

Self-Portrait with Gebirtig  
program note

Self-Portrait with Gebirtig was written in early 1998 for my brother, cellist Gary Hoffman, who has performed it extensively. Its title refers to the fact that three of the principal melodies of the piece (one from each of the three movements) were originally composed by Mordecai Gebirtig, a modest but celebrated Jewish folk musician who lived in Krakow, Poland and died at the hands of the Nazis in 1942.

These three melodies are interwoven with original melodic material and presented in the context of a compact concerto for cello and chamber orchestra. There are many moments throughout the piece in which the sounds of a traditional klezmer band are alluded to. The overall character, however, is that of an elaboration, an expansion of these ideas well beyond what one might expect from an “authentic” presentation of Gebirtig’s melodies. And this is where the “self-portrait” aspect emerges: since I have been involved in various projects of performing Gebirtig’s music as part of the Alpert-Hoffman Trio (as pianist and arranger), I allowed Gebirtig’s melodies in this case to work their magic on my imagination--to help me dream about what a “klezmer cello concerto” might have been like.

For those who would like to know the specific references, the Gebirtig melodies I used are: “Ker Bezemel Ker” in the first movement, “Bay Gvirim” in the second, and “Azelche Zvej Goldene Zep” in the third. Other melodies you might hear--like the principal tune of the second movement, “Sabbath Queen” --I will have to take full responsibility for!

Self-Portrait with Gebirtig has been performed many times since its premiere in New York: notable venues include Paris, Washington, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It has been commercially recorded twice by Gary Hoffman: with the Berlin Radio Symphony and with the Kiev Chamber Orchestra. Another recording is available with Milan Hudnik, cellist and the Slovenian Radio Orchestra.

Joel Hoffman