

Eric Zeisl's "American" Period*

Malcolm S. Cole

"America can find in my work not her own image mirrored, but she can find there strong medicines against the ills of fate, which I have learnt to brew and which she may need one day."¹ In these words the Austrian-American composer Eric Zeisl (1905–59) graphically summarized the impact upon him of America as an adopted homeland. Although he felt that difference of environment should not be overrated in its effect on a mature composer, the trauma attendant with his immigration to America liberated memories of early childhood and caused him to write his best works.

Viennese by birth, heritage, and training, Zeisl absorbed the legacy of 19th- and early 20th-century Austro-German Romanticism. As a student at the Vienna State Academy of Music, he immediately displayed a talent for melody, orchestration, and dramatic expression. Counterpoint and the handling of large forms, on the other hand, required patient study. The primacy of song in Zeisl's formative years cannot be overemphasized, for it was in this genre that his style most rapidly and freely developed.² Not apparent in the songs are two other shaping forces: (1) the Slavic tinge that colors some instrumental endeavors (*Variations on a Slovakian Folksong*, 1933) and (2) Zeisl's early awareness of the Jewish plight. Memories of the stream of fugitive Polish Jews who poured into Vienna would find powerful expression in a host of American works.

Ironically, it was in Austria that Zeisl composed *Three African Songs* (ca. 1930), his sole work on specifically American motifs. Inspired by German translations of two poems by Langston Hughes and one by Frank Horne, he set them for STB solo, SATB chorus, and small orchestra.³ "Arabesque" (Horne) illustrates the danger of working from translations. Taking the verb "schaukeln" to mean "to rock," the composer humorously portrayed a little Irish girl playing with a Black baby boy under a tree in which a Black man rocks, as in a hammock. In fact, the man had been hanged, the victim of a lynch mob. Zdenko Kestranek, Zeisl's sometime librettist, tampered inexcusably with "Aunt Sue's Stories" (Hughes), changing Aunt Sue to Kyulila and shifting the location to Africa. The beautiful "Harlem Nightsong" (Hughes) transcended all such vicissitudes.

Forced by the spread of Nazism to flee from Austria just as he was becoming established, Zeisl spent 1938 in Paris, where he began composing the music for *Job* (based on the novel of Joseph Roth), a work that was to occupy him for the rest of his life and provide a wellspring for his American years.⁴ Emigrating to America in 1939, Zeisl settled temporarily in New York. Through radio broadcasts, his music won considerable acclaim.⁵

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Moving to Los Angeles, he spent two disillusioning years in the movie studios. He subsequently became an instructor of theory and composition, first at the Southern California School of Music, then at Los Angeles City College. Although Zeisl's adopted homeland was by no means invariably kind—problems of employment, performance outlets, and especially publication harassed him—he enjoyed good success with critics and audiences. Most important, a number of significant works were commissioned and performed. Composed during his twenty-one years in America, these twenty-two works earned for Zeisl a niche in our American musical heritage (see Appendix).

The principal characteristics of Zeisl's pre-1939 style may be summarized as follows:

1. Extramusical stimuli: the poem, the play or story, texts scriptural and liturgical, the art work. Even some of the early instrumental works contain themes with vocal associations.⁶
2. Melody: Zeisl's lines, vocal and instrumental, derive from the Austro-German Lied tradition.⁷ In shape and stressed pitches they reinforce the essentially major-minor orientation of the harmony.
3. Rhythm: the prevailing meter is common duple. Metric changes within a work are encountered occasionally. Choices of rhythm and tempo, including precisely indicated fluctuations, serve both to heighten dramatic expression and to articulate sections. Rhythmic patterns tend to function as ostinatos. The union of a supple, rhapsodic melody with a strict accompanimental figure is common. Cross rhythms are also found.
4. Harmony: the scale upon which almost any given composition is based is major or minor ("Armseelchen," an early song, is prophetically modal). Pedal points, step movement in the bass, and sequence provide a logical, simple foundation upon which Zeisl superimposes rich detail that clearly derives from post-Romantic chromatic harmony and voice-leading. Harmonic rhythm is slow. Polychords occur. Polytone and purely parallel progressions or chords built of fourths are rare, progressive tonality practically unknown.
5. Scoring: he tends to orchestrate in layers and clearly separates melodic and accompanimental functions.
6. Counterpoint: although he effectively employs contrapuntal devices (augmentation, inversion, diminution) from the outset, the early fugues tend to be somewhat stiff and vertically conceived.
7. Structure: compositions grow rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically from a germinal nucleus. Ostinato patterns unify within movements, cyclic themes between movements. Formally, songs, choral works, and small instrumental movements are cast most often in song form. To his larger compositions Zeisl either transfers song form or

adopts Baroque procedures (e.g., *Passacaglia-Fantasy*, 1933). The sonata-allegro and the rondo are not customarily employed. Absolute instrumental music is in fact practically nonexistent.

These, then, are the genres, the techniques, and the procedures that Zeisl brought to America. The fundamental structural techniques would not change (ostinatos, pedal points, step motion, germ themes, etc.); the sound would change dramatically, reflecting a deeper personal evolution which can best be surveyed first by noting what Zeisl abandoned in this country, then by dividing his American output into five general, and sometimes overlapping, categories.

He abruptly abandoned the comic opera, for which there was no demand in this country, and the Lied. At the same time he temporarily perpetuated his European style, as in the *Romantic Comedy Suite* (1939–40), essentially a reworking of excerpts from the Singspiel *Leonce und Lena* (1937; G. Büchner). This characterizes the first of the five “American” categories. Conceived entirely in America, Zeisl’s incidental music to Emil Ludwig’s comedy *The Return of Ulysses* (1943) differs in no way, whether in the poignance of the Ithaca theme, the lyricism of the love music, or the humor of the ballet music, from the music of an earlier time and a different place.

A second category, initiated in Paris, is Zeisl’s *Gebrauchsmusik*. The finest representative example, the *Pieces for Barbara* (1944), was actually not conceived as a pedagogical tool but rather as a gift for his daughter. The composer’s wife subsequently added the delightful programmatic titles. In their published arrangement, the thirteen pieces—the publisher suppressed four others because of their alleged difficulty—provide the young pianist with stimulating 20th-century material of increasing complexity, introducing him to a host of technical, dynamic, rhythmic, interpretive, stylistic, textural, and formal problems.

It is in the third category that Zeisl’s approach alters most radically. The impact of his displacement, combined with the plight of the European Jews, recalled memories of the Polish fugitives and reawakened a sense of his own Jewish heritage. The seminal work is *Job*, the story of a simple man. The sufferings and wandering of the Mendel Singer family and its redemption through the once sickly, crippled son Menuhim stirred Zeisl’s creativity. In Paris in 1939 he composed the overture, Menuhim’s Song, and the Cossack Dance for a staged version.⁸ By 1941 he had completed the music for Act I of an opera. Zeisl’s music flows continuously in a kind of *Sprechgesang*, with lyrical set pieces interspersed. The orchestra underlines the action with appropriate rhythms and tone colors, fills all transitional passages, and bears the burden of reiterating and transforming the song of the still almost inarticulate Menuhim. Act I establishes the tenor of Zeisl’s American output. Its germinal theme of the Wunderrabbi’s prophecy, i.e., Menuhim’s Song, recurs as a leitmotif in almost each subsequent composition. Its sound inaugurates a new compositional direction.

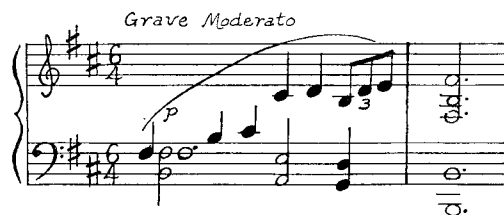
EXAMPLE 1: Menuhim's Song, mm. 10–12



Conceptually and technically, the *Requiem Ebraico* (Psalm 92, 1944–45), still Zeisl's most widely performed work, illustrates the thrust of this direction. In 1934, ironically, Zeisl had won the Austrian State Prize for a *Requiem Concertante*, using the Latin text and even retaining the characteristic French overture rhythm for the "Rex tremendae" section. In America, on the other hand, he wrote a specifically Jewish work, set to a scriptural text of praise and consolation, printed in Hebrew and English, and dedicated to "the memory of his father and of the other countless victims of the Jewish tragedy in Europe." For solo voices, mixed chorus, and organ (or orchestra), this work embodies new approaches to structure, melody, rhythm, tonality, and harmony.

Rather than setting the psalm verses as discrete, relatively independent movements, as he might once have done, Zeisl arranges them into units (1–2, 3–4, 5–7, 8, 9–11, 12–14, 15), builds almost each unit upon a transformation of the germinal theme (see Menuhim's Song) announced by the organ in m.1, and links these units with instrumental interludes.

EXAMPLE 2: *Requiem ebraico*, mm. 1–2



Conspicuous examples of transformation occur at the soprano-alto unit of verses 12–14, where he stretches the nine-measure announcement of the main theme in $\frac{9}{4}$ to seventeen measures of $\frac{4}{4}$, and at the concluding fuge, where the originally lyrical melodic arch has been sharpened rhythmically and compressed.

EXAMPLE 3: *Requiem ebraico*, mm. 246–49



Zeisl's melodies are at least modal, as in the gypsy minor construction of some lines in the fuge, and at times positively chantlike, as in the two

extensive baritone solos (verses 5–7, 9–11), which consist of recitation tones, ornamental inflections, and occasional florid, freely rhythmic melismas.

Zeisl sets the introductory chorus in $\frac{6}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{2}$ usurping in these years the place formerly held by common duple meter. The tempo indication Grave moderato, is likewise typical, Grave and Pesante tempos contributing to the mood of numerous compositions. Rhythmic patterns tend to be more pliant; frequent cross rhythms and meter changes contribute further to the rhythmic plasticity. New tonally and harmonically is the archaic liturgical flavor captured at the foreground level. Individual chord progressions are often modal (m.1, see Ex. 2), with open fifths, not infrequently in parallel motion, to enhance the effect. New also is the employment of progressive tonality, this work beginning in B minor and ending in its relative major. With increasing frequency, filler material progressing in steady quarters at the interval of the third or the sixth contributes animation to a slow-moving accompaniment (m.27).

EXAMPLE 4: *Requiem ebraico*, m. 27



Zeisl's contrapuntal techniques, present throughout the work, may best be seen in the concluding fugue, a model of the control he now possessed in this medium. After its presentation in an extended exposition, the subject is rarely absent, as an identifiable entity appearing in stretto, inversion, and, symbolically, augmentation (at the words, "To show that the Lord is upright"). At this climactic point Zeisl successfully combines the original form of the subject with its augmentation.

This category profoundly influenced categories four and five. To category four belong works conceived as reactions to phenomena fostered in the United States. The modal, chantlike *Prayer* (1945), Zeisl's only independent American work for solo voice, incorporates Biblical texts that express the composer's hope for the then new United Nations. Zeisl's realization of the atomic bomb's potential for destruction elicited the unperformed dramatic ballet *Uranium 235* (1945–46, his first since 1929), that places in juxtaposition a young couple and a mad scientist. A march of doom, Satan's dance, dynamo music, and nature music demonstrate Zeisl's pictorial powers. A concluding prayer recalls the specifically Jewish output of this time.

Conversely, the revival of the dramatic ballet suggested the possibility of utilizing this medium for vivid expressions of patience and faith in the face of persecution, ideas belonging to category three. The result was two Biblical ballets, *The Vineyard* (1953) and the more pastoral *Jacob and Rachel* (1954). Derived from the story of Naboth's vineyard (I Kings 21), the

former work includes majestic court music, exotic rites of Astarte, a bacchanal, and a stoning scene. In the concluding passacaglia and fugue, Zeisl not only exhibits absolute control of the Baroque procedure, but also turns it to dramatic use as the action proceeds to its inevitable denouement, the destruction of the King's palace.

The sharply increased production of independent, not overtly programatic instrumental music, category five, is signalled by an Organ Prelude (1944) that resembles the overture to *Job* and Menuhim's Song. In 1949 a significant cycle of multimovement solo and chamber pieces begins with the *Sonata Barocca*. The immediately ensuing Sonata for Violin and Piano ("Brandeis," 1949–50), which achieved wide recognition, perhaps best illustrates the forms and procedures typical of the cycle: three- (or four-) movement format, progressive tonality, cyclic relationships among movements and even among works. The first movement consists of a solemn, modal section that returns in ritornello fashion, framing components that approximate a sonata-allegro exposition and recapitulation. An expressive, chantlike line, at times rhapsodically melismatic, distinguishes the slow movement (Andante religioso [Hebraïque]). To this melody strict ostinato patterns are bound. The choice of modified song form suggests the derivation of these instrumental songs from vocal predecessors and counterparts. The thematic material of the finale, an extended rondo, embodies Eastern European folk elements: strongly accented dance rhythm, narrow range, repeated patterns, modal flavor, and popular cadence patterns.

EXAMPLE 5: "Brandeis" Sonata III, mm. 6–7



Frequent meter changes (even to $\frac{5}{8}$), which at times produce an additive effect, are characteristic. Notable in the remaining works of this cycle is the perpetuation of Baroque procedures in the finales of the *Sonata Barocca* and the Viola Sonata (Prelude and Fugue; Passacaglia and Fugue) and the Pesante-Fugue opening movement of the Second Quartet. The Cello Sonata includes an innovation in its slow movement. Instead of a chantlike line Zeisl, under the influence of the scholar Solomon Rosowsky, creates a melody from allegedly authentic Biblical cantillation formulas.⁹ Written toward the end of his life, an unpublished trio for flute, viola, and harp ("Arrowhead") is suggestive of a new direction in chamber composition, which is pessimistic in tone, spare in texture, and compact in form.

Zeisl's three principal orchestral works are: *Music for Christmas*, a set of variations on "O Little Town of Bethlehem" with a fugal finale in which the composer combines the "Adeste fidelis" subject with "O Little Town" and "Silent Night" in a contrapuntal tour de force; a piano concerto; and a

concerto grosso for cello and orchestra with a variation finale (Pesante maestoso, $\frac{3}{2}$) that fittingly caps Zeisl's orchestral endeavors: modality, rich—even sensuous—orchestration, a concentrated theme of flexible rhythm and narrow range, and at times polytonal accompaniment, and a powerful fugue that incorporates cyclic references from the first movement.

Following an involuntary hiatus of sixteen years, Zeisl returned to *Job* and brought to the composition of Act II increased expressivity and technical mastery. Switches of scene are more abrupt, the orchestral fabric is richer, the set pieces in turn more savage (Cossack chorus and dance), more tender (Deborah's lullaby), more sensuous (Miriam and the Cossack) than anything in Act I. Ensembles, which had been present in Act I, are more frequent and more assured, e.g., the complex one in Act II, Scene 2 that conveys the assorted moods of Miriam and her Cossack lover, Mendel standing before the synagogue, the chorus of the pious singing their evening hymn, and the Cossacks celebrating drunkenly in the inn. Appropriately climaxing Zeisl's years of struggle with counterpoint is the closing fugue of that scene, in which the entire cast combines variously to mock or to sympathize with Mendel's plight. The contrapuntal texture ceases dramatically at Mendel's decision to go to America. The coda ($\frac{3}{2}$), a stretto treatment of Menuhim's Song, symbolizes redemption while the chorus pronounces Mendel's fate, "Wandre Jud!"

With the completion of Act II Zeisl's career ended. He died in Los Angeles before composing Acts III and IV of *Job*, which would have been set in America. This unfinished and unperformed work, in which the composer's powers are so convincingly displayed, stands as a monument to the man who stated that his own immigration to America had deeply affected his works. In his exile Zeisl wrote, "I feel that I might never have written my best were it not for the great emotional strife of my uprooting" (see Note 1). Although he did not compose American music, Eric Zeisl may be said to have enriched America's musical heritage.

APPENDIX: ZEISL'S AMERICAN OUTPUT

Three African Songs, STB solo, SATB chorus, pft. or orch., ca. 1930.

Job, an opera (J. Roth; adapted by J. Kafka), 1939–58 [Act I, 1940–41; Act II, 1957–58].

Romantic Comedy Suite (five excerpts from *Leonce und Lena*), orch., 1939–40.

Return of Ulysses (incidental music to play by E. Ludwig), fl., vln., tpt., pft., celesta, 1943; suite for chamber orch., 1948.

Pieces for Barbara (13 pieces for piano for children, e.g., "Walking with Daddy"), 1944 (Vienna: Oesterreichischer Bundesverlag, 1949).

Prelude for Organ, 1944.

Requiem ebraico (Psalm 92), SATB soloists and chorus, org. or orch., 1944–45 (New York: Transcontinental, 1946).

Prayer for the United Nations (Biblical), soprano and organ, 1945 (New York: Mills, 1950).

Uranium 235 (ballet in two scenes by M. Dekobra), 1945–46.
To the Promised Land (three [four] movements for chamber orch.), 1948.
Four Songs for Wordless Chorus (Songs for the daughter of Jephtha, Judges 11:40), SA chorus, str., pft., tpt., timp., 1948 (New York: J. Fischer & Bro., 1949).
Sonata Barocca, piano, 1948–49 (Vienna: Doblinger, 1955).
 Sonata for Violin and Piano (“Brandeis”), 1949–50 (Vienna: Doblinger, 1955).
 Sonata for Viola and Piano, 1950 (Vienna: Doblinger, 1955).
Music for Christmas (variations and fugue for symph. orch.), 1950.
 Sonata for Violoncello and Piano, 1951 (Vienna: Doblinger, 1955).
 Concerto for Piano, 1951–52.
 “Be merciful unto me, O God!” (Psalm 52), tenor solo, TB chorus, chamber orch., 1952.
 Second String Quartet, ca. 1953 (Vienna: Doblinger, 1957).
The Vineyard (Biblical; ballet by B. Zemach), 1953.
Jacob and Rachel (Biblical; ballet by B. Zemach), 1954.
 Concerto Grosso for Cello and Orchestra, 1955–56.
 Trio [Suite] for Flute, Viola, and Harp (“Arrowhead”), 1956.

NOTES

¹ Albert Goldberg, “The Transplanted Composer, Pt. II,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 May 1950, sec. 4, p. 4.

² “The Published Songs of Eric Zeisl,” a manuscript by the present author, is in preparation.

³ *Afrika Singt*, ed. A. Nussbaum (Vienna: Speidel Verlag, 1929). Of the Hughes poems, “Aunt Sue’s Stories” first appeared in *The Crisis*, July 1921, p. 121, and “Harlem Nightsong” in *The Weary Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), p. 62. See Donald C. Dickinson, *A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes, 1902–1967* ([Hamden, Conn.]: Archon Books, 1967).

⁴ Joseph Roth, *Job, the Story of a Simple Man*, trans. D. Thompson (New York: The Viking Press, 1931); orig., *Hiob, Roman eines einfachen Mannes* (Berlin: G. Kiepenheuer, 1930).

⁵ For example, public demand forced NBC to broadcast the *Little Symphony* (1935, after pictures by Roswitha Bitterlich) three times in six weeks.

⁶ See Zeisl’s *Scherzo and Fugue for String Orchestra* (comp. 1933; Vienna: Universal, 1937); the theme of the trio (“Vergissmeinnicht”) and the fugue subject (“Der Weise”) are taken from songs.

⁷ To view most of these elements, see the cycle for soprano and piano, *Kinderlieder [Children’s Songs]* (Vienna: Capriccio Verlag, 1933); reprint, with English translation (Vienna: Doblinger, 1956).

⁸ *Menuhim’s Song* (New York: Mills Music, Inc., 1949) exists separately in a version for violin and piano.

⁹ Solomon Rosowsky, *The Cantillation of the Bible* (New York: The Reconstructionist Press, 1957).

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