

Brave Old Mordechai  
Program Note

Brave Old Mordechai (2003) is the result of a marriage between my recent opera, The Memory Game and the wonderful New Jewish Music group, Brave Old World. The name “Mordechai” refers to Mordechai Gebirtig, the Polish-Jewish poet and songwriter who lived in Krakow and is the subject of the opera. Gebirtig composed many songs that have become favorites in the literature of Jewish folk music—pieces such as “Reyzele” and “S’Brent”. In the opera, I employed three special instruments (in addition to the rest of the orchestra) which point the music clearly in the direction of Jewish culture in the 1920s and 30s: the accordion, mandolin and cimbalom (“tsimbl” in Yiddish). This last instrument has special importance, as it is the musical representation of Mordechai. The other “special” instruments also give symbolic depth to the characters representing Mordechai’s family—his wife Bluma and his three daughters Shifra, Basha and Lola.

When offered the opportunity to compose a piece for Brave Old World with string orchestra, I soon realized that Michael Alpert could really become Mordechai, and that this piece could not only be a reworking of material in the opera—it could (through the extraordinary talents of the members of Brave Old World) find an even more direct expression of the unique qualities of this man and his fascinating cultural environment. Thus, Kurt Bjorling’s clarinet represents the various singing characters, Stuart Brotman’s tsimbl is the instrumental foil to Mordechai and Alan Bern’s accordion leads the overall musical direction of the orchestra.

So Brave Old Mordechai begins with a scene from Act II of the opera, in which the famous American-Jewish singer from the Yiddish theater world, Molly Picon, pays a visit to Mordechai and his family in 1922. Molly and her husband buy—for \$50 in cash—two songs from Mordechai, promising that they will be made famous in New York, and that Mordechai will become the new sensation of Second Avenue. What really happened is that Molly sang the songs all over the USA, and never once acknowledged their author as Mordechai Gebirtig. Even today, there are many, many people who know Gebirtig songs taught to them by their parents and grandparents, having no idea where they came from and knowing only that they are “Jewish folk songs”.

The last part of Brave Old Mordechai focuses on a poem, “Bleib Gesund Mir, Kroke” (Farewell, my Krakow) in which Gebirtig speaks lovingly and nostalgically of the only place he ever lived in (he was murdered there in 1942). This is one of the dozens of songs for which the lyrics have survived, but not the melody. So what you will hear is a sort of collaboration across space, time, language and culture between Mordechai and myself—a collaboration that symbolizes the meaning of The Memory Game for me. Incidentally, if you visit Krakow and go to the house where Mordechai lived, you will see a commemorative plaque in metal, with the words of “Bleib Gesund Mir, Kroke” written under an image of his face.

Finally, I would like to point out that the collaboration of composers also extends to Brave Old World: there are three moments during the piece in which I have opened up the music to improvisation by the group. Thus, each performance of Brave Old

Mordechai can never be the same as any other. And the line between music played from notes fixed on paper and played spontaneously by ear becomes impossible to find—a state of affairs that I am very fond of.

Joel Hoffman (2003)