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MUSIC REVIEW

## Jewish Symphony Pairs Copland, a Weill Rarity

By MARK SWED Times Music Critic

The 100th birthday commemorations of Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill have been major components of international concert life this year, but the celebrations have been mostly separate parties. The paths of Copland and Weill did cross, and it seems as if the composers should have much in common. Both began as modernists but became famous when they adopted uniquely Populist musical positions. Both were Jews who, after Kurt Weill fled Germany in 1935, lived in New York. And both were enormous influences on developing a lasting American vernacular style. Yet, in fact, they had very little to do with each other. Weill is barely more than a fond footnote in Copland's two volumes of memoirs.

So it was a fascinating and original idea of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony to begin its seventh season Sunday night with a joint Copland-Weill tribute at the University Synagogue in Brentwood. Fascinating, too, was the constraint of making Judaism, not Populism, the common ground. Both men were secular composers. But it is not hard to find a strain of Jewish melody under the surface in several of Copland's pieces. As the creator of "The Threepenny Opera," Weill was far too much the cynic to be a very successful religious composer, but he did sometimes try

Still, the Copland and Weill halves of the program had practically no common ground. For Copland, the Jewish Symphony music director, Noreen Green, offered familiar examples of his jazzy early style in "Music for the Theater," his one overtly Eastern European score, the trio "Vitebsk," and two of the "Old American Songs" in choral arrangements.

Her Weill component, however, was newsworthy. Here Green presented extended excerpts from Weill's 3 1/2-hour oratorio "The Eternal Road," which he wrote with Franz Werfel and which was staged on Broadway by Max Reinhardt in 1937. "The Eternal Road" is Weill's largest work and the crucial link that demonstrates his transition from acidic German folk operas to Broadway. (Coincidentally, Weill's previous major work, the sarcastic "Seven Deadly Sins" was on the weekend's Los Angeles Philharmonic programs.)

"The Eternal Road" is also the missing link in Weill, since the score, until it was revived by John Mauceri two years ago for a production in Chemnitz, Germany, had been completely ignored. Sunday's performance of nearly a third of it was the first time the music had been heard in Los Angeles in more than 50 years (it was once semi-staged at the Hollywood Bowl).

A biblical tale on an epic Hollywood scale, "The Eternal Road" proved a great hit (if no money maker) on Broadway. But today it strikes us as exceedingly strange. Framed as an inspiring retelling of Old Testament stories by a rabbi to a young boy during a pogrom, it ends on a hopeful note of triumph, a note that history was about to prove tragically

wrong.

Green avoided that disturbing aspect of the work by safely sticking to excerpts from the stories of Abraham, Moses, Ruth, David and Solomon found in the first three of the oratorio's four acts. But even here, the oratorio is an odd work. The original German libretto was translated for Broadway into banal language (including such rhymes as "before you"/"adore you"). Weill's music is equally curious. It is stilted in its formal dramatic exposition but frequently opens up into wonderfully lyric, even sexy, songs with echoes of his Berlin operas as well as a preview of the Broadway style he would soon develop.

To properly evaluate "The Eternal Road" will require a more professional performance than Green--with her fledgling orchestra, amateur chorus, inadequate and crudely amplified soloists (Kathleen Roland, Evan Kent and Joel Pressman)--could possibly muster. Thanks to a nice touch of history, however, the scene was wonderfully set by the actor Dick Van Patten, who served as narrator. As the 9-year-old "Dickie" Van Patten, he had appeared as Isaac in the original Broadway production, and one wished his stories about it had gone on all night. For this evening Andrew Oberstein was the confident boy actor.

The program did boast one distinguished musical performance in Copland's "Vitebsk," potently played by the two unusually distinguished members in the orchestra: concertmaster Mark Kashper and principal cellist Barry Gold (both are also members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic) and by guest pianist Neal Stulberg (the locally based, and inexplicably locally ignored, conductor). Unfortunately, though, these fine players were placed so far back on the stage that they sounded as if they were in another room.