

Presentation on **Elie Siegmeister**

by Leonard J. Lehrman (submission for publication by Bulletin of the Society for American Music)
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[**Entering, one heard “Must There Be A Reason” from *The Mermaid in Lock No. 7*, recorded on Capstone CPS 8667, band #12, *Helene Williams Sings More Songs of Love.***]

Introduction by **Alan Karass**, Chair: Dr. Leonard Lehrman, formerly Assistant Professor of Music at SUNY-Geneseo, Assistant Conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, and Founder of the Jewish Music Theater of Berlin, is Director of Music and Composer-in-Residence at St. George's Church (Hempstead NY), Reference Librarian at Oyster Bay-East Norwich Public Library, Founder and Director of the Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus and the Long Island Composers Archive, and Co-Founder of the Elie Siegmeister Society. The composer of 180 works to date, including 10 operas and 6 musicals, at previous MLA conventions he has made presentations for the Jewish Music Roundtable (twice), the Bibliography Roundtable, and the Composers/Performers Roundtable, and led the Chicken Singers in his "MLA Battle Cry." He was also a featured presenter at the 1995 Sonneck Society Convention on Marc Blitzstein. In 2005 he and Elizabeth Kirkpatrick Vrenios presented a Marc Blitzstein Centennial Cabaret at the National Opera Association convention in NYC, and hope to do something similar for the Elie Siegmeister Centennial in 2009.

Leonard Lehrman: Radio host Robert Sherman called Elie Siegmeister “one of our giants.” His music was premiered by Stokowski, Mitropolous, Toscanini, Maazel, William Warfield... in New York, Minnesota, Ohio, Nebraska, Maryland, Virginia, Louisiana, France, Germany, Belgium—and Pittsburgh. A vital creative spirit as composer, pianist, conductor, author, and teacher, he was born in Harlem—though he grew up in Brooklyn—on January 15, 1909, 9 years after Aaron Copland, 9 years before Leonard Bernstein; he died just months after the two of them, 16 years ago this month, at age 82.

His teachers included Seth Bingham at Columbia, Albert Stoessel at Juilliard, Wallingford Riegger (from whom he learned about prosody in setting texts) and Nadia Boulanger, against whom he revolted after 4 years, but with whom he made his peace later in life, and to whom he sent some of his own students (including myself) to study counterpoint.

He first introduced fellow Boulanger student Marc Blitzstein (whose 102nd birthday is today) to proletarian music and the Composers Collective of New York in the 1930s. In the 1940s he led, toured and recorded with the American Ballad Singers, published *A Treasury of American Song* and *The Music-Lovers' Handbook*, and arranged and conducted the Broadway show *Sing Out, Sweet Land!* starring Alfred Drake and Burl Ives.

In the 1950s he began teaching at Hofstra University, where he founded and conducted the Hofstra Symphony, and collaborated with Langston Hughes, Norman Rosten, Lewis Allan (the pseudonym for Abel Meeropol [see his 2003 Centennial Concert CD on Original Cast Records]), and Edward Mabley in works like *The Wizard of Altoona*, *Darling Corie*, *For My Daughters*, and *The Mermaid in Lock No. 7*.

In the 1960s he wrote the textbook *Melody and Harmony* (on which I worked as a proofreader) and arrangements for *The Joan Baez Songbook*, and composed the cantatas *I Have A Dream* and *The Face of War*, the latter climaxing a May 1968 Composers for Peace concert he organized at Carnegie Hall. Following three bicentennial commissions in the 1970s and a Guggenheim in 1979, in the 1980s the 92nd St. Y commissioned his operas after Bernard Malamud: *Angel Levine* and *The Lady of the Lake*. Portions of *Lady of the Lake* have just been released on CD by the Milken Archive on Naxos.

Siegmeister's works, listed in the catalog I put together and Carl Fischer printed up for distribution at this conference, include 20 for the stage, 41 for orchestra (among them 9 symphonies and 5 concertos), 14 for band, 38 choral, 34 chamber, 40 for piano, 159 songs, one Hollywood film, and hundreds of folk song and other vocal and/or piano arrangements. Also printed up and distributed were an orchestral works brochure, an alphabetical

index of alternate titles, and indexes of co-creators of texts used in Siegmeister works and of music arranged by Siegmeister.

Siegmeister's own students included Herbert Deutsch, Tom Cipullo, Joseph Pehrson, Gerald Humel, Sy Brandon, Ronald Caltabiano, Stephen Lawrence, Roger Nierenberg, Richard White, Barry Drogin, Pulitzer Prize winner Stephen Albert, Carl Fischer CEO Lauren Keiser, Theodore Presser Vice-President Daniel Dorff, NYU musicologist Michael Beckerman, and myself. On his deathbed he said to me: "I don't want to call you my 'disciple,' as I don't believe in doctrine, but you're my 'continuator.'" Having encouraged me to study, and to complete, numerous works left unfinished by Marc Blitzstein, he told me wistfully and somewhat laconically: "I know that when I die, if I leave anything unfinished, you'll finish it!"

In Blitzstein's case, Leonard Bernstein had promised to try to complete his friend's work—esp. the nearly complete one-act opera *Idiots First* and the very incomplete three-act opera *Sacco and Vanzetti*, but gave up after a few months. Blitzstein's sister, seeking someone to finish it, then asked David Diamond, William Bolcom, and finally Elie Siegmeister, who recommended me. Twenty completions and thirty-five years later, my Praeger bio-bibliography of Marc Blitzstein appeared in time for his centennial in 2005. (See also his 2005 Centennial Concert CD on Original Cast Records.)

Kenneth Boulton and I have a contract with Scarecrow Press to do a bio-bibliography of Siegmeister in time for his 2009 centennial. The most important article to appear on Elie to date is still Carol J. Oja's "Composer with a Conscience: Elie Siegmeister in Profile," in the Summer 1988 *American Music* v.6 no. 2 pp. 158-180, which inspired Elie, and me, to join the Sonneck Society. This past January, the Siegmeister archive at the Library of Congress (thanks largely to Betty Auman and Ray White [present in the audience today]) yielded a great many treasures, including Elie's earliest extant composition, a Fughetta in C from 1925 or '26, dedicated to "meine Freundin, H.M.," Hannah Mersel, who later became his wife. I'll play it now in what I believe is its first public performance....

And now, the Pennsylvania connections:

The Mermaid in Lock No. 7, which you heard an excerpt from earlier, is I believe the only opera commissioned in, taking place in, and premiered in Pittsburgh: at The Point, July 1, 1958. It was commissioned by the American Wind Symphony, the conductor of whom, Robert Boudreau, had planned to be with us today, but told me on the phone two days ago he had been delayed out of town. I understand that Elie insisted on conducting it himself, which he was known to do a number of times—the 1979 NY premiere of his opera after O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars*, was another instance of that. Soprano Elizabeth Kirkpatrick, who participated in that, and many Siegmeister premieres, could tell us about that. Unfortunately, though she was planning to be here, she called in sick with laryngitis this morning. She was going to sing a portion of the mermaid's first aria, which tells how she swam to Pittsburgh, searching for the US Navy frogman she had met at Land's End, a fellow named Jack, whom she calls "Bonny Jacky." (Land's End is actually near Cornwall, not Ireland... but... close enough I guess!) It includes the lines: "I came to a triangle: What did I see? The Monongahela and Allegheny!"

Outside of Pittsburgh, the work has been produced in Antwerp (in Flemish) in 1972, in Harlem with an all-black cast, and at Hofstra—both in 1976--and in 1989 at a naturist resort in southern France, around a swimming pool, where the mermaid's costume consisted of sea-shell earrings. Period. When Elie saw the photos you're about to see, some of which appeared in *Opera Monthly*, and one of which will appear in the bio-bibliography, he called it "the definitive production." (Scans of the slide show should be posted on the internet soon.)

There's a nude scene at the climactic end of *Lady of the Lake*, which Elie described to me as "very dramatic," where, as per the Malamud story, the heroine rips off her top to reveal a concentration camp number tattooed on her breast. That didn't happen at the premiere, though, as at the last minute the soprano refused to do so. There's also a nightclub strip scene in an unfinished and unproduced 1951 collaboration with Langston Hughes, the script and lead sheets for which were found at the Library of Congress five weeks ago. Commissioned by the American Opera Company of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Federation of Music Clubs with the sole

stipulation that it be set in Pennsylvania, it was originally called *Pennsylvania Stars*, then *The Princess of Altoona*, and finally *The Wizard of Altoona*. It's a kind of a cross between *Carousel* and *Carnival*, with shades of *Bus Stop, 110 in the Shade*, and a foreshadowing of the Wright & Forrest near-operetta musical *Kean*, for which Elie wrote the incidental music. *Kean* was a vehicle for Alfred Drake, and I'm convinced that *Wizard* would have been also, if only the right director had been found to help put it into shape. I'm going to share with you portions of two numbers from it: an ensemble number as workers at the carnival muse about various towns in Pennsylvania: "How D'you Reckon It'll Be"... and the love duet... (Similarity was noted, aurally, between the latter and the opening of "People Will Say We're in Love" as sung by Curly in *Oklahoma*, a role Alfred Drake had created.)

But I don't want you to get the idea that Elie wrote only lyrical and funny pieces. Here's the percussive opening of his first published composition, that appeared in Henry Cowell's New Music Editions in 1936, "Strange Funeral in Braddock." It begins and ends with the exhortation: "Listen!"... The piece was sung widely by Mordecai Bauman (who's celebrating his 95th birthday today) and choreographed by Anna Sokolow. In 1950, as McCarthy was spreading fear throughout the land, Leonard Bernstein suggested to Elie that this piece be performed again. Elie told me he turned pale, walked away, and did not speak with Bernstein again for years. In the early 1980s, they were both backstage at a concert and Bernstein called out: "Elie Siegmeister! Weren't you just a bit pink in the old days?" Elie retorted: "No more than you, Lenny." To which Bernstein responded: "O, I was red!"

And then there's the 1964 Piano Sonata #2, written for Elie's son-in-law Alan Mandel, which begins with a passage using plucked strings. In the absence of a grand piano, Elie once said one would have to "drill a hole" in the instrument. But we do, thanks to George Boziwick and Gordon Rowley, have a grand piano at our disposal today!... As you can hear, it begins violently and dissonantly, but quickly cadences in a simple A minor. Elie was not an atonalist. Nor was he a dodecaphonist. One of my fondest memories is playing doubles tennis with him in the 1960s, shortly after I had started using twelve-tone technique, without his approval. We were both at the net and I hit the ball past him. He cried out: "Help! I'm being beaten by a twelve-toner!"

Finally, Elizabeth was going to entertain us with two short songs: the delightful "Rain" from the Norman Rosten cycle *For My Daughters*, and a number Elie wrote with Langston Hughes while working on *The Wizard of Altoona*, which I think should be included in any presentation of music from that work: "Chalk Marks on the Sidewalk." But instead, we'll hear Helene Williams singing another Langston Hughes-Elie Siegmeister song from that show which does not appear in the script but was included in the Oct. 1951 audition, and was later to be incorporated into it. It's what I would call their most Talmudic work, "Yes, No, or Maybe" (Langston's great-grandfather was Jewish), and was included in concerts we gave in Israel last summer – which may have been the first performances of any Siegmeister works in Israel.

In the Q&A that followed, Howard Pollack asked about a reference in his *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* [p. 278] to a 1934 letter from Copland to Israel Citkowitz expressing regret that to Roger Sessions, Elie Siegmeister seemed to be "a symbol of Communism... whereupon all is lost there and then!" What did it mean?

Answer: It explained why, although Elie and Aaron were good friends, and Siegmeister programmed Sessions's "Aria of the Fishwife" from his opera *The Trial of Lucullus* (along with Copland and others) on his May 1968 Composers for Peace concert at Carnegie Hall, no work of Siegmeister's was ever programmed on the Copland-Sessions concerts. Politics was one of two main reasons that Siegmeister's music did not and still has not received the attention it deserves. (He had never been a member of the Communist Party, but was, like Marc Blitzstein, Mordecai Bauman, and Langston Hughes, and others, very active in groups like the Workers Music League – later American Music League – that the FBI considered Communist fronts.) The other may have been his not having been a member of what he, Jerome Moross and Bernard Herrmann referred to as "the Homintern" or homosexual network (as distinct from the Communist International or "Comintern").