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PERSPECTIVE

A Question for Passover

Why is Ernst Toch's cantata different from all others? Because, as one of the few pieces composed for the Jewish holiday, it shows such works' potential.

By MARK SWED

Two weeks ago at a concert by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, Ernst Toch's "Cantata of the Bitter Herbs" was performed for the first time in about 30 years. A forgotten work by a mostly forgotten composer, it is a doubly neglected score. Rarer still, it represents an effort by a noteworthy composer to write a Passover piece.

Passover is a time when Jews remember their dramatic escape from bondage and religious persecution. Its text, the haggada, which is taken from Exodus, tells how the Jews were passed over by the divine vengeance brought down upon Pharaoh's Egypt, how they made their escape across the divinely divided Red Sea and wandered the desert for 40 years in a determined bid for freedom.

The Passover story is, for most people, the most exhilarating and uplifting one in the Old Testament--Cecil B. DeMille certainly thought so. Moses, who broke the bonds of slavery and led the Jews to a promised land, is not only Judaism's most revered prophet, but the deliverer of laws that are the bedrock of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. If all this--the quest for freedom, for religious tolerance, for a homeland--isn't worthy of the inspiration of great music, what is?

The lack of such Passover pieces is all the more glaring given the time of year. Passover is the ceremony of spring's onset, of renewal and rebirth. It shares the dawning of the season with Easter, which has given rise to some of the most profound music of all time.

Bach's St. Matthew and St. John passions, Handel's "Messiah" and Wagner's "Parsifal" are examples of works that in reenacting the last days of Christ, the crucifixion and resurrection (or in the case of Wagner's opera, their implications), offer universal insight into suffering, self-sacrifice, rejuvenation, transcendence.

Indeed, this narrative of a single death has so penetrated global consciousness that one of the best recordings of Bach's "St. Matthew" Passion comes from the Bach Collegium Japan. Osvaldo Golijov's "La Pasion Segun San Marcos," a sizzling Latino setting of St. Mark's gospel, has become, with the release of a recording of its premiere performance in 2000, a worldwide sensation. (Yes, there is the occasional grumpy naysayer, such as the editor of American Record Guide, who is quoted in the latest issue as protesting, "I don't think the Passion story of Jesus should be told in vulgar street music.")

Significantly, even Golijov, an Argentine Jew now living

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near Boston (and composer-in-residence this season for the Los Angeles Philharmonic), wrote a Christian passion, not a Passover oratorio.

That there are no important Passover works written before the 19th century may not be surprising, given that there were few major Jewish composers and little place for liturgically based Jewish works in the concert halls. It has never been the custom of synagogues to commission new music for their services, as did the Lutheran church, in the form of cantatas from Bach, or the Catholic church, in its appetite for masses from just about everybody. The Old Testament was always a fertile source for material for opera and oratorio, but the closest thing to a major Passover oratorio would be Handel's "Israel in Egypt." Halevy's "La Juive" has a Passover scene, but this 19th century French grand opera is no "Parsifal."

From the onset of the 20th century, Jewish composers have become plentiful and the concert halls more ecumenical. Still, that made little difference. Schoenberg's "Moses and Aron" (like Rossini's "Moses in Egypt" before it) is more about the man than the events (whereas Moses' name never occurs in the haggada, lest he be deified). Korngold's syrupy eight-minute Passover Psalm doesn't count for much.

Perhaps the reason that the major 20th century Jewish composers--Schoenberg, Gershwin, Milhaud, Bloch, Bernstein, Feldman, Ligeti, Reich--haven't written for Passover is that they haven't felt the need. The biblical narrative is so compelling, and Jews are so obsessed with it, that they have made Passover an occasion for a ritual enactment at home, in the celebration of the Seder. Using the haggada as a guide, prayers are recited, Passover songs are sung, bitter herbs that recall the bitterness of slavery are tasted, wine is drunk at specific points, along with many other rituals. Another tradition is the analysis of the biblical story the night through, while some of the most observant Jews go so far as to flood the floors of their home and wade through the waters in remembrance of the Red Sea crossing.

In contrast to Passover's personal religious observations, Easter is a more public holiday, with its week of special services and spectacles, including such customs as the Hollywood Bowl sunrise service. Consequently, what Passover music there is tends to function less for sacred purposes than as popular entertainment, show-business arrangements of the Passover songs equivalent to those of Christmas carols.

Still, in 1937, Toch felt a need to make a public statement. The emigre composer, newly arrived in Los Angeles, had just learned of the death of his mother in Vienna and of Hitler's armies now in his native land. He could not help but identify those events with the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. With the help of a noted local rabbi, Jacob Sonderling, he fashioned an English-language text based on the haggada, and wrote a cantata for chorus, orchestra, four vocal soloists and narrator. The work was premiered in Los Angeles in 1938.

The cantata tries too much and too little. The narration is a bit stilted (although at the recent performance, it needn't have been quite so lifeless as it was when read by Leonard Nimoy). The choruses and solos are mostly prayers and psalms. In his Los Angeles years, Toch, who showed an experimental streak in Vienna, had two musical styles. He wrote serious symphonies, string quartets and other works in a complex, often grim but also gripping, highly chromatic style. He also scored films in a populist, though never trivial, way (he was especially good at capturing the angst of noir and the weirdness of science-fiction).

For his cantata, he wanted immediate communication and

wrote in a manner that is even more direct than that of his film music. The music is far from easy, as the recent tentative performance proved. But in trying to create a work that approached common vernacular and still expressed deep meaning and intense emotions, Toch never quite found the balance. A childlike simplicity, sweet and innocent, pervades the score. I kept wishing, in hearing it, that he had followed the example of Bach and Wagner, which was to stretch the idiom of his music as far as he could in the search of the most penetrating expression.

Even so, the ending, a tender plea for peace that was eloquently sung by baritone Michael Sokol, got to me. On the day of the concert, Israel had sent its tanks into the West Bank city of Ramallah. With the Israelis and Palestinians appearing blinded by their sense of biblical prerogatives, the Passover story can seem to justify barbarity. The genocidal Pharaoh ordered the killing of every newborn Jewish male child. When the Pharaoh refused to let the Jews go, Aaron, Moses' brother, threw down his rod and through divine intervention caused the plagues upon the Egyptian people, culminating in a visit by the Angel of Death to the firstborn in every Egyptian household. To my mind, both Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat had come to seem intolerant, destructively inflexible, angry old men right out of those terrible earlier times.

The first half of the concert, in Beverly Hills High School's acoustically challenged K.L. Peters Auditorium, didn't help assuage the day's gloom. It consisted of the local premiere of a "Pesach" Cantata (Passover Cantata), in which Passover tunes, sung by a couple of hammy cantors, were merrily jazzed up with waltz rhythms, Verdian oration, and even a cowpoke gallop or two by Raymond Goldstein, associate conductor at the Jerusalem Great Synagogue.

Such cheap entertainment may be a welcome diversion in Israel these days, but I think the gentle persuasiveness of Toch's "Cantata of the Bitter Herbs" should be more welcome still. The notable Easter works that many of us will be listening to this week are a boon to humanity. With even a modest work, Toch shows us that a Passover cantata might have similar potential. With the situation so bad in the Middle East, we can't wait forever. Toch's kind-hearted message of peace in the time of war needs to be heard.

Now.

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Mark Swed is The Times' music critic.

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