

The Music Within the Words, Part 2
program note

This is the second in a series of pieces in which I have made use of some fascinating material that has come to me in the course of my work as a “Jewish” musician. Since 1995, I have been a member of a trio (called Nepon-Polesitsky-Hoffman) that presents concerts of music that draw from the various Jewish folk traditions. Not surprisingly, the power and freshness of those melodies began to infiltrate my other quite non-Jewish music, and what has emerged is a group of concert pieces--orchestral and chamber--that elaborate and reinterpret these wonderful songs. The title “The Music within the Words” refers to the musicality of the texts, as well as to the multifaceted world of Jewish life--past and present--that is evoked in a parallel manner by both the texts and the melodies.

The rather unusual instrumentation is a result of the exigencies of the first performances--it was written to be performed by my two brothers Toby and Gary, my sister Deborah and myself (viola, cello, harp and piano in that order). As a group (and also earlier with our parents) we had performed many concerts, but a piece in which we all could play together was lacking. It turned out to be a surprisingly rich medium, which includes both the warm sounds of the strings as well as the cooler shades of harp and piano.

This collection of six pieces draws equally from both the Sephardic (Mediterranean) and Ashkenazy (Central and Northern European) traditions. The first piece, Mi Pi El, is based on a Sephardic melody, the text of which describes a joyful, even ecstatic meditation on the gifts of God. I have changed the melody slightly, but have preserved its repetitive and exotic qualities. The second piece, Chichi Bunichi, is another Sephardic tune--a disarmingly simple and beautiful children’s counting song from Sarajevo. Here, I have tried to capture some of the middle-eastern percussive and melodic sounds. The third, Der Rebe Elimeylekh, is a rollicking Ashkenazy song about a rabbi who literally dances himself into a frenzy. In my version, I gave him lots of room to kick and twirl. After a short break comes Complas de Purim, another Sephardic song about the early spring holiday called Purim--in particular, descriptions of some of the preparations for the upcoming festivities. This is followed by a bittersweet Ashkenazy lullaby called Shlof mein Kind, in which a mother sings of her people’s troubles even while helping her child find sleep. The last piece, 7:40, another Ashkenazy piece, is actually a very famous Russian instrumental tune. Even though there is no text, there is a story: a group of klezmer musicians is playing a Jewish wedding and, even though the wedding party is over, the musicians are having so much fun that they keep going. Time passes, and they play and drink, drink and play. Eventually one of them looks at his watch and realizes that if they don’t immediately put their instruments away and run, they’ll miss the 7:40 train leaving the station in Kiev. They are so tired and drunk that they don’t exactly run at all...but somehow they reach the station only to see that the train is pulling away down the track. In my version, I decided not to hide the details of this story at all. In fact, if you listen carefully, you’ll even hear the train!

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