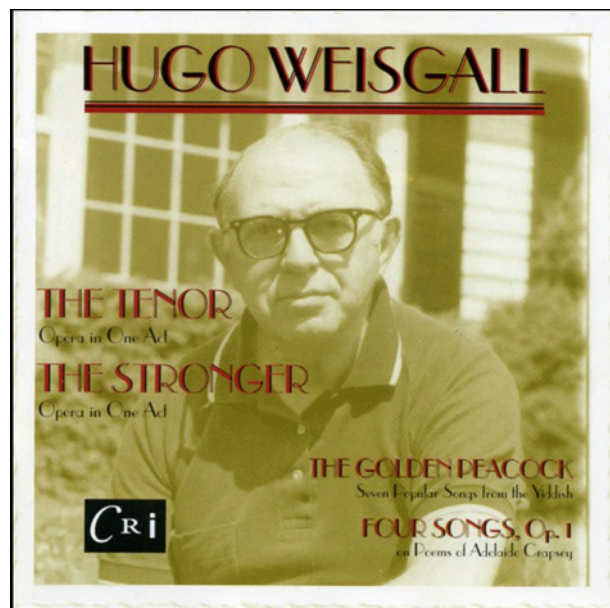


NWCR757

Hugo Weisgall

Two Operas and Two Song Cycles



The Tenor: Opera in One Act (1948–1950) (78:45)

Based on the Play *Der Kammersänger* by Franz Wedekind; Libretto by Karl Shapiro and Ernst Lert

1. Coming! Coming! (3:24)
2. Who's Who in Smells, Sir (1:55)
3. Have You Forgotten What You Were Hired For? (3:30)
4. To Belong to You (3:17)
5. My Trunks, Costumes, Scores? (1:43)
6. Forty Minutes Left (4:15)
7. Sitting in the Dark (5:12)
8. I Am Young, Gerardo, I Am Pure (5:24)
9. Surprise, Surprise, Quite a Surprise! (6:19)
10. Here Is My Card (1:54)
11. That Was a Noble Trick (5:16)
12. Nils Hansen Brought the House Down in London Last Night (4:02)
13. I Am Just Likely, Am I Not (2:35)
14. I Have Left My Home Forever (9:50)
15. I Have Created Nothing (5:42)
16. And Yet You Cannot Leave the Stage? (6:57)
17. Yes, Maurice, Yes, Yes (7:29)

Valet, baritone: Chester Ludgin; Bellboy, tenor (buffo): John Kuhn; Gerardo, an Opera Singer,

dramatic tenor: Richard Cassilly; Young Girl, lyric soprano (spinto): Dorothy Coulter; Maurice, Gerardo's Manager, bass-baritone: Richard Cross; Helen, dramatic soprano: Doris Young; Vienna State Opera Orchestra, Herbert Grossman, conductor

The Stronger: Opera in One Act (1952) (24:40)

Based on the Play by August Strindberg; Libretto by Richard Hart

18. Lisa, Darling, How Nice to See You (3:26)
19. Isn't This a Sweet Infant? (6:15)
20. You're Still Brooding about That Mix-Up (5:05)
21. Why Must All His Things Be This Horrid Color (4:24)
22. And as for Harold (5:26)

Estelle, soprano: Johanna Meier
Lisa, silent role

The Aeolian Chamber Players: John Graham, viola; David Walter, double bass; Ronald Anderson, trumpet; Albert Regni, clarinet, saxophone; Hugo Weisgall, conductor

The Golden Peacock: Seven Popular Songs from the Yiddish (1960–1976) (18:38)

23. Undzer Rebenyu (Our Dear Rabbi) (3:06)
24. Lomir Zikh Befrayen (Drinking Song) (00:55)
25. Mayn Harts Veynt in Mir (My Heart, My Soul Cries Aloud) (3:28)
26. Baleboste Zisinke (The Pretty Mistress) ... (2:31)
27. Shlof Mayn Kind (Sleep My Baby) (3:10)
28. Der Rebe Elimeylekh (Rabbi Elimeylekh) (2:30)
29. Di Goldene Pave (The Golden Peacock) .. (2:54)

Judith Raskin, soprano; Morey Ritt, piano

Four Songs, Op. 1, on Poems by Adelaide Crapsey (1934)..... (8:09)

30. Old Love (1:18)
31. Song (2:06)
32. Oh, Lady, Let the Sad Tears Fall (3:11)
33. Dirge (1:36)

Carolyn Heafner, soprano; Dixie Ross Neill, piano

Total playing time: 2:12:04

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Notes

Hugo Weisgall's *The Tenor*, a chamber opera in one act, was one of the most serious and substantial American operas of the 1950s. Weisgall's musical style recalls German models. The dense, developmental texture often crystallizes into strong set-numbers, and supports a complicated system of musical *da capos*, thematic recurrences, and even references to *Tristan and Isolde*. This thematic structure is complicated but effective; the piece does not appear to me overcomposed

for the theater.

Dramatically, the opera is likewise intense. Based on Wedekind's *Der Kammersänger*, the libretto concerns a present-day matinee idol, a man who has sacrificed personal integrity to his self-image in the role of Tristan. Women fall for him in droves, but when one of them gets serious his insufficiency becomes plain. For Gerardo cannot face his Manager's threat to revoke his contract if he is associated

with any scandal. Helen, however, has left her husband, and she implores Gerardo to quit the stage-life that he himself realizes is stifling him. He is on the point of agreeing when the Manager telephones; Gerardo reneges and Helen shoots herself. Terrified, the tenor steps over her body to obey the Manager's summons—his career wrecked, of course. The success of this libretto, incidentally, is due partly to some bold rewriting of the original play by Karl Shapiro and Ernst Lert.

Illusion, manipulation, and crumbling identity are powerfully projected by Weisgall, though he has his musical problems. There is a certain neutrality to the musical style and the lyric sections do not quite “sing” as they should. But we can take some stiffness and some blandness in a first opera that shows a superb instinct for the right musical idea for the right occasion. When Gerardo and the Manager are getting rid of a persistent intruder, the triple fugue is ominous and riotous, and perfectly placed for both musical and dramatic coherence. When Gerardo, trying to placate Helen after finally rejecting her, breaks out unconsciously into the music of *Tristan and Isolde*, we understand by means of the single grisly stroke how he has no real voice of his own. This is no trick illusion; it sums up and clarifies musically the fundamental dramatic idea.

In fact, *The Tenor* would appear to have been written because the composer had something to say, not just because it seemed to him a good idea to write an opera. A rare, precious quality indeed.

—Joseph Kerman, 1959

The Stronger was written in the late spring and summer of 1952 expressly for the Hilltop Opera Company of Baltimore, a small, professional cooperative group that I had helped organize and directed for a number of seasons.

From the first I regarded this piece as an experiment, a kind of operatic exercise. My primary task was to find ways to translate Strindberg's psychological monodrama, with its rapid, constantly changing moods and its almost total lack of sustained moments, into musical terms. The chief problem was that the music had to function alternately as background and foreground—at times pure atmosphere, then shifting between characterizing the protagonist, Estelle, and picturing the physical movements of the wordless Lisa.

Also I sought somehow to balance the two roles more equally. Rather than conform to the traditional theatrical interpretation in which “the star” plays the silent role and comes out on top, I tried to leave open the question as to which of the two women is really “the stronger.”

Finally, because of our limited production resources (and with Schoenberg's highly complex *Erwartung* in mind as a model not to be followed) I tried to achieve my objectives as simply and economically as possible. Hence the small physical setup—an orchestra of eight (although with considerable doubling in the woodwinds)—and the deliberate use of very limited and highly stylized musical material. Almost all of the music evolves from the first twenty measures, played before the first words are spoken.

The first four performances (with piano, on consecutive days) were hair-raising and almost convinced me that my “experiment” would not work. For the first one on a Thursday, the final fifty or sixty bars had not yet been written. I begged the indulgence of the tiny audience, told them about the piece, had the soprano sing snatches of it, sang bits of it myself, and more or less improvised the end.

I finished the vocal score by Friday noon and we rehearsed for several hours in preparation for that evening's performance. I had been convinced for some time that the

original Estelle had been miscast. Although she looked and acted well, she could manage neither the somewhat difficult vocal intervals nor the trickier rhythmic passages. The fact that the end of the opera had remained unfinished until Friday's rehearsal did not help matters. The tension was pretty high all around.

Friday's so-called performance was a total disaster. Estelle broke down practically at the first bar, though our wonderful “cocktail pianist” (the composer, Dominick Argento), chain-smoking and doubling as prompter, managed to get her through the curtain. Afterward there were tears, hurt feelings, and hysteria, and my role as villain became clear when Estelle's husband threatened to beat me up. Saturday's performance had to be canceled and another work substituted to make our double bill. At this point I decided to make a clean sweep. I fired Estelle and asked Eva Bober, the understudy, if she would undertake the role for Sunday's matinee—our most important performance of the run. She agreed. After singing Saturday evening—I no longer recall what role—Eva sat with Dominick and me, fortified by endless supplies of coffee, Dominick still chain-smoking, Nathalie, my wife, giving moral support as well as sitting in for the silent role, and proceeded to work all night to get the music memorized and to make major staging adjustments. We quit about five in the morning, not so much because of the 4 o'clock performance as because of the dress rehearsal called for 1:00 P.M. The performance went off as scheduled and somehow seemed to work. *The Stronger* has remained my most frequently performed opera.

Though *The Stronger* was originally designed to be coupled with my first opera *The Tenor*, I later decided to make it one of a trilogy of short works to fill an evening. One other of these has been composed to date, my verbatim setting of Yeats's *Purgatory* (1958). [Note: Weisgall wrote the third opera in 1989. It is a comedy entitled *Will You Marry Me?* with a libretto by Charles Kondek.]

—Hugo Weisgall, 1971

The golden peacock is an image frequently encountered in Yiddish folklore. Because of its beautiful plumage (Talmudic literature ascribes as many colors to it as the days of the year), as well as its role as a messenger to loved ones, the peacock came to symbolize both the Yiddish folksong and Yiddish poetry.

In Hugo Weisgall's *The Golden Peacock*, Jewish music is presented with a brilliant synthesis of the folksong and art music styles. Though the Eastern European Yiddish folksong has been fortunate in eliciting first-rate idiosyncratic settings from Ravel, Milhaud, and Lazare Saminsky; previous arrangements have been largely prosaic, styleless, or lacking in sheer musicality.

Weisgall's work may be considered a landmark, and may very well rank with Bartok's settings of Hungarian songs and Britten's English songs. Using a contemporary musical vocabulary with his customary skill and imagination, Weisgall has created a twentieth-century frame of reference for these Yiddish songs. In each, the composer's expressive power evokes a germane atmosphere and delineates deeply sympathetic dramatic profiles. These songs, which in the past have been viewed as rather spineless and sentimental, appear in Weisgall's settings as startlingly fresh, filled with pungency and boldness. For his method is never solely decorative or extraneous or meant merely to provide simple harmonizations well suited to folk songs. Instead, Weisgall goes directly to the musical or poetic center of the song itself, purifying an emotion, highlighting an attitude, pinpointing a

psychological complexity, invigorating an inherent rhythm, and, overall, making room for the song to flow and expand into an artistic entity. And though on occasion Weisgall has made slight alterations in the melodic lines of some of the songs for purposes of tonal variety or characterization, nothing of the original is ever lost. Only another, wider, more intricate dimension has been added.

Weisgall has deliberately chosen the term “popular songs” because he considers these songs as closer to the French genre of “chant populaire” than to genuine folksongs. Whether individually composed, communally conceived, or bardic in origin (there is often a narrow borderline), these songs form part of the folksong heritage of Yiddish-speaking Jews. They may be found in the Idelsohn, Cahan, Kipnis, and Beregovski-Feffner collections.

“*Undzer Rebenyu*” (“Our Dear Rabbi”) is often sung in unison with great fervor as a choral song, evoking the mystical powers of the Hasidic Rabbi. Folklorists, however, consider it to have been originally a parody. It is set here in a serious vein. “*Lomir Zikh Befrayen*” (“Drinking Song”) is a vigorous and brusque song in praise of brandy, which might have been sung by a coachman or a laborer. It is similar to folk songs of other countries, except here the glory of the Sabbath replaces Bacchus. “*Mayn Harts Veynt in Mir*” (“My Heart, My Soul Cries Aloud”) is a touching love song of departure and loneliness. It reflects the anguish of the woman left behind by the husband or lover forced to leave home. “*Baleboste Zisinke*” (“The Pretty Mistress”), a flirtatious and very suggestive song, is said to have been collected by Sholem Aleichem, who allegedly sang it with many double entendres. “*Shlof Mayn Kind*” (“Sleep My Baby”) is one of the loveliest of Yiddish lullabies. Yet its bitter undertones reflect the song’s involvement as a self-conscious piece of social commentary. “*Der Rebbe Elimeylekh*” (“Rabbi Elimeylekh”) is frequently mistaken as a genuine folksong, but is obviously modeled after the familiar “Old King Cole.” Weisgall’s accompaniment is a tour de force, a virtuoso piano étude echoing in a highly stylized manner a Klezmer (Jewish folk music) orchestra gone somewhat askew. “*Di Goldene Pave*” (“The Golden Peacock”) is given a most moving setting that becomes a kind of dream song in which the beauty of the stately peacock and the despair of the unhappy woman are juxtaposed. The two final measures bring the curtain down slowly on this and the other six dramas.

The Golden Peacock was given its first performance by Judith Raskin and Morey Ritt on January 23, 1978, in New York, at a League of Composers/ISCM concert.

—Albert Weisser

Weisgall’s Four Songs, Op.1, date from about 1934. This haunting and beautiful collection of sad songs by the twenty-two-year-old composer (who quickly abandoned his use of opus numbers) is held together by common themes of lost love and life. Weisgall has said that he was attracted to the poetry of Adelaide Crapsey while in high school in Baltimore. He claims to have written the first song, “Old Love,” after hearing the Brahms Second Symphony for the first time. Indeed, the slowly turning melody recalls the famous horn solo in the coda of the first movement of Brahms’s piece. And the third song, “Oh, Lady, Let the Sad Tears Fall,” owes a good deal to the prelude to Act III of *Tristan and Isolde*, a score that Weisgall revered. But these youthful songs, with their restrained piano parts, already suggest one of Weisgall’s primary characteristics as a composer: a melodic impulse that leads him to shape curving, arching vocal phrases. If the harmonic style here takes off from late Romanticism, it also

shows the influence of his teacher Roger Sessions’s non-triadic diatonicism, harmonic variety, and meticulous attention to voice-leading. The completion of this song cycle initiated a period of transition in Weisgall’s progress as a composer, conductor, and scholar. His subsequent wartime opera and symphonic conducting activities in Europe led to more instrumental than vocal compositions. But upon his return to the United States in 1947 Weisgall’s focus returned to his life-long passion, opera, and in 1950 his first mature stage work, *The Tenor*, burst from his pen.

—Bruce Saylor

Hugo Weisgall (b Ivančice, nr Brno, 13 Oct 1912; d Long Island, NY, 11 March 1997) has been called America’s preeminent composer of opera. His musical legacy includes ten important operas, each based on a major theatrical masterpiece or theme, ten song cycles, sacred choral music, with and without orchestra, and works for orchestra, various chamber combinations, and solo piano. His honors are too numerous to detail—but the most recent of them include the Lifetime Achievement Award from Opera America, the Gold Medal for Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the William Schuman Prize from Columbia University, the first award in the arts from the Foundation for Jewish Culture, and a number of honorary doctorates. Weisgall was an intellectual—having received his Ph.D. in German literature from Johns Hopkins University—but he was also a man of action. He founded and directed chamber opera companies, music conservatories, and chamber music societies. His activities in various military, diplomatic, and cultural posts in Europe during and after World War II relied on a unique combination of guile, foreign-language abilities, and *chutzpah* and led to the liberation of many people in danger. As a life-long educator, Weisgall taught composition at Juilliard (1957–1970), was Distinguished Professor at the Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College, CUNY (1961–1983), and was chairman of the faculty of the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (1952–1996). A gifted administrator, he directed the path-breaking Brena and Lee Freeman, Sr., Composer in Residence Program at Lyric Opera of Chicago from 1988 to 1997, and served as a president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1990–1993), the American Music Center (1963–1973), and the League of Composers/ISCM (1970–1971).

Hugo Weisgall was born in Ivance, or Eibenschütz, a German-speaking town in Czechoslovakia, but his family settled in Baltimore in 1920, and Weisgall was completely American-educated. In 1960 he moved to New York with his wife, Nathalie, and his two children, Deborah and Jonathan. Trained in conducting by Fritz Reiner and in tonal composition by Rosario Scalerò at the Curtis Institute, and a private student of Roger Sessions in the 1930s, Weisgall held himself (and others) to the highest personal and musical standards. He was painstaking and slow-working as a composer, and all his music is intricate, complex, and carefully wrought.

Weisgall evolved a personal style of vocal writing in which the rhythms and contours of American speech characterize dramatic situations and emotions. His music is informed by an intimate and passionate knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera and song literature, drawn from his experience as a singer (he sang the role of the Umpire in the premiere of Schumann’s *The Mighty Casey*). It is also shaped by his prowess on the podium (he conducted orchestras in London, Brussels, and Prague, and led the Italian repertory at the Prague National Opera in postwar Czechoslovakia), and by his thoroughgoing knowledge of synagogal music and

cantillation (he conducted the choir in the Baltimore synagogue where his father—also a composer and singer—served as cantor).

Weisgall deliberately tried to make each successive work different from the last, in order not to “repeat himself.” His lyrical but dark, expressionistic first opera, *The Tenor* (1950), fused opulent polytonal harmony with dissonant chromaticism. His last opera, *Esther* (1993), is a grand opera on the Biblical story that employs his dense, uncompromisingly atonal but rigorously consistent harmonic

idiom. The work’s clarity and dynamic directness made it the surprise success of the New York City Opera’s fortieth anniversary season in 1993; it garnered raves from the public and the national press, and it capped Weisgall’s distinguished career as a major figure in American opera. His last work, *Evening Liturgies* (1986–1996) for cantor, chorus, and organ, realized a life-long desire to set the Friday evening synagogue service, and contributes to Jewish music a new sacred masterpiece that stands next to Ernest Bloch’s *Sacred Service*.

—Bruce Saylor

Production Notes

The Tenor: Originally released by Westminster Records in 1959; first released by CRI in 1965 (on CRI SD 197).

The Stronger: Produced by Carter Harman, recorded by David Hancock, and first released in 1972 (on CRI SD 273). Original recording made possible by the kind assistance of Randolph Rothschild, Joseph Machlis, Rene and Theodore Wyler, and the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

The Golden Peacock: Produced by Carter Harman, recorded by David Hancock, and first released in 1980 (on CRI SD 147).

Four Songs on Poems by Adelaide Crapsey, Op. 1: Produced by Carter Harman; recorded by David Hancock, New York, 1981. Originally released on CRI SD 462. The original recording was made possible in part by a grant from the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.

Digital remastering by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer, at Sony Music Studios, New York City.

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