

# The Arts

## Great Music

Rarities mark LAJS concert honoring two great Jewish composers.

By Ellen Jaffe-Gill, Contributing Writer

One was a U.S. resident from the beginning of his long life to its end, creating music as American in its sound and subject matter as "Yankee Doodle Dandy." The other, after making his mark in Germany, fled his homeland through France and spent his final, tragically few years adding to the glory of the American musical theater at its height.

Both Aaron Copland and Kurt Weill were born in 1900 — Weill the son of a cantor, Copland the son of a synagogue president — and both will be celebrated when the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS) opens its seventh season Sunday, beginning a series of concerts tracing the 20th century Jewish experience through music.

The Dec. 3 program is in keeping with the symphony's mandate to bring lesser-known but important Jewish works to Los Angeles audiences. In a story on National Public Radio a few years ago, reporter Johanna Cooper compared LAJS artistic director Noreen Green to "a persistent, driven musical archeologist, tirelessly digging through libraries." Green has traveled through Europe, Russia, Israel, and the United States in search of lost or little-known gems of Jewish music.

The symphony's second concert in March will focus on film music by Jewish composers, and an April event will present uplifting music inspired by the Shoah.

Copland is best known for ballets on American themes such as "Appalachian Spring" and "Rodeo," for anthems including "Fanfare for the Common Man," and for the eloquent scores of several films, including "Our Town" and "Of Mice and Men."

The Dec. 3 concert will feature Copland's "Music for the Theater," two of his settings of "Old American Songs," "Simple Gifts" and "Zion's Walls"; and his first significant chamber work, "Vitebsk: Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano."

Though Copland, who died 10 years ago at age 90, didn't often work with Jewish themes, he brought them front and center in "Vitebsk," in which he uses sounds that echo the intonations of synagogue chant and folk melodies such as the hora. He wrote of the piece, "It was my intention to reflect the harshness and drama of Jewish life in White Russia."

The second half of the concert presents excerpts from Weill's monumental work "The Eternal Road," its first West Coast concert performance in 50 years. Written after Weill's celebrated collaboration with playwright Bertolt Brecht, the most famous product of which was "The Threepenny Opera," and before Weill penned the music for Broadway classics like "Knickerbocker Holiday," "Lady in the Dark," and "Lost in the Stars,"

the opera premiered in 1937.

"The Eternal Road" depicts a Jewish community in Europe on the eve of a pogrom. Hoping to inspire strength in his frightened congregation, the town's rabbi recounts the biblical stories in which Jews overcame adversity and demonstrated their faith in God. These stories are interspersed with episodes showing the lives and concerns of various people in the town. The opera, which was written as life worsened for German Jews and which premiered, with eerie prescience, a year before Kristallnacht, nevertheless ends on a hopeful note.

The 3 1/2-hour opera, which incorporates traditional Hebrew melodies as well as notable German music, opened in New York to public and critical acclaim. Green calls it "awesome — Kurt Weill at his best." The sheer size of the production precluded a profitable run, however, and it sank into oblivion until it received a splashy, full-scale revival last year at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Green saw the Brooklyn performance and hopes to mount a full production in Los Angeles at some point. For now, the local audience will have the hour and 15 minutes that Green has prepared, focusing on the Bible stories.

"Getting permission to do excerpts was interesting," Green told The Journal. "Weill left very specific instructions on what could be cut and what couldn't."

Veteran actor Dick Van Patten ("Eight Is Enough"), who at age 8 appeared in the original Broadway production of "The Eternal Road," will narrate the excerpts on Dec. 3.

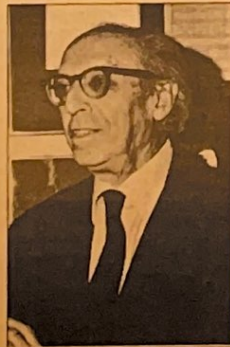
"It's very moving to find something that I thought was forgotten and that I never forgot," said Van Patten, who made room for Sunday's performance between film roles. "My father told me when I was eight, 'It's the best play you'll ever be in,' and 25 years later, he still said it. It's a great play, and I'm thrilled to be part of it."

"It's truly a privilege to be singing this music," said Evan Kent, cantor at Temple Isaiah in Rancho Park and one of the soloists in "The Eternal Road," which he called "hauntingly beautiful in that it expresses the impending horror of the Third Reich without explicitly stating it."

Although the juxtaposition of Bible stories and the jaunty strains of Berlin cabaret music may seem a bit strange, Kent said, Weill, whose life was cut short by a heart attack in 1950, succeeded in showing how relevant the stories are.

"The names of the patriarchs and matriarchs are a part of our daily liturgy," Kent said. "To be telling their stories through contemporary music makes their lives, their foibles and their personal challenges from God that much more profound."

See "7 Days in the Arts," page 30, for ticket information. ■



Top to bottom: Kurt Weill, Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Director Noreen Green and Aaron Copland. Green will conduct pieces by Copland and Weill in a program this Sunday night marking the centennial of each composer.

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