



# With Yehudi Wyner's liturgical work, 'a recovery of the spirit'



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

**Composer Yehudi Wyner, at his Medford home in 2009.**

**By David Weininger** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 12, 2017

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Yehudi Wyner can no longer recall a few details related to the composition of “Torah Service with Instruments,” a piece that the Cantata Singers are reviving May 12. He doesn’t remember the name of the individual who commissioned it, only that he was a clarinetist from New Haven who wanted a piece for his son’s bar

mitzvah. Or <sup>Comments</sup> how the instrumentation — four brass instruments, double bass, and chorus — was chosen. Or how the commissioner reacted when the work was premiered in May 1966. It was, after all, more than a half-century ago.

But he's crystal clear about what he was trying to accomplish with "Torah Service" and with "Friday Evening Service," written three years earlier. In the years leading up to the writing of both pieces, Wyner had been the organist and music director of a couple of Reform synagogues in Westchester County, N.Y., and he'd found himself "repelled by the kind of music I had to perform," he said recently by phone. The music was a descendant of the post-Mendelssohn Protestant musical tradition. "It had no passion behind it," he said.

So when opportunities came to write what would become perhaps the two most significant liturgical works in his catalogue — works with very different musical languages and emotional profiles from each other — he explicitly conceived of them as "a recovery of the spirit of what I imagined was ancient Judaism," he explained. He prepared for them by undertaking a study of Hebrew — a language he had never learned, though he was fluent in Yiddish — and fell in love with the language's compact intensity and allusive power. It helped him think in a fresh way about the ancient texts that animate these two central rituals of Jewish worship: the celebration of Shabbat in "Friday Evening Service" and the veneration and reading of the Torah in "Torah Service."

"The prayers themselves are a result of desperate expression," he said. "I say desperate because, if you imagine life two or three thousand years ago in an essentially arid country, no protection from disease or natural phenomena, the elements, not to speak of enemies. . . . What else do you do but shout your lungs out and hope for the best?"

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“You sing or you speak with a kind of desperation or passion that is irrational, because rarely does it really have very much external effect,” he continued. “You can’t change the weather by yelling, but you can make yourself feel better, and you can develop a sense of community. And that, I think, is what is at the heart of early Jewish worship. Not singing sweet little songs.”

That primal wildness Wyner was seeking is easiest to hear in “Torah Service,” which the Cantata Singers are performing on a program that also includes Honegger’s oratorio “King David” and a selection of Yiddish art songs by Lazar Weiner, Yehudi’s father. “Torah Service” is written in an angular, somewhat dissonant musical language that conveys the intensity of both the joy and the lamentation Wyner saw in Judaism’s origins. Yet like every composer of sacred music, Wyner had to strike a careful balance between the competing demands of music and text. “It doesn’t pretend to preempt the prayers themselves,” he said of the music. “The prayers remain intact, and the music is commentary or a dramatization, but it doesn’t supplant the ritual readings.”

Originally, Wyner wanted both services to be performed primarily in synagogues, so they could be heard and experienced as part of the rituals of Jewish worship. (One way in which the Cantata Singers are honoring Wyner’s intention is by incorporating readings of the relevant prayers between the movements of the piece.) But their liturgical use never caught on in a widespread way, he noted.

“The Jews don’t want my music in the synagogue,” he said bluntly. “The time when these pieces were written, there was still a viable synagogue music [tradition] — choir, organ, cantor. Within 10 years, that disappeared, and it’s never coming back. That’s why I’m not unsatisfied to hear these things done in a secular setting.”

And yet, the fact that the pieces have had to make their way in more traditional concert settings has sometimes allowed Wyner to make unexpected connections. He recalled conducting the “Friday Evening Service” years ago at Kent State

no one knew Hebrew, which was causing the singers a lot of consternation. So he came to one rehearsal and told the chorus, “The language that you find so difficult — do you realize that when you sing these words, you are mouthing the words that Jesus mouthed?”

That may not be true; scholars generally concur that Jesus primarily spoke Aramaic. But the line apparently worked.

“There was a gasp, and what motivation it evoked,” he recalled. “They busted their ass to learn that thing.”

## CANTATA SINGERS

At Jordan Hall, May 12, 8 p.m. Tickets \$25-69. 617-868-5885,

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