

Program Notes

Paul Hindemith, *Organ Sonata No. 3* (“nach alten Volksliedern”)

Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) was an active and successful composer, string player, and teacher in his native Germany until the Nazis came to power in 1933. The immense popularity of his opera *Mathis der Maler* (“Mathis the Painter”), proclaiming an artist’s responsibility to promote social justice, made him an enemy of the state, which banned half his repertoire from performance. He made plans to emigrate for the sake of his music and his wife Gertrude, who was Jewish. They moved in 1938 to Switzerland and then in 1940 to the United States, where Hindemith had accepted a teaching position at Yale University. However, Hindemith had arrived in America some months before his wife, and his third organ sonata, composed while they were apart, is a kind of love letter to her and to his homeland.

The sonata, subtitled “nach alten Volksliedern” (“on ancient folk songs”), quotes sixteenth-century German love songs in the same way that Johann Sebastian Bach incorporated hymn melodies into his organ works. In the opening movement, based on “Ach Gott, wem soll ich’s klagen, das heimlich Leiden mein” (“Ah Lord, to whom should I lament my secret suffering”), the tune serves as a sturdy bass line supporting gently rocking upper voices before moving to the top of a solemn motet. In the second movement, the tune “Wach auf, mein Hort” (“Awake, my love”) appears as a sustained tenor line sandwiched between meandering upper voices and a halting bass. The playful final movement presents “So wünsch ich ihr” (“I bid her then”) clearly in the lowest and slowest moving voice. The migration of the quoted melodies over the course of the sonata from the bottom of the musical texture to the top and then to the middle before returning to the bottom is reflected in Hindemith’s sequence of tonal centers, which begins in A-flat, leaps up to B, and then makes its way back down through A to A-flat.

Gertrude was extremely involved with Hindemith’s work and usually went with him on his travels, so it must have been a great relief for them to be reunited. The thirteen years they spent in America before returning to Switzerland would be the pinnacle of Hindemith’s celebrated career as a world-renowned composer and a teacher.

Kevin Leong
Music Director and Conductor

Lukas Foss, *Behold, I Build an House*

Lukas Foss (1922–2009) was born Lukas Fuchs to Jewish parents in Berlin, Germany, where, as a musical prodigy, Julius Goldstein introduced him to the music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. After the Nazis' rise to power, his parents removed to Paris in 1933, where he studied piano and flute, and in 1937, he immigrated with his family to the United States. He studied with Fritz Reiner and Randall Thompson at the Curtis Institute, where his friends included Leonard Bernstein, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Samuel Barber. After studying at Yale with Paul Hindemith and receiving several prestigious grants and awards, he succeeded Arnold Schoenberg at UCLA and later became professor of music at Boston University in 1991.

Behold, I Build an House was commissioned for the dedication of Boston University's Marsh Chapel on March 14, 1950. A biblical cantata for chorus and organ (or piano), the text is drawn from 2 Chronicles and describes the construction of Solomon's temple. The first section, showing the stylistic influence of Aaron Copland's fanfares, presents the construction of the temple, followed by an organ interlude. The central section is made up of a series of musical offerings of praise and dedication, also followed by an organ interlude. The work ends with a slow-moving, meditative chant inspired by a synagogue melody.

"I think that identity comes to the fore in many pieces, and it is a great asset to be deeply rooted in the soil of one's people," he responded in the 1940s to a query about the relationship between nationalism and music. Foss composed other pieces based on Jewish texts including *Song of Songs*, a solo biblical cantata for soprano and orchestra (1946); *Psalms* for chorus, orchestra, and two pianos; and *De profundis* for chorus. In addition, he wrote the *Salamone Rossi Suite* for orchestra, based on music by the late Renaissance/early Baroque Italian Jewish composer Salamone Rossi (ca. 1570–ca. 1630), who composed, among much other music, the first known Hebrew liturgical settings in the style of the Italian Renaissance. Foss considered his Jewish and American identities as twin badges of honor. Shortly after the Second World War he returned to Berlin to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic. When a reporter asked him how it felt to "be home," Foss replied that he would be home when he got back to New York.

Laura Prichard

Randall Thompson, *Alleluia*

Randall Thompson (1899–1984) was an influential American composer and teacher possessing great wit and charm. He specialized in music for a *cappella* choir; among the best known today are *Frostiana* (1959), settings of seven Robert Frost poems, and the stunningly lyrical *Alleluia*, heard today. The *New York Times* called him “music’s Norman Rockwell,” and his Harvard colleague James Haar described his choral works as “a shining reflection of the joy and creative skill with which he taught musical craft: of Palestrina and Lasso, of Monteverdi and Schütz, of Bach and Handel.”

As a student at Harvard, Thompson was mentored by the renowned choral conductor and editor Archibald Davison and studied composition under Ernest Bloch. He began a lifelong appreciation of Monteverdi and Palestrina at Harvard and found inspiration in their works while writing his own orchestral music during a three-year fellowship at the American Academy in Rome (1922–26). He composed his *Pueri Hebraeorum* for Wellesley College while teaching there (1928–29) and received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study collegiate music education in the United States (1929–30). He received a doctorate in music from the Eastman School of Music, went on to direct the Curtis Institute of Music (1939–41), taught at the University of Virginia, and then returned to Harvard (1948–65).

Thompson’s most popular choral work is his elegant anthem, *Alleluia*, commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951) for the opening of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. It was written in five days and delivered to the conductor, G. Wallace Woodworth, only forty-five minutes before the premiere on July 8, 1940. Koussevitzky had requested a “loud and festive” choral fanfare, but the composer was preoccupied with the recent fall of France and turned out an atypical, brooding, and passionate meditation on the word “Alleluia.” He later remarked that his tempo marking of *Lento* was inspired by Job 1:21: “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Thompson’s *Alleluia* is still played at the opening ceremonies at Tanglewood each year.

Laura Prichard

Ernest Bloch, *Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service)*

Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) was a Swiss-born, Jewish composer who immigrated to the United States in 1916. He taught at the Mannes School of Music in New York City and gave private composition lessons to young American composers such as Randall Thompson, whose *Alleluia* is heard in this concert. Bloch was the first director of the Cleveland Institute of Music (1920–25) and the second director of the San Francisco Conservatory (1925-30). While at the Conservatory Bloch developed a relationship with Cantor Reuben Rinder of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco. Cantor Rinder persuaded Gerald F. Warburg, a noted cellist and patron of music and musicians, to commission the work for the Temple. *Avodath Hakodesh* was appropriately dedicated to Warburg.

The *Sacred Service* is at once both an oratorio based on the Sabbath liturgy and a collection of practical service music appropriate to Reform Jewish worship. The division of the *Sacred Service* into five parts mirrors the Sabbath morning liturgical progression in the *Union Prayer Book* (1922), from which the text is taken. There are instrumental preludes and interludes that represent periods of congregational silence—such as during the removal of the Torah scrolls from the ark and their return—and silent internal devotions. The work, usually sung in Hebrew, flows between massive, dramatic emotional segments interspersed with more delicate textures.

Part I opens with a four-note motive (G-A-C-B) in the organ, repeated by the cantor, and taken up in the choral setting of the traditional prayer, “How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel; I come to worship in the temple.” This motive recurs throughout all five movements as a unifying element. Bloch calls all the introductory texts of Part I his “Exposition”: the call to prayer, *Borechu*, a short instrumental interlude; the *Shema Yisroel* with Bloch’s slightly shortened version of its blessings; and the first two blessings of the *Amida*.

Part II of the *Sacred Service* represents Israel joining in the singing of the praises that encircle the Heavenly Throne: here Bloch sets the *Kedushah* (“Sanctification”) with *Kodosh, kodosh, kodosh* (“Holy, Holy, Holy” from Isaiah 6:3) and completes the *Amida* with a stirring choral rendition of the *Yimloch* (“The Lord shall reign for ever” from Psalm 146:10).

Part III begins with a meditation. The organ alone is heard, allowing the listeners a moment to formulate their own thoughts, perhaps as a substitute for the silent liturgical *Tefillah*. Then the choir, unaccompanied, quietly intones *Yihyu Lerozon*, the prayer for acceptance that follows the *Tefillah* (“O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before Thee, Adonoi, my Rock and Redeemer. Amen.”) The composer called this section “a silent meditation which comes in before you take your soul out and look at what it contains.”

Part IV sets the portion of the service during which the Torah Scroll is returned to the Ark, *Gadalu* (“Declare the greatness of the Lord” from Psalm 34). The section ends with *Etz Chayim* (“Tree of Life” from Proverbs 3:18, 17), traditionally sung as the doors of the Ark are closed; it is described by Bloch as a “peace song.”

Part V concludes the Sacred Service with an alternation of scriptural and non-scriptural material, beginning with *Vaanachnu*. Bloch provides an accompaniment while we hear the recitation of the *Aleinu* (closing prayer) with its last line in Hebrew, *Bayom hau* (“On that day” from Zachariah 14:9). Bloch thus expresses his hope for universal brotherhood. The text of this section concludes with part of the Mourner’s Prayer, written by Gustav Gottheil at the end of the nineteenth century. The text is intoned, not sung, and Bloch hoped that audiences might recite it in their native language as part of the performance. Bloch then specifies, “Chorus and Cantor must sing all of the following [the *Tzur Yisroel*] . . . as a far distant lamentation of all mankind. . . . The Answer to this lamentation—this cry for help—is then the *Adon Olom*.” Bloch chose to use the more universal *Adon Olom* (“Lord of the World” from the Evening Service) to replace the traditional closing prayer of the Morning Service, *En Kelohenu* (“Who is like our God”). The liturgical services end with an unspecified benediction, and Bloch chose the Priestly Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26). “After the orchestra and chorus give this message of faith, hope and courage, we must send people back to their routine of living, cooking, laundry and so on. Thus the priest gives a Benediction, the chorus answers, ‘Amen’ and they leave.”

Laura Prichard

— *These notes are based on material found in the Milken Archive.*