hollow harmonies in the instruments. The formality softens with the appearance of rising harp arpeggios, and it frees even more with the entrance of the tenor's cantorial singing and choral responses. A barren, imitative choral section, "Lochein Hawr'shawim" (*Not so the wicked*) rises up and sinks back down, and the recitative-like music returns. With this, the psalm ends, "derech reshaim toveid" (*the ways of the wicked will perish*), but the Weiner returns to the opening music and text—*happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked*. This reprise and the resulting symmetrical design give the work an emotional stability that few of his songs enjoy.

*Khoyves* ("Debts") is the second in a set of three superb songs by Weiner on poetry of the philosopher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). This poem, like much of Heschel's writing, grapples with the often mystifying relationship between the mortal and the Eternal. Weiner's setting allows these words to speak simply, supported by an unadorned melodic line and a responsive harmonic journey. However, this short song does evoke a larger commentary: the gently pulsating accompaniment of the beginning comforts at first but, in the end, its persistence has turned quietly oppressive. Of the Weiner works on this program, *Khoyves* was composed last, in 1973.

*Mayn Tfile* sets a post-Holocaust poem by H. Leivick (1888-1962), Russian poet arrested for subversion at the age of eighteen, marched on foot for four months to Siberia, rescued and smuggled out by Jewish revolutionaries and, in 1913, brought to New York, where he became known as a wallpaper hanger and the greatest Yiddish poet of his day. The poem is one of derision, one in which harshness and mysticism intersect. The opening of Weiner's setting gasps for breath, first in the instruments,

and then in the voice's own halting rhythm. Although the accompaniment gradually begins to build momentum, the vocal line remains frustrated. With the line "Mayn tfile geyt oyf iber zeks milion griber" (*My prayer goes up over six million graves*), all erupts, but the music abruptly retreats. The song ends as questioningly as it had begun, now with the ringing of funeral bells.

*El khanun*, the largest and most overtly dramatic of these three solo songs, sets a powerful poem from 1945 by Polish-American poet Kadia Molodowsky (1894-1975). Written with the pain of the Holocaust still too near, her poem despairs even of the Jewish people's relationship with God. Weiner's setting reaches from a somber intimacy to an operatic anguish. In the song's extended climax, "Heyb oyf dayn fayerdike brem" (*lift your fiery brow*), the universe flutters wildly, as if trying to throw off the mantle of God's love. Yet again, the text and music return to the beginning, and the song turns the bitter final words in on themselves.

*Yihyu L'Rotzon* is eloquently simple. In three phrases, the prayer is suggested, captured, and commented upon. The instrumental introduction—surprisingly expansive for such a short work—leads to a solo alto's recitation of this one-line prayer. The instruments that had intertwined in the introduction now embrace the singer's meditation. The chorus answers by repeating the prayer, now with a very different view, rich and vital. The music pauses and, without elaboration, closes. Perhaps the beautiful instrumental opening, with its lines like enwrapped vines,

stands for the prayer's first clause—*May the words of my mouth*; the solo voice, for the second—*and the thoughts of my heart*; and the homophonic choral plea, the third line—*be acceptable in Your presence*.

—David Hoose

### **Yehudi Wyner on his father's music**

Lazar Weiner always chose Yiddish poems of fine literary value. Whether they were introspective, philosophical, or folk-related, they were invariably tasteful. And because of their clear diction and straightforward expressive affect, they were excellently suited to musical setting. He avoided metaphysical or highly involved intellectual speculations. In these predilections, Weiner was faithful to the long traditions of such classical song composers as Schubert, Brahms, Wolf, Fauré, Debussy, and Mahler. In choosing to set Yiddish poetry



**Lazar Weiner and Yehudi Wyner**

to music, it was Weiner's lofty aim to create a genuine, characteristic, and varied art music on the order of the great classical repertoire.

Weiner was well aware of the stylistic and procedural revolutions in 20<sup>th</sup>-century music. His appetite for the new and the experimental was insatiable. Well into his eighties, he could be found at concerts of contemporary music, no matter how radical or progressive, and he kept an open mind to all possibilities. Perhaps it was the strength of his inviolate conviction about his personal mission and a passionate devotion to the values of Yiddish culture that enabled him to absorb many outside influences without fear of compromising his core values.

—from *Milken Archive of Jewish Music*, edited

## **Yehudi Wyner**

Yehudi Wyner is one of America's most distinguished musicians. His compositions include over 100 works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, solo voice and solo instruments, piano, chorus, and music for the theater, as well as liturgical services for worship. He has received commissions from Carnegie Hall, Boston Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, The Library of Congress, The Ford Foundation, Koussevitzky Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, Fromm Foundation, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and Cantata Singers. His recording "The Mirror" on Naxos won a 2005 Grammy Award, his Piano Concerto, *Chiavi in Mano* on Bridge Records was nominated for a 2009 Grammy, and the same concerto received the 2006 Pulitzer Prize.

He has received two Guggenheim Fellowships, The Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the Rome Prize, Brandeis Creative Arts Award, and the Elise Stoecker Prize given by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center for "lifetime contribution to chamber music." He is currently President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and is a member of The American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Mr. Wyner has also had an active career as a solo pianist, chamber musician, teacher, director of two opera companies, and conductor of numerous chamber and vocal ensembles in a wide range of repertory. Keyboard artist of the Bach Aria Group since 1968, he has played and led many of the Bach cantatas, concertos and motets.

Mr. Wyner has been Professor at the Yale University School of Music, Dean of the Music Division at State University of New York, Purchase, guest professor at Cornell University, and frequent Visiting Professor at Harvard University. He held the Walter W. Naumburg Chair of Composition at Brandeis University and is now Professor Emeritus.

Born in Western Canada, Mr. Wyner grew up in New York City. After graduating from the Juilliard School with a Diploma in piano, he went on to study at Yale and Harvard Universities with composers Paul Hindemith, Richard Donovan, and Walter Piston. Yehudi Wyner is married to conductor and former soprano Susan Davenny Wyner.

## **Yehudi Wyner, Torah Service**

*Torah Service was commissioned by a private individual in New Haven, Connecticut in 1966, and it was first performed by Yale University students at a synagogue in Woodbridge, Connecticut. The work is scored for baritone solo (cantor), four-part mixed chorus, and five instruments: horn, two trumpets, trombone and double bass. Together, the seven movements are about twelve minutes in duration.*

The Torah service occupies a central position in the synagogue, for it is here that the Torah, comprising the *Five Books of Moses*, is removed from its protective ark, reverently yet joyously displayed, and then rolled out to the portion designated by the date to be read by members of the congregation. At the end of each annual cycle, the scroll is rewound, and the reading begins anew with the words “In the beginning....”

Of all the artifacts in Jewish life, it is the Torah alone that is held in veneration, for it is the deepest source of Jewish history and belief, and all basic wisdom flows from its teaching. In the synagogue service, prayers that surround the actual reading from the Torah are compilations from many sources—the Psalms, Numbers, Chronicles, Deuteronomy, Proverbs, and Lamentations. These prayers shape the sense of anticipation that leads to actual contact with the Torah, and they contain references to a remote past that contribute to a sense of community. Concerning the opening of the Ark, Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz has written:

The taking out of the Scroll of the Torah from the Sacred Ark, as well as its return thereto, has for over a thousand years formed the solemn and dramatic centre of the public service on Sabbaths and Festivals. The prayers by the reader, and the congregational participation in those prayers by means of responses and sacred acts, are the growth of over 1500 years.

In my musical setting, I have taken the liberty of beginning with a quiet meditation, “Yihyu L’Rotzon” (*May the words of my mouth*), after which the service begins with the recitation of exultant phrases from the Psalms: “Ayn Komocho” (*There is none like unto Thee among the Gods, O Lord. The Lord is King forever and ever*) and the intimate invocation “Av horachamim” (*Father of mercies, do good in Thy favor unto Zion*). The Ark is opened at the text “Va Y’hi Binsoa” (*and it came to pass...*), about which Rabbi Hertz writes:

This is the invocation prayer of the children of Israel in the wilderness, whenever the Ark of the Covenant went forward. The Ark of the Covenant, guiding the Israelite tribes in their desert wanderings, typified God in front of his people—the Divine Presence—protecting them and leading them on to victory. We still feel the thrill of sacred enthusiasm that animated our fathers of old when they heard these words.

The movement continues with the line “Kumoh Adonoy” (*Rise up, O Lord, and Thine enemies shall be scattered*), which Hertz describes as “the impressive war-cry of truth against error, of righteousness against sin.” That is followed by the text “Ki mitziyon” (*For out of Zion shall go forth the law*). Hertz continues, “These words [from Isaiah] are taken from the prophet’s sublime vision of the Messianic age...when right, not might, shall then rule the world.”

The congregation then recites the “Sh’ma,” (*One is our God; Great is our Lord; Holy is His name*). At this, the climax of the service, the Torah is removed and unrolled to the chapter relevant to that particular week, which is read by a congregant. In this musical setting, each “Aliah” is preceded and followed by a subdued processional. At the words “Y’hallelu es shem Adonoy” (*Let them praise the name of the Lord*), the Torah is returned to the Ark.

Perhaps the most extraordinary and moving of the historical allusions is at the end of the service—*Ki Lekach Tov; Etz Chayim*—where the Torah is compared to a “tree of life,” its teaching are “good doctrine,” and its “ways are pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” Without transition, the mood changes. At “Hashivenu,” we read, *Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall return: renew our days as of old*. Hertz alerts us to the eloquence of these words, “Originally they were spoken 2500 years ago after the burning of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. From the depths, Israel then prayed for the soul-communion with God that had marked its life in the olden days.”

I have been reluctant to encourage concert performances of my *Torah Service*, because this manner of presentation can result in a kind of passivity and distance. The synagogue does not have the long tradition of large-scale compositions that embody the essential elements of the prayer narrative comparable to the wealth of music associated with the Christian church. (The *Sacred Service* of Ernest Bloch is an atypical exception, a work comfortable in sacred and secular environments.) Sacred oratorios, cantatas, requiems, and masses, most of which were intended to be part of church services, have increasingly found a comfortable place in the concert hall, even as they continue to play their intended roles within sacred services. Even within the church, however, these musical forms express their deep spiritual sentiment without necessarily engaging worshippers in direct, active involvement.

My *Torah Service* may be more akin to the sacred cantatas of J.S. Bach, whose congregation would have understood their theological thought—if not the music itself—and would have known the chorale melodies. Other than possibly joining in singing the cantata’s chorale, his congregants would have listened to the cantatas as elaborations on the theological message of the day. This *Torah Service*, then, could assume a similar role in the synagogue, adding another dimension to, and commenting upon, the intrinsic and essential prayers expressed by the rabbi. Until that day comes, however, it is in the concert hall that this music offers its own reflections on these prayers.

## Honegger on his music

I do not worship the fair, or the music-hall, but chamber music and symphony music for its essence of solemnness and austerity. I place such importance in the architecture of music that I would never want to see it sacrificed for reasons of literary or pictorial order. I have a tendency (maybe a little exaggerated) to look for the polyphonic complexity. I am not trying to return to a harmonious simplicity, like some anti-impressionist musicians. On the contrary, I think that we should use the harmonic material created by the school of thought that preceded us, but in a different way, as a base for figure and rhythm. Bach uses elements of tonal harmony in the same way that I want to use the superimposing of modern harmonies.

## Arthur Honegger, *Le Roi David*

*Le Roi David is in twenty-seven musical sections, some quite brief, and several, including The Dance around the Ark, quite grand and involved. The oratorio is about seventy minutes long. In its first version, the music is scored for soloists—at least one each of soprano, alto and tenor soloists, four-part mixed chorus, and an instrumental ensemble comprising 2 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), oboe (doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets (one doubling on bass clarinet), horn, 2 trumpets, trombone, piano, celesta, harmonium, timpani, and 3 percussionists who play tambourine, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, tambourine and gong. This performance also includes Honegger's optional cello, as well as harp, about which there is a comment below.*

In 1921, the poet and playwright René Morax (1873-1963) planned to reopen the Théâtre du Jorat, in Mézières, Switzerland, that he had founded in 1907, and had been closed during the war years. For this celebratory event, he imagined a grand biblical drama—the story of David, from his boyhood as shepherd and warrior, to his reign as king of the Israelites, and to his decline and death.

Although music had always been integral to the theater's productions, Morax seemed to forget that he needed a composer until there was very little time before the play's opening. When several composers understandably refused Morax's offer, he sought the advice of conductor Ernest Ansermet, who replied, "There's only one man I know who could do that for you, and that's Arthur Honegger." Honegger had a burgeoning reputation, but he was still quite young, so Morax consulted with Igor Stravinsky, who affirmed Ansermet's recommendation.

Despite the approaching deadline—two months—and without having read the text, Honegger accepted Morax's offer. Later, he wrote, "I didn't realize the importance of the work I'd been entrusted with, but I accepted with pleasure, because the subject suited my 'Bible-loving' tendencies." One of the challenges Honegger knew he would face was that of writing a substantial amount of music for a pre-ordained instrumental ensemble consisting of very few instruments, and mostly

woodwinds and brass. When he asked Stravinsky how to tackle such an assignment, the ever practical visionary who three years earlier had composed his own back-of-the-truck *Histoire du soldat*, said, "It's very simple....Go ahead as if you had chosen this ensemble, and compose for a hundred singers and seventeen instrumentalists." Honegger later reported, "It seems simple, but that single reply gave me a splendid lesson in composition: never to consider given conditions as something imposed, but on the contrary as a task that I wanted to accomplish, as an inner necessity."

Honegger worked rapidly, but he begged Morax to delay the premiere for about three weeks. He received one extra week. Even

having finished writing the music itself, however, Honegger still had to orchestrate all of the movements. Despite the advice from Stravinsky, he again grumbled about this task, "By having only wind instruments I'm depriving myself of half the orchestral possibilities....how can I generate any power with one leg turned into a wind instrument?....I'm very unhappy. But enough moaning. I accepted the make-up of the orchestra and I must find a way round it. I intend to get down to it energetically and to try and acquit myself honorably....and if there's no one to play the bass drum, I'll do it myself."

In his biography of Honegger, Harry Halbreich writes, "The dress rehearsal on 10 June was nearly a disaster. It lasted not less than ten hours, words and music together. Several scenes had to be cut (luckily, ones without music), and some of the spectacle had to be eliminated—a large chariot, drawn by horses and driven by a myopic blacksmith, had generated panic in the orchestra pit." This story resembles that of the first performances of Kurt Weill's epic history of the Jewish people, *The Eternal Road*, a work inspired by *Le Roi David*, and a ten-hour spectacle that was fraught with its own preparation chaos.

Despite the near calamities, the first performances of *Le Roi David* triumphed. Honegger had more than acquitted himself, and the music quickly put him on the map. Inspired by this great success, he extracted his music from the four-hour play and, with the help of Morax, created a narration to tie together it all together into a



**Arthur Honegger**

small oratorio. A couple of years later, Honegger also expanded the instrumental ensemble that had frustrated him so, recasting the work for the same soloists and chorus, but now with a huge orchestra. In spite of the relief that must have come from having a large string section at his disposal, Honegger left much of the original orchestration alone. In fact, in later years, he expressed preference for his rough-hewn original.

One happy addition that the larger orchestra provided was the harp, an instrument Honegger had been unable to include in the original music for the play. (Perhaps no one in the village played the harp.) But what is the story of David without his harp? This performance of *Le Roi David*, while using the chamber version, folds into the texture some of the large orchestration's harp writing. It also includes a cello, which in the chamber version Honegger mysteriously calls *ad libitum*.

Honegger's *Le Roi David* came to redefine the oratorio in the twentieth century. With strong connections to Bach, but without the grandeur of Elgar and Franck—instead possessing a Stravinskian leanness—this mini-oratorio paved the way for the large choral works of William Walton, Frank Martin, and Benjamin Britten.

The oratorio is a model of concision. In fact, the original function of Honegger's music as incidental music may have led to a somewhat breathless quality in some of its sections, particularly ones toward the beginning. As well, the sometimes cryptic narration that was devised for the oratorio did little to knit together the brief musical segments. Perhaps Honegger's audience lived with the biblical story enough that only the slightest verbal references were necessary to call up entire scenes. In addition, the words of David are sung at different times by at least three different voices—an alto, a tenor, and a soprano—as well as by the chorus. So, without benefit of the four-hour play (in which such shifts would be heard as metaphoric), the listener could be confused. Hoping to make the story clearer and to help the shorter musical sections flow together, we have taken the liberty of expanding and reordering some of the first part's narrative.

Jean Cocteau (who was the narrator at the oratorio's first performance) characterized his play *Antigone* as "a photograph of Greece taken from an aeroplane." With comparable dramatic economy, concentrated narration—as if spoken recitative—and the musical incisiveness of an engraver's illuminations, Honegger captures all of the pastoral and violent complexity of a long, glorious life and, at the same time, of an entire people.

**Jean Cocteau, in 1955, at Honegger's cremation**

Arthur, you managed to gain the respect of a disrespectful era. You combined the science of an architect of the Middle Ages with the simplicity of a humble cathedral stonemason. Your cinders are burning and will never cool down, even if our earth has stopped living. For music is not of this world, and its reign has no end.

—*David Hoose*