

Gebirtig Speaks
program note

Gebirtig Speaks is one of those musical works that was created for a very specific performance. The motivations that drove its creation were essentially two: it served as one of a number of pieces in which I explored some of the ideas for my opera The Memory Game (a trial run of a couple of scenes in miniature, and without the singers), and it also was created as a vehicle for David Krakauer, in which his talents for improvising, playing “classical” clarinet and “klezmer” clarinet could all merge in a single work. It turned out that the accordionist (violinist in the original version) and the pianist were also called upon to improvise to a degree—again as a result of the specific personnel for this performance as well as the original performances.

The Memory Game is largely about the life of Mordechai Gebirtig, the celebrated Polish-Jewish folk poet and songwriter from the Krakow of the first half of the last century. As such, it incorporates several of Gebirtig’s songs, including one that found its way into this piece: ikh hob dikh lib—a sarcastic and unhappy love song. The other melodic material in Gebirtig Speaks is mine, although some of Gebirtig’s sound world is infused into my melodic approach as well. In this work, I have given the main role from the opera—Mordechai—to the clarinetist, whose assignment is to represent the many sides of this fascinating personality as spoken through the E-flat, B-flat, A and bass clarinets—thus the title.

Joel Hoffman