

## Leo Zeitlin, *Palestina: An Overture for the Capitol Theatre, New York*

Edited by Paula Eisenstein Baker and Robert S. Nelson. Middleton, Wisconsin, 2014. [Full score, xix + 59 pp. ISBN 978-0-89579-800-8].

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Leo Zeitlin (1884–1930) occupies a unique niche in the history of American film music. The Russian-born and -educated composer, violist, conductor, and pedagogue emigrated to America in 1923 and found success composing and arranging music for New York’s Capitol Theatre. Since his untimely death in 1930 his musical works have collected dust in a trunk inherited by the composer’s daughter, Ruth, and in various archives. Zeitlin was a member of the Society for Jewish Folk Music founded by graduates of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. This association, founded on the idea of incorporating Jewish sacred and secular materials into their compositions, influenced Zeitlin’s musical oeuvre immensely. With that intention in mind, Zeitlin wrote *Rhapsody on Hebrew Themes* for the Capitol Theatre, one of New York’s major “movie palaces,” and the theater subsequently renamed his piece *Palestina*. Zeitlin composed the work as a dramatic overture to start all showings at the Capitol for the two weeks preceding the Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of 1929. This type of marketing strategy appealed and was familiar to audiences, and this grand medley of Jewish tunes was notable. Movie palaces were a common performance venue for original concert works and some were broadcast over the radio, and *Palestina* had a similar beginning on September 22, 1929 on the *Major Bowes’ Capitol Family* program. The tradition of featuring overtures in theaters extends back to at least the 1800s as Norman O’Neill points out in his well-known paper “Music to Stage Plays.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Norman O’Neill, “Music to Stage Plays,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 37 (1910–11): 92.

In 1986 Paula Eisenstein Baker embarked on her research exploration into the life and music of Leo Zeitlin after discovering a copy of the composer’s *Eli Zion* for violoncello and piano in an archive in Tel Aviv. In this edition, Baker and Robert S. Nelson continue their work reviving the music of the once-forgotten Zeitlin. Previously the duo edited and compiled 32 extant works of chamber music by the composer, which, like *Palestina*, are available from A-R Editions, Inc. Baker and Nelson have crafted a critical edition of *Palestina: An Overture for the Capitol Theatre, New York* that will undoubtedly interest scholars and performers alike. The edition is divided into four sections commencing with an annotated introduction providing a thorough sketch of Zeitlin’s life and work. This chapter is divided into eight subsections. The first area details Zeitlin’s time at the Capitol Theatre from 1925–1929. The famous “picture palace” held their orchestra to a high standard and performed art music and American popular music in addition to accompanying films. The authors mention a Capitol press release that notes Zeitlin was a “former pupil and protégé of Rimsky-Korsakoff” (p. ix) and also studied orchestration with Alexander Glazunov. Of specific interest to readers of this journal, the authors mention the possibility that Zeitlin knew fellow countryman and film composer Dimitri Tiomkin. Zeitlin’s emergence as a major contributor to the music at the Capitol Theatre coincides with cellist Yasha Bunchuck’s promotion to conductor of the Capitol Grand Orchestra. The two were Russian and Yiddish speakers and likely friends. The small subsection on the programming of *Palestina* notes

the Jewish-themed work coincided with the Jewish High Holy Days and was heard by at least ten million listeners on the radio broadcast. The critical reception overview provides evidence of the successful reviews *Palestina* garnered and the critics' description of the score as "unusual" and "exotic." The overture received a reprise performance in the spring of 1930 in conjunction with Passover. The authors confidently proved that Zeitlin was the sole composer of *Palestina*. Contemporary critics stated that conductor Bunchuck compiled and/or orchestrated the dramatic overture while bestowing additional arranging credits to Zeitlin. The authors' thorough investigation of both their musical skills and education demonstrate the unlikelihood of Bunchuck contributing to *Palestina* and his name being attached to the score merely to "enhance his reputation" (p. x). Sadly, Zeitlin died of encephalitis lethargica (sleeping sickness) less than a year after the premiere of *Palestina*. It seems doubtful that the work received any performances since his passing. In the aftermath of Zeitlin's demise, his wife, Esther, approached Capitol with a request to publish her husband's music. This never materialized but she did receive his manuscripts from the theater. In 1932, Kalmus published Zeitlin's most famous work, *Eli Zion* for violoncello and piano.

In the section entitled "*Palestina* as Jewish Art Music" Baker and Nelson consider the influence of the Society for Jewish Folk Music on Zeitlin. The society promoted nationalist Jewish music based on cantillation, liturgy, and folk song. The authors demonstrate that *Palestina* contains complete Jewish tunes and two Jewish musical signifiers: 1) interval of the augmented second; 2) imitation of the *shofar* (the Jewish ram's horn sounded often during the High Holy Days). In the "Thematic and Motivic Sources" section, the authors note the songs "Oy, Abram" and "Shoshanas Yakov" have some similarities to Zeitlin's original themes. Their analysis leads me to agree that this is only coincidental. However, Hirsh Shmulovich Kopyt's *Freulichs*, with its famous Yiddish folksong "Khanike, oy khanike," is appropriated in section two of the overture. Section three uses the wedding dance song "Gute nakht" from Joseph Chernaivsky's "Die yiddisher träern." Section four includes an unpublished work, *Scene Hebraique und Chsdischer tants* composed by Zeitlin and Kalman Cheifetz. The authors provide a detailed and coherent analysis of the micro and macro structure of the overture, including harmonic analysis, Jewish modes, and motivic and formal analysis.

After the introduction, a set of plates show two pictures of Zeitlin: one at the piano with a photograph

of Glazunov hovering above him and another with his Capitol Theatre colleagues. Following the pictures, four facsimile pages of Zeitlin's original manuscript of *Palestina* share a glimpse of the composer's pencil score. The 308-measure score is beautifully engraved and carefully edited. The edition concludes with a "Critical Report" that explains the original source manuscript and the commercial nature of the score. The volume is 17 inches in height and 11 inches in width allowing this to serve as an easily readable conductor's score. Baker and Nelson made reasonable editorial decisions (without taking creative liberties) to conform the score with modern practices, including translating Italian musical terms into English, setting all tempi assumptions into brackets, placing the instruments in modern standard orchestral order, and an unplayable organ pedal note written in three registers is fixed by substituting it with three stops. These practical decisions are made with the obvious intention of wanting this score performed. The edition concludes with "Critical Notes," which detail all discrepancies between their edition and the original handwritten manuscript.

The only minor fault in this fine edition is the omission of the film and stage play that followed *Palestina*. However, the reader may consult Baker and Nelson's *Leo Zeitlin: Chamber Music* to discover that the film *Speedway* (1929) was screened after the overture. As early as 1925, conductor and silent film music compiler Erno Rapée wrote about the usefulness of matching overtures to the forthcoming film, stating, "The Overture and its selection depends largely upon the general lay-out of the program. If, you have a Spanish picture and you are building a Spanish prologue and you happen to have a Spanish scenic it is obviously desirable to choose a Spanish Overture to keep the program in the same vein throughout."<sup>2</sup> Rapée also encouraged the use of overtures that contain "Christmas Carols, or Easter Chimes" to mark those holidays. It is possible that Capitol followed Rapée's suggestion of relating overtures to holidays but not the topical relationship to the film it preceded. As Baker and Nelson relate, *Palestina* was programmed to call attention to the Jewish High Holidays.

*Palestina* is the work of a master orchestrator. From the mournful ascending harmonic minor opening, to the evocative French horns imitating the calls of the *shofar*, to the dramatic *fortississimo* tutti chords that conclude the work, we hear the sound of the Society of Jewish Folk Music joined with the

<sup>2</sup> Erno Rapée, *Encyclopedia of Music for Pictures* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 8.

theatricality of a veteran arranger of a New York movie palace. Leo Zeitlin's name is mainly forgotten even among film music scholars. He died before many of his colleagues travelled west to Hollywood. Pro Musica Hebraica, an organization dedicated to bringing neglected Jewish composers' music back to the concert hall, has organized two concerts featuring Zeitlin's music. In 2008 Itzhak Perlman performed *Eli Zion* and in 2009 The Biava Quartet with Rachel Calloway, Konstantin Soukhovetski, and Alexander Tall performed Zeitlin's Yiddish art songs. This edition represents the continuing rebirth of Zeitlin's music through the loving hands of Paula Eisenstein Baker and Robert S. Nelson whose enthusiasm for Zeitlin is infectious. Even more, it represents a noteworthy advance in our discipline

by bridging the gap of theater music and film scores. The authors' previous collection of Zeitlin's chamber music has appreciably expanded the Jewish musical repertoire and one must hope orchestras will similarly take up performances of this evocative dramatic overture.

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