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Vayetze



An artist on her own

Francoise Gilot wants to be remembered as more than 'the woman who left Picasso' Page 8

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Self-Portrait (1948), copyright Francoise Gilot

Copland and Weill at 100: A Jewish musical odyssey

Reviewed by Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Since turning her major talent and energy to the creation and direction of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, Dr. Noreen Green has been going — and growing — from triumph to triumph.

Sunday evening at University Synagogue at the Symphony's first performance of the new season, a rapt audience thrilled to a program of 50- and 60-year-old compositions, played and sung with such strength and quality that we were carried back in time to the era of Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill.

Both composers were born in 1900, so this was the Copland/Weill Centennial concert. But, as brought out in Noreen Green's words of introduction and in Dr. Michael Isaacson's program notes, the two men presented a definite contrast.

Copland — American-born, known for bringing American folk melodies to the concert stage. Weill — driven from Germany by Nazi terror. Yet both created music that was expressive of Jewish life. And that music was featured on Sunday's program.

Copland's *Vitebsk: Study on a Jewish Theme* is a trio for violin, cello and piano. Concertmaster Mark Kashper, first-cellist Barry Gold and guest pianist Neal Stulberg performed an admirable interpretation of this work. Dr. Green in her engaging introduction simply sang a few bars of the Chasidic theme that dominated Joel Engel's score of *The Dybbuk*, the play that gave Copland the idea for the suite.

Then the trio picked it up. They dramatized the musical insecurity of quarter-tones in the strings against vigorous piano accents — sometimes heavy, sometimes sharp — Copland's rendition of the hardships of Jewish life in Russia. And they swung into brilliant *frailach* passages to echo the joy in that

life. Altogether an outstanding performance.

Rounding out the Copland half of the evening was his *Music for the Theater*, composed at an early age, and selections from *Old American Songs I and II* in which the Valley Beth Shalom Choir joined the orchestra.

Given the architecture of the University Synagogue *bimah*, the singers could not be placed behind the orchestra as they so often are. Instead they were on stage-right and the instruments center and left, which made for improved sound balance.

The full audience responded with total attention, from the opening trumpet solos by Paul Salvo and Marissa Benedict to the sonorous final notes of *Zion's Walls* by the mixed chorus and full orchestra.

The entire second half of the concert consisted of excerpts from Kurt Weill's *The Eternal Road*. A 1937 work — just one year before *Kristallnacht* — it is set in a European synagogue where Jews seek strength from their rabbi and their faith against the pogrom raging outside. The rabbi takes the Torah scrolls from the ark and starts telling them their history, which is reenacted on stage — 250 people in the cast!

The original production was a financial disaster that closed after four months. But after half a century it was revived and Noreen Green saw a performance in Brooklyn. She determined to do a concert version, without the on-stage pageantry. The music would be featured. She proceeded to do a tireless research job which landed her the score — some of which got sent to the wrong address — together with Weill's absolute limits on what could and could not be excerpted from its 3 1/2 hour length.

She also found actor Dick Van Patten, who was a member of the original cast at the age of 8. Van Patten, known to today's audiences from the TV series "Eight is

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"Enough" and many other shows, narrated the L.A. performance and regaled the audience with anecdotes about the original show, which has lived in his memory in great detail ever since. Director Max Reinhardt, writer Franz Werfel and producer Max Weisenthal came to life for today's audience in Van Patten's entertaining recollections.

Singing multiple parts in *The Eternal Road* were tenor Evan Kent (Jacob, Aaron, David, etc.), who was truly impressive in his vocal ease and power and in his crystal diction; soprano Kathleen Roland (Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, Bathsheba), who brought a specific operatic quality to the performance; and baritone Joel Pressman (Abraham, Moses, Solomon, etc.), who interpreted his various roles with strong feeling.

The chorus punctuated the Golden Calf sequence with a Rachmaninoff-like punched refrain — "this is our G-d, this is our G-d!" — and formed the European congregation for the drama.

The orchestra provided a solid foundation for the work, from the awesome scoring of danger and drama to the accompaniment of soloists to the intrusion of German cabaret tunes before the encounter of Ruth and Boaz. Total effect: spellbinding.

Inevitably, some lines got lost, of course. Voices from the chorus could not be heard above the brass section. Never enough solo mikes for that. But the new season is certainly off to a great start.

Dr. Ian Drew, Noreen Green's personable husband and president of the LAJS, described the goal of the orchestra's activities as "to inform your path to Judaism." A concert presenting Copland and Weill contributes to fulfilling the goal.

Incidentally, this seems to be a Weill year in L.A. Later this season, Theater West announces a revival of *Three-Penny Opera*.

In the effort to inform our path, the orchestra's educational director, Elizabeth Gilbert, heads a program in Jewish old-age homes throughout L.A. to bring klezmer and Sephardic music to the elderly. The Jewish Community Foundation honored her and the orchestra for that program's success.

The cheers of the standing audience should resound in the ears of the performers for a long time.