

THE GOLDEN PEACOCK: Seven Popular Songs From the Yiddish (1960:1976)
Undzer Rebenyu; Lomir Zikh befrayen; Mayn Harts Veynt in Mir; Baleboste Zisinke;
Shlof Mayn Kind; Der Rebbe Elimeylekh; Di Goldene Pave

TRANSLATIONS, to texts by women poets (1971 - 1972)

Knoxville, Tennessee (Nikki Giovanni); Song (Adrienne Rich); Child Song (Deborah Trustman); Poem (Celia Dropkin); Poem (second version); Poem (Celia Dropkin); The Rebel (Mari E. Evans); A City By the Sea (Anna Margolin)

HUGO WEISGALL (b. Czechoslovakia, 1912) has devoted most of his composing to music for voices. Seven operas, eight song cycles, and much choral music form the core of his output. The vocal impulse is primary. The voice is always at the musical centerpoint of Weisgall's musical fabric, often in the form of arching, long-breathed melodies. The composer's involvement with vocal music and its performance, his intense concern with intellectual problems, and his skill in handling American speech have led to a distinctive body of work.

Weisgall was completely American-educated after moving to the U.S. as a child of seven. Following the performing bent of his father, an opera singer and cantor, he sang lieder and conducted choral music from childhood. Weisgall later studied with Fritz Reiner at Curtis and during the 1940s conducted regularly orchestral music as well as opera both here and in Europe.

He is Professor of Music at Queen's College, and a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

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 or bardic derived (there is often a narrow borderline), these songs form part of the folksong heritage of Yiddish speaking Jews.

These songs may all be found in the Idelsohn, Cahan, Kipnis and Beregovski-Feller collections:

1. *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.
2. *Lomir Zikh Belrayen* (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 folksongs of other countries except here the glory of the Sabbath replaces Bacchus.
3. *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.
4. *Baleboste Zisinke* (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.
5. *Shlof Mayn Kind* (Sleep My Baby) is one of the loveliest of Yiddish lullabies. Yet its bitter undertones reflect the song's evolvment as a self conscious piece of social commentary.
6. *Der Rebbe Elimeylekh* (Rabbi Elimeylekh) is frequently mistaken as a genuine folksong. It is obviously modeled after the familiar Old King Cole. Weisgall's accompaniment is a tour de force, a virtuoso piano etude echoing in a highly stylized manner a Klezmer (Jewish folk musician) orchestra gone somewhat askew.
7. *Di Goldene Pave* (The Golden Peacock), a most moving setting which 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 the League of Composers — ISCM Concerts.

— Albert Weisser

TRANSLATIONS, written largely in Maine during the summers of 1971 and 1972, assumed its present form quite fortuitously. I had long been wanting to set some Yiddish poetry, but shied away because I felt I did not know the language well enough. When I saw the excellent translations in the anthology edited by Irving Howe and Dozer Greenberg, I knew that one of my problems had been solved. Furthermore, when Shirely Verrett commissioned me to do a cycle for her, I decided to try to complement Schumann's *Frauenliebe und Leben* from a 20th century view point. I chose a group of poems written and translated by women. For a time I thought of setting poems by black women poets only, but later decided that women were more important than color. Of the seven pieces, two are by black poets, three are translated from the Yiddish by Adrienne Rich, another is an original poem by Adrienne Rich, and still another is by my daughter, Deborah Trustman. I built my textual structure around a woman's life beginning with childhood through old age.

The title TRANSLATIONS has a number of connotations. First, some of the poems used are indeed translated from another language. Secondly, the poems are by women and set by a man. Perhaps the most significant translation is imposing a musical structure on an pre-existent poetic form.

TRANSLATIONS is dedicated to Shirley Verrett and was given its first performance in Chicago by Elsa Charlston, September 6, 1976.

— Hugo Weisgall

JUDITH RASKIN has been acclaimed for her appearances with the Metropolitan Opera as well as with other major opera companies and orchestras in the U.S.A. An outstanding recitalist, she has become increasingly involved in contemporary repertoire, and has premiered several new works by American composers. She has made numerous recordings, among them Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, most recently two works by Miriam Gideon on CRI SD 401.

MOREY RITT has been praised for her artistry in solo recitals and chamber music concerts in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Argentina, and Australia. In 1979 she made her recording debut (on CRI SD 403) in Perle's *DICKINSON SONGS* and also in 1979 she was appointed Professor of Music at Queens College.

Produced by Carter Harman

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)