

ARTS & LETTERS

Ierb Cantata,' a Kaddish for Our Times

her's storm troopers triumphantly goose-stepping air way into his beloved arena. And word soon came rolling out of the suddenly operative situation of Jonas Toch's own relatives and some newly trapped there behind enemy lines (more in half of whom, including a wife's sister, would never see it out).

For all the urgent immediacy of the piece's composition, Toch never conceived of "Cantata of the Bitter Era" as a narrowly Jewish epic. Rather he recognized the face of those ancient men a universal theme — the yearning for freedom and liberation experienced by oppressed peoples everywhere. (In this, he was not dissimilar to his new friend composer Gerhart, who just 10 years earlier had scored majestic themes of longing for liberation from oppression and discrimination through the prism of his masterpiece "Porgy and Bess.") In an effort to render such universal themes more universally accessible, in this instance Toch consciously bent his musical idiom to a more tonal range in range more in keeping with the Hollywood style, which would presently net him a brace of Academy Award nominations.

That Pastover, Sondheim indeed marshaled an impressive array of forces, including master players from the paramount radio orchestra under the direction of producer Boris Morros, for the premiere of the Toch Cantata at Fairfax Temple. In addition to the piece's many other elements, it required a children's choir, and then, prominently in the first row was Toch's only child, Franz — his recently deceased mother's 8-year-old grand daughter, the girl who would in turn become my own mother.

Fifty years following the death of my grandfather's mother, my wife gave birth to his first great-grandchild, Sara. A year later, my mother (my grandmother) was killed in a pedestrian accident during the painful days that she lingered on in a coma. Sara was first learning to walk, and one had the uncanny sense of a spirit impressing the generations.



TOCH ARCHIVES, UCLA
LIKE LIKE GRANDFATHER, LIKE GRANDSON: Composer Ernest Toch (1887-1964), a modernist influential in Middle Europe in the aftermath of World War I, in a photograph with his daughter Franz (top). Franz's son, the writer Lawrence Wechsler, poses with a bust of the composer sculpted by Anna Mahler, Gustav Mahler's daughter.

Several years later, when Sara was 8, we happened to be traipsing through an abandoned and overgrown Jewish cemetery in a lush forest in rural Poland, contemplating the tumbled and tumbled ancient headstones, evidence of a once vibrant presence, now achingly absent. The tombstones featured all sorts of weathered

carvings — vases, candles, menorahs and, most mysteriously, pairs of outstretched hands, their fingers peculiarly spread in a V formation, the thumb and two adjacent fingers to one side, the pinky and its neighbor to the other.

"Why," Sara asked, quite sensibly, "are they all saying, 'Live long and prosper'?"

A few months later, while preparing a Talk of the Town piece for The New Yorker around the theme of KCRW's recent Jewish Short Stories radio series, I got a chance to interview that series's host and moderator, the actor Leonard Nimoy, author of a recent memoir of his Star Trek experiences, "I Am Spock." I mentioned my daughter's query to him, and he burst out laughing, for as it turned out, he now told me, she had gotten it "exactly right."

As he had been preparing the Spock character in the early days of the series, Mr. Nimoy, who had been raised in Orthodox Jewish surroundings in Boston's West End, had thought of the eternally exiled Vulcan as a sort of cosmically Wandering Jew cast among that otherwise homogenous crew. Called upon to invent a ritualized greeting gesture for his Vulcan alter ego, Mr. Nimoy related how he suddenly recalled one of the most charged moments of the services at his local synagogue when he was a child: how the Kohanim, the representatives of the priestly tribe, approached the raised stage and formed a semi-circle, their large shawls draped over their extended arms, and their fingers outspread in that four-fingered V-configuration.

"It was a very loaded moment," Mr. Nimoy explained. "You weren't supposed to look as they began chanting, for it was said that at that moment the Shekhinah, the holy presence of God, entered the sanctuary, and that this spirit was so powerful, so beautiful, that if you saw it, you'd die. Being an 8-year-old, of course, I peeked, and the sheer theatrical

ity of the occasion indeed made a lasting impression, one that I subsequently summoned forth in creating that 'live long and prosper' gesture."

I recorded this little piece of exegesis in The New Yorker a few weeks later, titled "Oy, Spock," and frankly, as the years passed, allowed the revelation to recede from my memory. Until recently.

For years after my grandmother's death in 1972 (Toch himself had died eight years earlier, in 1964), I'd taken it upon myself, to the extent that I was able, to spread word of his quite remarkable musical legacy. The L.A. émigrés used to succor themselves with the story about the two Sachsons who meet on the Santa Monica palisade, one says to the other, "Yeah, it's true. Here I'm a dachshund, but in the old country I was a St. Bernard." Well, back in the old country Toch had been a St. Bernard — and he wasn't exactly chopped liver following his exile in America. His last 15 years in particular witnessed a remarkable late efflorescence, including an opera and seven symphonies (the third of which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize) — but Toch's work never again regained the resonance it had once held. And my efforts were by and large

halted, plodding, incompetent and in vain.

Recently things have begun to change. All sorts of Toch CDs have begun pouring forth — especially from Germany, where they are being very well received — ventures I had absolutely nothing to do with. To cap it off, a few months ago I received word that Norron Green and the L.A. Jewish Symphony were going to be reviving the cantata as one of their concerts. They asked me if I had any ideas for a possible narrator. Remembering my conversation with Mr. Nimoy, I called to ask whether he'd be willing. Graciously, he agreed.

And there you have it. On March 10, a full-scale revival of this long-neglected work at the California symphony's regular digs at the Beverly Hills High School Auditorium. I myself have just turned 50 — the very age Toch was when he undertook the work's poignant challenge. At the concert I will be accompanied by my daughter, granddaughter of that little girl who sang in the very first row of that very first concert.

Mr. Wechsler, who was on staff at The New Yorker for 20 years, was recently named director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at New York University.



Secrets of the City

A SERIALIZED NOVEL

By Anne Roiphe

CHAPTER 11: MADDIE MILLER'S LATE-NIGHT

In Chapter 12, Benjy Cruck tells the Mayor that if the city doesn't mandate a vaccine for the mysterious illness afflicting the city, there might just be a riot.

I had an early appointment with her therapist, Dr. Bergen. She wore her lab coat over her black slacks. I'd loved her lab coat, the starched white of it, the promise of a germ-free surface, the uninterrupted glacial space at her back. She settled down. Dr. Bergen knew immediately that I was pleased about something. Beneath the surface, change was approaching. He felt the same way he did about something after the ground hog had seen its shadow. Sometimes he was right, sometimes he was not.

I'd started, "My brother," she said, and the room filled with Jacob, his commanding ways, his testosterone, his bare knuckles prodding her ribs, his way of holding forth so she could hardly get a word in, the way his mother looked at him as if he were Moses himself eating brisquet at her table, all the money he got for his bar mitzvah, his cruel smile, his cruelty to her hamster. I'd had just begun. The fern on the window sill drooped, signaling a desperate need for water.

Dr. Bergen, who was prone to allergic sneezing, began to sneeze. He reached