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News

NEW CD INVITES LISTENERS INTO JEWISH CABARETS OF OLD EUROPE

Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano Celebrates Tantalizing Tunes of a Turbulent Era

World Premieres of Works by Weill, Milhaud, Wolpe, Others

Like the southern African-Americans who migrated to the big cities of the North, poor rural Jews of the early twentieth century trekked from the hinterlands and isolated villages of Central and Eastern Europe to seek a better life in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Imperial Vienna.

In both cases, the new arrivals made a lasting and far-reaching impact on the world's music.

An adventurous new release from Cedille Records, *Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano* (Cedille CDR 90000 065), revives the long-overlooked genres of Jewish cabaret, popular, and political songs from 1900 to 1945.

Performers are the (all-American) New Budapest Orpheum Society, featuring Chicago-area cantors Stewart Figa, baritone, and Deborah Bard, soprano; and mezzo-soprano Julia Bentley, a celebrated young classical singer especially noted for her interpretations of contemporary repertoire.

The program is a two-disc set, with an 80-page booklet, priced as a single CD. The first CD presents songs in their original languages; the second offers many of the same songs in English translations. Together, there are more than two hours of songs ranging from broadly comical jabs at Jewish cultural stereotypes to sultry romantic ballads and rousing political calls to arms, to heroic anthems and quiet celebrations of the emerging Jewish homeland in the Middle East.

Musically, the songs illustrate a rich range of styles, including tango, samba, traditional Jewish folk tunes, jazz, and late German Romanticism. In these songs one also hears the stirrings of modern musical theater and nightclub cabaret.

The program unfolds in four broad, roughly chronological themes. Songs arising from the Jewish urban migration poke fun at the nouveau riche, the privileged, and Jewish cultural stereotypes. The second group of songs includes sophisticated and poignant popular ballads of romantic love and longing, including two ultra-romantic entries by Friedrich Holländer (1896-1976), one written for Marlene Dietrich in the classic film, *The Blue Angel*.

A set of political songs by Hanns Eisler (1898-1962) on Bertholt Brecht texts deals with war, economic justice, and the rising tide of fascism. Another song mocks Hitler by alluding to the failure of an enemy from ancient Jewish history, Haman, the Persian antagonist of the Purim story.

The program concludes with songs in Hebrew celebrating Jewish pioneer life in pre-statehood Israel. These feature “postcard songs,” musical settings by prominent composers to contemporary poetry written by settlers in the Holy Land.

Among the many recorded premieres in this section are two songs each by Kurt Weill (1900-1950) and Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), and songs by Paul Dessau (1894-1979) and Stefan Wolpe (1902-1972).

Other widely known composers making appearances are Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), with some fully tonal, late Romantic settings for modernist poetry, Irving Berlin (1888-1989), and Aaron Copland (1900-1990).

Cantors Stewart Figa and Deborah Bard sing the more theatrical, vaudevillian, character-based pieces. Figa has performed in Yiddish Theater Productions in New York, where he worked with great artists of the Yiddish stage. He sang the classic Yiddish song “Rumania, Rumania” on the award-winning CBS-TV series *Brooklyn Bridge*. The Northwestern University theater graduate serves as cantor at West Suburban Temple Har Zion in River Forest, Ill.

A graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and Hebrew Union College’s School of Sacred Music, Ms. Bard has sung roles in professional theater in Chicago and New York. Her *Holiday Songs Kids Love to Sing* is a best-selling recording of Jewish music for children. She serves as cantor and music director at the historic K.A.M. Isaiah Israel Temple in Chicago’s Hyde Park neighborhood.

Ms. Bentley, who sings the more classically styled art songs on the program, has performed with every prominent contemporary music ensemble in Chicago. In May 2001, she sang at Carnegie Hall in Pierre Boulez’s *Marteau Sans Maître*, conducted by Boulez. The *New York Times* praised her “rich sound, deep expressivity, and an uncanny sense of pitch.”

The New Budapest Orpheum Society is a Chicago-based collective whose artistic director, Philip V. Bohlman, a distinguished University of Chicago ethnomusicologist, unearthed much of the repertoire on the CD. Professor Bohlman, who wrote the booklet notes, is the author of the recently released book, *World Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

As professor of music and Jewish studies at the university, Bohlman’s fieldwork has taken him to Jewish communities in central and eastern Europe. It was his research there and in Israel that yielded many of the songs heard on *Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano*.

Other ensemble members are University of Chicago-based, Russian-born arranger and pianist Ilya Levinson, a graduate of the Moscow State Conservatory, whose music has been recorded by the Maxwell Street Klezmer band on the Shanachie label; Bulgarian-born violinist Peter Blagoev, who, since emigrating to the U.S. in 1993, has performed as soloist with many orchestras in the Chicago area; bassist Stewart Miller, who toured with the Glen Miller Orchestra and has recorded with several high-profile Chicago jazz artists; percussionist Hank Tausend, who performs regularly with several

regional orchestras and with jazz and dance bands such as Airflow Deluxe and Woody Allen's Band in New York; and flutist Elizabeth Ko, a soloist at the 1997 National Flute Association convention and winner of the 1994 University of Chicago Concerto Competition.

Jon Steinhagen, who penned American lyrics for the songs from the Yiddish, German and German dialect, and Hebrew originals, has received two Joseph Jefferson Citations and three After Dark Awards for his musical theater work since 1995.

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE), dedicated to showcasing Chicago's most noteworthy classical artists, is an arm of the nonprofit Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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*Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano:
Jewish Cabaret, Popular, and Political Songs 1900-1945
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 065)*

New Budapest Orpheum Society
Stewart Figa, baritone
Julia Bentley, mezzo-soprano
Deborah Bard, soprano