



## Report of Coz 26: Tuesday 22 December 2020 Michael Shapiro with Elliott Forrest

	<p><b>COZ 26: Tuesday 22 December 2020</b> 'Composer in focus'</p> <p><b>Michael Shapiro</b> composer/conductor <a href="https://michaelshapiro.com/">https://michaelshapiro.com/</a> In dialogue with <b>Elliott Forrest</b> Peabody Award winning Broadcaster/Producer/Director <a href="http://www.ElliottForrest.com">www.ElliottForrest.com</a> <b>The influence of Jewish heritage on Michael's music, his Klezmer father, choice of subjects, Tikkun Olam etc</b></p>	
Michael Shapiro		Elliott Forrest

This session can be heard here: [IFJMS YouTube channel, COZ Playlist](#)

Video link

<https://youtu.be/C7rRIQI-v00>

### Michael Shapiro in discussion with Elliott Forest Influences from my Jewish heritage

#### COZ 26: Report by Malcolm Singer

22.XII.2020

I first met **Michael Jeffrey Shapiro** in Siena in 1974. I was 21 years old - he was a couple of years older than me. I spent the summers of 1973 and 1974 studying at the Academia Chigiana and made many good friends in those magical days, several of whom have remained friends and colleagues for life. Michael is one of them. We were both young Jewish composers, and we shared the initials MJS. I was brought up in London, he in New York. Soon afterwards our Italian meeting, Michael worked as a répétiteur at the Opera Studio of the Zurich Opera, and I visited, staying with him for a few days, and seeing my first 'live' performance of Don Giovanni. Michael and I have kept in touch down the years. When Malcolm Miller interviewed me at one of the early COZ lectures on July 21st 2020, I invited Michael Shapiro to attend online. As a result of that occasion, Michael connected with the COZ community, and he featured at his own COZ event on December 22nd 2020, being interviewed by his friend and colleague Elliott Forrest - radio presenter at WQXR and freelance producer.

Elliott chatted with Michael about his early life, growing up in a bilingual Brooklyn household - English for the children and Yiddish for the parents and grandparents, which the children were not supposed to understand, but, of course, soon did.

#### We listened to:

**Eliahu Hanavi Variations** for Cello (1994)

**Peace Variations** for violin (2005)

**Second Symphony** (2015)

**Archangel Concerto for Piano and Orchestra** (2018)

Other works discussed:-

**Voices** for soprano, SATB chorus, and chamber ensemble (2019)

**At the Shore of the Sea - Concerto for Violin and Orchestra** (2020)

**The Slave** – work in progress

With respect to the **Eliahu Hanavi Variations** for solo cello, we were able to watch a video discussion that Michael had given to Neil Levin for the Milken Archive back in 1998. In the interview Michael explained the piece was performed in Berlin at a Holocaust Conference in a concert organised by Gottfried Wagner.

The **Peace Variations** (based on 'Shalom Aleichem') were written a decade later for the great virtuoso violinist Tim Fain. Michael described to us how he had worked with the violinist, seeking the instrumentalist's advice and guidance when writing the piece. We then listened to the theme and the virtuosic 17th variation - Paganini-like with double-stopping and exciting runs up and down the fingerboard.

Next, we moved forward another decade to the **Second Symphony**. Michael told us the scherzo movement was a tribute to his father - a Klezmer clarinetist. Through his father's influence, Michael was introduced to both Klezmer and Jazz at an early age, and these influences can be heard in much of his music. This work is in four movements, doffing its cap to orchestral music of Mahler and Shostakovich, perhaps, although Malcolm Miller and others can sense the influence of Sibelius in this music. Michael acknowledged that unconsciously some of these influences may be present, but we all agreed that this thrilling movement, inspired by Chassidic dance, had its own individual musical language that belonged distinctly to Michael Shapiro alone!

Elliott Forrest went on to ask Michael about the **Archangel Concerto for Piano and Orchestra**. Michael explained that this was inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost* - from passages from dealing with Good and Evil. We heard excerpts from Book One and Book Two. We learned that the calm, slow chords over a low pedal that open the second section that we heard, represent the Garden of Eden. Michael spoke about the concept of 'Tikkun Olam' - the concept in Judaism of 'repairing the world' - and how it influenced not just this work but much, if not all, of his music.

Michael then discussed Jewish themes in the recent works; the use of a Yom Kippur melody in the middle movement of his **Violin Concerto - At the Shore of the Sea**, and the use of Sephardic poems in **Voices**, which is scored for soprano, SATB and 10 players. The melodies of both 'Ani Maamin' and 'Avenu Malchenu' are quoted in this work.

The session ended with the discussion of a work in progress - an opera based on Issac Bashevis Singer's novel **The Slave**. Michael told us how he, as a young composer, had first read *The Slave* in 1971 and had actually reached out to the great writer himself to try to get the rights to the work. It is only now more than 40 years later, that Michael, as a mature composer, has felt ready to return to this story, acquire the rights, and start writing the opera. Michael's own family, on his father's side, lived in the same place as Singer's family, so Michael feels particularly closely connected the world that Singer conjures up in his stories.

Yaacov Fisher who met Michael through these very COZ events, is looking forward to his organization Spectacular World of Jewish Music and the Jerusalem Opera (with the Jerusalem Symphony in the pit) putting on the consortium première of *The Slave* in Jerusalem in 2022 or 2023 - a wonderfully exciting prospect! It was great to finish the session on such an uplifting and hopeful note.

**Report by Malcolm Singer - December 2020**

**MICHAEL SHAPIRO LINKS:**

**Website:** <https://michaelshapiro.com/>

## **Milken Archive video:**

<https://www.milkenarchive.org/videos/category/oral-histories/michael-shapiro-variations-on-elياهو-hanavi/>

## **Peace Variations:**

### **Theme**

<https://open.spotify.com/track/4LyxuKcdve8rJ6GOonXJtA>

### **Variation 17-**

<https://open.spotify.com/track/13C1nSXVbqkiTMqCUTwjRe>

## **Second Symphony, Third Movement:**

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2zyWeJfI0GsmDrBAUCJk6F>

## **Archangel:**

### **Book One-**

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6zZAJY1XTV7cZb943lv11K>

### **Book Two-**

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0Dgtk0GKo6H47Waldv4jqa>

## **short bios**

**The Slave** – Video trailer here <https://vimeo.com/495061954>

# THE SLAVE

## An Opera in Two Acts

Based on the book *The Slave* by Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer  
Adapted by arrangement with the Isaac Bashevis Singer Literary Trust

Music by Michael  
Shapiro Libretto  
by Hannah  
McDermott



## SYNOPSIS

### Prologue

In 1648, during a time of plague, pestilence, and the denial of human rights, the citizens of the Jewish village of Josefov are massacred by Cossacks. During the chaos, Jacob, a young scholar, is manacled and led away.

### Act One – Wanda

Four years have passed. Jacob is now the slave of Jan Bzik, a tavern owner in the Polish village of Zagayek. Jacob, waking up in the mountainside barn where he resides, meditates on the loss of his old life. Wanda, Jan Bzik's daughter, enters. The affection between Wanda and Jacob is palpable. After she leaves, Jacob agonizes over his attraction to Wanda, a gentile.

In Jan Bzik's tavern, the villagers gossip. Stefan, the bailiff, tells Jan Bzik that Jacob has brought bad luck to the community. Bzik dismisses Stefan's concerns. When Wanda arrives, Stefan attempts to flirt with her but Wanda rejects him. Wanda's mother, Anieszka, scolds her for preferring their Jewish slave Jacob to Stefan.

Jacob is startled by Wanda entering the barn. When a storm begins, Wanda tells Jacob that the weather is too bad for her to return home. They prepare to sleep. While lying next to each other, they kiss. Jacob tells Wanda that she must bathe in the stream before they go any further. She does so, then reenters the barn. The two embrace.



As Zagayek celebrates the harvest, Wanda and Jacob help harvest the grain. The peasants make fun of Jacob for being a Jew. When Stefan arrives, he notices Wanda's attention to Jacob. He jealously taunts Jacob and encourages the rest of the men to do the same. Anieszka enters and tells Wanda that her father has died and that she is needed immediately, ordering Jacob to stay. With Wanda gone, Stefan's comments grow increasingly vicious. Suddenly, Jewish men enter with the local priest. They explain that they have come from Josefov to ransom Jacob and take him home.

After a month of travel, Jacob and the men from Josefov are finally approaching home. They tell Jacob that Josefov was destroyed by the Cossacks and that his wife was killed. After falling asleep for the night, Jacob awakens dreaming of Wanda. He is torn between his love for her and his duty to his faith and the community of Josefov.

Jacob has made the long journey back to the barn and finds Wanda sleeping. He begs her to run away with him. When she accuses him of abandoning her, Jacob insists that he loves her. Wanda consents to go with him.

### Act Two – Sarah

Jacob and Wanda, who now goes by the Jewish name of Sarah, are introduced to the community of Pilitz by the village Rabbi. Jacob explains to the Rabbi that his wife is mute. The Rabbi appoints Jacob to teach at the *cheder*, or religious school. They encounter Gershon, the manager of Count Pilitzky's estate and de facto leader of the community, and his wife, Beile Pesche, who are both cold to Jacob and Sarah.

In their new home, Jacob reads to Sarah from Isaiah. Sarah and Jacob discuss the need for Sarah to continue to pretend to be a mute while she is learning Yiddish. If it is discovered that Sarah is a gentile, then they will both be sentenced to death under Polish law. Sarah

tells Jacob that she is pregnant.

The Jews of Pilitz are gathered in the synagogue for Yom Kippur morning services. Count Pilitzky storms in, demanding to see Gershon, whom he wants to kill for selling a bull. When Jacob intercedes, Pilitzky redirects his anger towards Jacob. Sarah rushes forward and begs, in Polish, for Pilitzky to spare Jacob. The community, stunned, explains to Pilitzky that Sarah is mute, so this must be a miracle. Pilitzky decides to spare both Jacob and Gershon. He fires Gershon and hires Jacob to manage his estate.



Pilitzky has called Jacob to his manor. After a theological debate, Pilitzky excuses himself but says that his wife has a few questions for Jacob. It

becomes clear that Lady Pilitzky knows that Sarah is not mute. She warns him that women cannot help what they say when they go into labor. She gives him his wages for the week and intimates that it is enough money to travel far.

When Jacob returns home, he finds two pilgrims who have heard about the “miracle” and wish to be blessed by Sarah. Sarah begins to feel labor pains. Jacob urges the pilgrims to ask for the Midwife. The Midwife and some local women arrive. Sarah begins to scream and talk. In response the women go to get the Rabbi. The baby is born but Sarah is weak. Gershon and the Rabbi enter and question Jacob. Defeated, Jacob reveals Sarah’s true identity. Gershon says the Rabbi will excommunicate Jacob. The Midwife tells Jacob that Sarah is dead and that he needs to leave with the baby before he is killed. Jacob takes the baby and escapes.

### Epilogue

After living in the Holy Land for twenty years, Jacob returns to the cemetery in Pilitz. Talking with the groundskeeper of the cemetery, he is able to find the approximate location of Sarah’s grave. Jacob, weak from illness and traveling, lies down. Sarah’s spirit appears and tells Jacob that he will never have to leave her again.



Author ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER wrote his great novel *The Slave* in 1962. Singer was a Jewish Polish-American writer who wrote in Yiddish. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978. His over five dozen short stories are published by the Library of America, and many of his novels have been made into stage plays and motion pictures, including *Enemies: A Love Story*, *The Magician of Lublin* and *Yentl*. He is widely considered one of the great writers of the twentieth century, whose works combine witchcraft, mystery, and legend with a modern sensibility and ironic consciousness.

Although written in a relatively simple style, his tales are often complex, based on the belief that story (like melody) is the prime vehicle for revealing the inner being of his characters and the unusual places they find themselves.

<https://www.bashevissinger.com>



Composer MICHAEL SHAPIRO's works have been performed throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe with broadcasts of premieres on NPR, BBC, CBC, the Israel Broadcasting Authority, Sender Freies Berlin, SiriusXM Symphony Hall Living American, and over 50 international public and commercial radio stations. His music, which spans across all media, has been characterized in a *New York Times* review as "possessing a rare melodic gift." His oeuvre includes more than 100 works for solo voice, piano, chamber ensembles, chorus, orchestra, band, as well as opera, film, and television, with recordings on Naxos and Paumanok Records. His grandmother, Annie (Chaya) Shapiro, was born in Bilgoraj, Poland, where her family's rabbi was Isaac Bashevis Singer's grandfather.  
<https://michaelshapiro.com>



Librettist HANNAH MCDERMOTT is currently a Dramaturg Associate with American Lyric Theater, an organization committed to the development of new operatic works. As a librettist, McDermott recently completed two one-act operas for Opera Lab at The Juilliard School—a program she assisted in launching. She received a Master of Philosophy with distinction from the University of Oxford as well as a Bachelor of Music from the Juilliard School with a focus in vocal performance. Some of her favorite projects while at Juilliard included participating in The New York Festival of Song and playing Miss Pinkerton in *The Old Maid and the Thief*. She continued to perform at Oxford, soloing with the Oxford University Philharmonic and portraying the role of Eurydice in Harrison Birtwistle's *The Corridor*. Hannah has composed program notes for Santa Fe Opera, Opera Saratoga, and Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

#### CAST LIST

Jacob - Baritone  
Wanda/Sarah - Mezzo  
Soprano  
Jan Bzik/Gershon - Bass  
Mother/Beila Pesche -  
Contralto Stefan/Pilitzky -  
Tenor  
Dziobak/Rabbi - Bass-  
Baritone Peasant  
Girl/Midwife - Soprano  
Moishe Zakolkower, Rescuer, Peasants/Jewish Villagers - SATB

ORCHESTRATION 1,1,1,1-1,1,1, Electronic keyboard, Timpani, Percussion  
(1) Strings 3,3,2,2,2

#### VIDEO SAMPLE

Megan Moore, as Wanda, and Gregory Feldmann, as Jacob, with Steven Beck (New York Philharmonic), piano

<https://vimeo.com/495061954>