

Interview with Joshua Horowitz

Tell us how this project got started, Josh.

Well, after we finished our last project the Klezmer Shul, we had a lot of material that was still on the cutting room floor that we wanted to use. Magen Solomon had approached us about doing a new project with the SF Choral Artists, and Cookie thought it would be a great idea to set superstitions to music, since she and her family had a wealth of these ruminating in their psyches. I couldn't imagine anything more impractical. I mean, you can set poems, prose, newspaper articles - anything that has words - to music, but a superstition, like avoiding going under a ladder, is very difficult to make musical. Also, Stu and I are not superstitious, although Cookie is. Nevertheless, with an attitude of derision and ridicule, I began researching Jewish superstitions, with a mind to make fun of them. I began by setting a few things that did have words, such as incantations, and various mystical names of God. But as the research progressed, it dawned on me that the most powerful superstitions converge upon one terrible event: the sickness and death of newborns. So in the course of composing the work, my own attitude changed almost 180 degrees, and I used this change of mind to help structure the work, which moves ambivalently between burlesque comedy and tragic grief. I put myself in the mindset of a 10th Century Jew transplanted into the modern world, motivated by both medieval terror and modern cynicism.

Why did you choose to use a narrator?

I knew that I wanted to break down the "fourth wall" so that the audience could enter multiple dimensions. The narrator occasionally comments on the characters and their actions. When this happens the audience becomes aware of itself, and maybe by extension, its own superstitions and beliefs.

So how did you create the libretto?

I began by integrating references to Lilith that I found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bible, the Talmud, and some of the mystical works of Judaism. Then I also gathered Yiddish aphorisms and curses, and created the text around those, with smatterings of other quotes, such as one taken from a 16th Century madrigal comedy. In the course of researching the text, I came across many bizarre beliefs that are embedded in the Jewish canon of beliefs.

Such as?

Okay, the shaving of pubic hair required by women in Judaism. Apparently this comes from the belief that those very same pubic hairs could castrate men during intercourse. I didn't think that up. It's right there in the Bible and the Talmud. In fact it seems to be the source of Freud's castration anxiety theory; and the idea that demons are created from the nocturnal emissions of men in their sleep. Also not my idea. By today's standards that's weird stuff.

Then how did you integrate this into the libretto?

I used snippets of modern urban sex slang and wove it into the dialogue. Also, I took the traditional portion of the Ashkenazi Jewish wedding ceremony whereby the bride is instructed by the *badkhn* (master of ceremonies) and turned it into a duet between Lilith and Adam when they argue. That argument consists of Lilith refusing to lie beneath Adam, so it's sexual by its very nature. And the style of the duet has remarkable similarities to the secco recitatives of early opera. I've always marvelled at that connection.

Urban sex slang?

Yeah. Like, Lilith calls pubic hair her “rough ragman's coat” and there's a lot more, both Yiddish and English, but I won't give it away here, because it's much better sung.

So how many languages are in the libretto?

Four. English, Yiddish, real and fake Hebrew, and fake Latin.

Fake Latin and Hebrew?

Yeah, there are two places where I use bilingual puns, where you think you're hearing Hebrew or Latin, but if you listen closely it's really English. Mozart did that in a few vocal pieces to hilarious effect. So the libretto is really macaronic, but the audience won't have trouble understanding it, as there are supertitles and the context is clear.

Let's talk about the structure of the work. You mentioned that you took the structure from the Alphabet of Ben Sira.

Right, that work is based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet and there are also 22 sections of Lilith. There appears to be a structural connection of the Ben Sira work to the biblical Lamentations of Jeremiah, which feature four poems also written as acrostics, corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Then, in Lilith, I also composed an actual alphabet song when Adam names the beasts.

And there's a kaleidoscopic array of musical styles as well.

Yes, there are almost as many musical styles as there are movements, ranging from Croatian island music, to Bulgarian, Albanian, Moldovan, Hutzul music, etc. etc. Cookie and Stu contributed some wonderful compositions in and around these styles too.

Was that a random decision?

Sure, I guess it's as random as anything else (*laughs*). I think one of the reasons we used different styles, besides liking them, is that they give the feeling of foreboding in the context of the drama. Even though Jewish music itself has been informed by and shared with ethnic people who surrounded Jews in the diaspora communities, the use of various types of ethnic music in *Lilith* feels like there is impending danger. It really struck me, that anywhere from 20-40% of European childbirths prior to the 19th century ended fatally within a year. If you think about it, what protection would be possible against that kind of theological system error?

Talk a little bit about magic and how it's used in the work.

Okay, there are two things about magic that seem to prevail in Jewish thought: One is that demons can be fooled. You know how at a Jewish wedding when the glass is smashed and everyone yells “mazi tov”? Well, today we're instructed to remember the destruction of the Second Temple when we witness that, but the older interpretation is that the smashing of the glass is intended to ward off demons. See, if you have a happy event and something is broken, the demons are fooled into believing that the act of destruction is already taking place, therefore they don't need to attend. It seems so simple! I mean, all you have to do is break something, right? It doesn't take much to fool those guys. For instance, just draw a chalk circle around the birthing bed, and the demons won't cross it! The second idea of magic is that nothing is as it appears to be. The work itself fools you right away into thinking it is a

burlesque. And it is. But not only. Lurking below the surface is a serious admonition that whatever power is out there, there is no justification we can humanly find for the suffering and death of innocents. That may become clear toward the end of the work as the atmosphere morphs, but by that time, the audience has laughed enough that its left wide open for the emotional assault.

I'm interested in the extent of your use of magic in the composition and how that actual works on the listener.

Okay, the idea of the circle is very important. In several of the movements, I've created Möbius strips whereby the end of the section is actually also the beginning of the repeat, so it's difficult to tell where it ends and where it begins. There are also circular motives that permeate the work, sometimes giving the feeling of something ongoing or eternal or floating. The use of the Tetragrammaton is also prevalent throughout. There's lots of Gematria as well. Not to mention the actual incantations and mystical names that run through the work and are sung by the choir.

At one point I noticed, Adam auctions off Lilith as a sex slave to himself. Is that in the original story?

Okay, you caught me. That's the only thing that I put in myself. I'll tell you how that got started: My Canadian friend Tamara Bernstein sent me a recording of a livestock auctioneer's chant from Alberta. She said, "Isn't it unbelievable how close this sounds to Jewish davening?" That gave me the idea to poke at Jewish prayer a bit and so I created the soliloquy of Adam auctioning off Lilith to himself. Who else could he have auctioned her off to? He was the first man, so he's the only one who could buy her, or sell her for that matter. I've never quite understood how creationists could overlook the fact that, if we take the Bible literally, we're all the product of incest. I mean, if Cain and Abel were the first offspring, their progeny would have to have come from their own incestuous dealings with each other and the intervention of some male childbearing reproductive apparatus that was left out of the Bible's description of the event. Or... one of them would have to have procreated with their mother. Yikes! Anyway, since the story of Lilith itself is built upon a biblical anomaly, why not build upon that?

What anomaly are you talking about?

Oh, I forgot to mention that the mythology of Lilith was based on the fact that the Torah states first that God created man and woman on the sixth day. In Genesis, 1:27 we find the first mention of the creation of both man and woman:

So God created mankind in his own image in the image of God he created them.

From that passage it would be clear that the first man and woman already existed before the next mention of human creation in Chapter 2:19-22:

But for Adam, no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

So the author of the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* used that contradiction to posit the notion that Adam had a previous wife. It's alternative Midrash.

How about the artwork of Phil Blank. How did that get started?

Phil wrote to me many years ago as he is a fellow accordionist and cimbalom player in his North Carolina band, Gmish. Only years later did I discover his incredible artwork and asked him shyly if he would ever consider doing *Lilith*. He accepted right away, and began a long series of paintings, each one a masterpiece in and of itself. Somehow, Phil managed to lock into the atmosphere of the work with an incredible instinct for the combination of playfulness, absurdity, beauty and sadness that was in the music and text. There are secrets embedded in his paintings that you will only see if you look hard and meditate on them. In this way they're like the narratives of Renaissance paintings, but whimsical and hilarious too. Midway through the work, we both realized that we had something resembling a graphic novel on our hands, but because it was a libretto, Phil decided to coin a new artform, the "graphic noveletto." It became its own art piece, which is why we've printed them as zines and are offering them separately at the performances. The books are annotated too, with copious footnotes of rare cultural stuff.

Okay, let's talk about your collaboration with the performers, starting with Veretski Pass.

Well, Veretski Pass isn't a collaboration - it's more like a family of co-conspirators. Cookie and Stu have really helped to shape this work with their composing and arranging skills. Even though the choral parts were all composed by me, several of the instrumental interludes were composed by the both of them. Cookie has a wonderful sense of melodic line and comes up with combinations of motives that are always surprising, and Stu is an authority on a host of East European styles and has been responsible for not only composing, but bringing in some of those cool melodies for the instrumentals. Many of our ideas come about in rehearsal, too, through working with the material at hand.

So how are you using Klezmer and other East European music in this?

Unabashedly. Ever since Bartok, Stravinsky and Kodaly – the so-called Primitivists, the trend has been to "elevate" folk songs into the modernist realm – to reharmonize them, orchestrate them, obscure their tonality and rhythm, and basically to relieve them of their folk quality. Okay, we're doing some of that too, but our skill set as folk performers can come into play here too, as we're able to play some of the folk music without modification. In the context of the drama, this can sound oddly more modern than if we manipulated these all the time. When you listen to Bartok and you know the sources, sometimes you can't help but think, "why didn't he try to get the exact sounds like he heard them in the villages?" It's way more dissonant hearing a scordatura fiddle, 3-string viola and sheepskin drum than hearing an orchestral string section imitating it. These were the guys who thought folk music is better than it sounds. We take our primitivism seriously in *Lilith*!

Sounds like there are different styles at play here?

Okay, let me tell you the history of that. You know, I had the good fortune of being damaged by a strict patriarchal European music academy education [The Graz Academy of Music, where Josh later taught music theory in the 1990s]. I remember being graded down for two reasons by my drunkard of a composition teacher (may he rest in peace with a bagpipe loop piped into his grave, blaring at full blast). The first was for writing tonal music – you know, stuff that sounds nice. And the second was composing, using what Germans and Austrians love to call a *Stilbruch*, which means, a break in style. The idea is that you shouldn't mix different styles of music, for instance, Baroque and Impressionistic, or whatever. I remember saying to my teacher then, "so, like, Charles Ives doesn't count, or what?" I mean, it was just silly. So, here we are today in *Lilith*, with styles changing in every chapter and verse. Up with *Stilbruchs*! Down with...I dunno...whatever. We'll think of something.

What about the soloists, Michael Wex, Heather Klein, Anthony Russell?

Wex is a longtime friend and probably the world's most knowledgeable Yiddish expert. He performed the work with us at a preview in Canada and told us that he really wanted to do the premiere, which we were tickled about. It's scary to think about what he would have done had he written the libretto, because his stream-of-consciousness wit could have produced some irrevocable moments. We would choose Wex over James Earl Jones any day of the week. And Heather is also the perfect choice - beautiful voice, commanding stage presence, one of the *grande dame*'s of Yiddish and a wonderful person to work with. As far as Anthony goes, who could ask for more than a black Adam: a bass who sings Yiddish like a cross between Paul Robeson and Sidor Belarsky? Right?

Tell us about your work with the San Francisco Choral Artists.

This is our third collaboration with them, and we've loved every moment. Magen Solomon is a modern composer's dream. She's championed more than 180 new works and is wholly dedicated to putting unusual music on the stage, along with her agenda to ferret out Jewish choral works. And the singers in the choir are the funnest group you could imagine, not to mention their excellent musical qualities and openness to try new things. And, I don't know what I'd do without Tina Harrington, the assistant conductor, as she fixed so many things in the score and made my sometimes idealistic musical meanderings performable. Also, the administration of the Choral Artists, especially Natalie Churchill, have been a dream team. Beyond that, Laura Rosenberg has been a godsend with the supertitles, stage management and proof-reading, Andy Muchin and Peter Bonos from the Jewish Music Festival and Judy Kunofsky and Gil Rosoff from Klez California have been wonderful.

There's also a child in the work. Does that present problems because of the adult nature of it?

Right. At first I thought, "everybody's gonna think I'm a pervert, putting a child in an adult-themed program" but it's not like I dressed him up as an adult and snuck him in or anything. I mean, his parents are pretty open-minded. His mother, Sharon Bernstein is a wonderful cantor at a Sha'ar Zahav in the city, and his father, Francesco Spagnolo, is the curator of the music collection at the Magnus Museum. Francesco originally took me after hours to view the Lilith amulets there, so he's even partly responsible for the idea in the first place. Ariel is a super smart, fun, musical kid too, and he had lots of ideas about how to present himself on the stage. We've known him since he was a wee little kid (he's nine now). But in reality, not all the details of Lilith are within his sight line (yet).

How does your version of Lilith compare to the feminist one? I mean, is she still a feminist?

Well, she's still headstrong and refuses to subordinate herself to both Adam and God, so as far as those attributes are concerned, she's a feminist. But I don't think many feminists would want to retain the perverted child killer aspects of her character that are part of the original story. Also, in the later feminist version of Lilith, say from Judith Plaskow's 1972 article, "the coming of Lilith," she becomes friends with Eve and bonds with her in "sisterhood," stripped of all evil. But in our story, no one is spared their ignominious image - Adam, Lilith, the Angels - they all appear grotesque. In my mind, Lilith is the personification of the 11th attribute of God: cruelty. Remember the Kabbalistic concept of Sefirot that explains the multiplicity of God's manifestations in the world? Those attributes are crown, wisdom, understanding, kindness, strength, beauty, victory, awe, foundation and monarchy. But cruelty is the 11th attribute that's overlooked in that construct, in my opinion.

Has anyone been offended by your version of Lilith?

One could only hope! A scandal would be wonderful to promote the work. Seriously, though, I think some people are taken aback by some of the sexual concepts, and we had quite a few discussions among ourselves about what was appropriate and what was inappropriate. I learned that my threshold or lack thereof is not necessarily the threshold of others, so I think there is a director's cut lurking in the wings, as I did censor some of the text already. It's interesting, when we performed this at our preview in Canada, some Orthodox folks told us that this would be very difficult to perform in their circles, not because of the risqué language or concepts, which they loved, but because many people in those communities are very superstitious and run and hide at the mere mention of the name "Lilith."

Really?

Sure! In fact, there is an industry dedicated to the exploitation of the fears of pregnant women, and if you just look online, you'll find all kinds of amulets and prayer sales with promises of safety, good luck, wealth and fertility. Lots of money is being made on this. So I took some of these advertisements and molded them into the text of the Blay Gissn (lead pouring) songs at the beginning and end. Though in some performances we may not do the lead pouring enactment.

Explain the significance of Lead Pouring?

Well, I know it from my years living in Austria, when at New Year's, people would have fun by taking chunks of lead that they put in a spoon and hold over a candle, then when they melt, pour them into a bowl of cold water. The lead dries instantly into various shapes, which are then interpreted like a palm reader would. So, for instance, if it dries in the shape of a boat, the lead pourer would say, "it's a boat, you'll take a trip!" I thought this was just a Germanic custom, but as it turns out this is still done in Orthodox communities, and judging by the ads, it's not just a parlor game, but some people actually take it seriously. I'm telling you, music is the wrong business. There're riches out there ready to be lavished upon us if we could only prey on the insecurities of expectant mothers with a candle, a spoon and a bowl of water. Low overhead, high yield.

Are there other Lilith dramatic treatments that you studied before you wrote yours?

You know what's weird? I looked and looked, and although the name "Lilith" is used for various works and characters (like the 1964 movie about an insane woman, or the ex-wife of Frasier in the sitcom, Lilith Magazine, or the Lilith Fair concert series), there is oddly no drama or opera I could find. It's wide-open territory. Oh wait, yes there is. There is this bizarre occult rite written as a mini-play in the 1890s in France by Remy de Gourmont for the avant-garde Theatre de l'Oevre (Theater of the Eye), where there is some hilarious dialogue between Lilith and Satan, where Satan says something like, "I shall inhale your sex like a bunch of lilac," and Lilith responds, "I am hungry for your flesh, oh my he-goat." Gosh, I should have included some of those quotes, huh? I think that work was deemed the most unperformable play ever written.

Let's talk about improvisation. Veretski Pass is known for being seasoned improvisers, but how did you work that into the composition and does the choir have to work around you?

Okay, for us, when we're playing instrumentally, it's no problem to throw things around – we're used to doing that and every piece will have various amounts of improv, but asking 20-odd singers to improvise at the same time is a tall order. Still, we did it.

How exactly?

For instance, in the Prologue, they're given two 4-part harmonic structures, the notes of which are changed at will. The basic principle is that there is freedom and restraint at the same time. The freedom aspect is important to us, to ensure that each performance is different – I've always hated the fact that when you listen to, say, a Mozart symphony performance by Karajan or Karl Boehm, the differences between those performances are only in the realm of the subtler areas of expression, like dynamics, tempo, bowing of the strings, yawn, yawn, yawn! I want to hear a version where the violas take the main melody this time rather than the cellos, and what happens if we change that stagnant harmony at bar 64? That's what folk music does, but classical music never reached that level of humility. It's petrified into a vortex of stagnancy, and God forbid you should tamper with a flawed Beethoven overture. Okay, so we can build that change into the music itself without ruining its character. Another section in the piece has the choir hurling Yiddish curses, and they can choose whichever curse they want, change to another, etc, as long as they keep the pulse steady.

Were you just referring to Beethoven's Fidelio Overture, by the way, as flawed?

How did you know? That overture is the poster child of the law of diminishing returns. Beethoven rewrote it three times, and it just kept getting worse.

Could you do better?

I'm sure I could do better at making it worse than Beethoven did, yes.

But I wanted to ask you, how does the choir get out of that type of improvisation you mentioned and get back into the piece, so to speak?

Magen suggested selecting one curse as the "exit" curse, and gives a signal when they move to that, then repeats it a certain number of pre-determined times - very simple solutions with nice results that keeps the promise of change intact.

I want to go through each of the movements to find out what exactly they're doing. Let's start with the Uvertur and Blay Gissn song at the very beginning.

Cookie wrote the overture, which is a very cool opening motif that repeats a few times as a marker throughout the work. It goes directly into the child song. His melody is very simple, based on Jewish *leynen*. It's obviously a spoof, because it's set against a barbershop quartet. That's the humor flag that tells you that a burlesque is underway.

The Forshpil sounds very Stravinskyesque, like the Soldier's Tale, or Renard the Fox. Is there a reference there?

No, not at all although I was aware of the similarity. We based that piece on a sopile melody from the island of Krk, in Croatia. Stu turned us onto that. The sopile is a double reed shaum, played in a very old mode with close intervals that are fixed, in this case somewhere between a major sixth and a minor seventh. We kept the character of that melody but added our own touches of harmony and rhythm to it. It does end up sounding a bit like a circus processional tune, and is a bit bizarre, which we love.

What about the Ehye piece?

The choir sings Ehye Asher Ehye (I am that I am) using the simplest motive possible – a major second and a perfect 5th, which is pitted against itself in mirror images. The whole spirals upward, so it's very much like a musical DNA molecule. At the end of the movement the choir sings the names of the 7 Patriarchs, because they are symbols of the divine "brood."

Ehye sounds as if it moves from naïveté to mysticism?

I'm glad you caught that. I had in my mind the idea of an infant, bumbling God, just getting used to his new flawed creation, playing around with his building blocks. The words "I am that I am" are circular sounding. The repetition makes it feel like you could keep saying them over and over and they won't change, so I wanted to keep that effect in the movement, even though God does eventually grow into his powers.

Then Adam shows up and starts naming the animals.

Yeah, in Hebrew alphabetical order!

And then starts to hump them??

Yup, that's in the original story. He's a lonely horny bugger who'll do anything to procreate. Not unlike modern man. He's kind of a frat bro without decent bait.

Okay, then with the creation of Lilith, they begin to argue, and the style is so much like the recitatives of early opera.

Yes, but I'm using the 19th Century traditional klezmer ritual song of the Badkhn to the bride on her wedding day. I split up the melody, though, between Adam and Lilith. The style of early Baroque opera recitatives and the Badkhn's song are very similar, so I couldn't resist taking advantage of that.

Then in the second part of the recitative, they revert to Yiddish and the choir enters. Why did you put it all together like that?

Well, the antiphonal character of the recitative just lent itself so well to an argument and was a perfect vehicle for Yiddish curses. And because the Baroque style had already been broached, I couldn't resist composing a Passacaglia - one of the defining forms of the Baroque. So I interspersed the Passacaglia as a way of creating ambivalence. After all, at that point, Lilith and Adam are still dealing with their sexual attraction, so the "I love you but I hate you" back-and-forth seemed to work well via a mixture of non-Jewish Baroque and Jewish Wedding styles. It's one of those things that only becomes obvious after you hear it.

Then Lilith screams the forbidden name of God and she's done for, right? She's gone to the other side, and you play a furious piano part, called Sheydim (Demons).

Yeah, the 2nd part of the solo contains a mirror image of the first part.

But didn't you use the musical mirror image already as a depiction of the deity?

Yeah.

So you used the same symbolism for God and the demons?

Yup.

Are you afraid you'll be struck by lightning or something?

Do you assume God disapproves?

Okay, so after that there's a creepy, floating movement with toy piano, pizzicato strings and 2-part choir, singing various mystical names of God.

Yeah. Remember that in Judaism, you're never supposed to utter the name of God, so we have all these substitute names, which always seemed kind of arbitrary to me because they're still names, right? Well out of respect for the danger that Lilith has now put us all in by breaking the divine law, I actually wanted to erase the evil she brings into the room by supplanting the "bad name" with the allowable names of God. Believe it or not, even though I don't believe in all this, in the back of my mind, I did it out of respect for those in the audience who do believe it. So it's a kind of protective magical device.

Okay, so why the toy piano?

Beside being enchanted by that instrument - I'd use it everywhere if I could get away with it and not be accused of trying to imitate Cage [John Cage wrote a Suite for Toy Piano in 1948] it brings up associations of children, and I don't even mind the fact that Hollywood child demon films love to make use of it too. The more complex the associations, the more emotional confusion we can generate, which is kind of the purpose of this portion of the work.

Why do you want to confuse the audience emotionally?

I think that once the audience has laughed, then been afraid, and then confused, it's open to feel more deeply. The sequence is important, though.

What do you mean?

Well, if you make people afraid from the beginning, they're closed. But if you disarm them with humor first, they're left more open.

This sounds very manipulative.

It's what we do for a living.

After Lilith flies off to the Red Sea, she visits men in their dreams, and you wrote a fugue for this section. Why did you choose that form?

Beside relating to the earlier Baroque style that I used, fugues themselves always have the character of multiplication. You hear one voice, then another follows, then they combine with the third and the texture waxes and wanes. Remember, Lilith is promiscuously visiting scores of men in their dreams, and the fugue just seemed to express that. I didn't use traditional counterpoint, though, but rather composed a mixolydian theme that expressed simplicity and rampant growth at the same time. Then at the second half, the choir intones the names of the three angels that show up later to negotiate with Lilith.

Then we come to a bizarre part of the drama, where Adam goes crazy, and we hear what I thought was Torah chanting. Is it what I think it is?

It is a Torah chant, one to one! The Hebrew blessing would normally be: "Barukh Ata Adonoy Eloheny Melekh Ha Olam", etc, etc.

But what he actually sings is a a bilingual pun, which sounds like Hebrew if you don't pay attention: "Broken and tired and annoyed I'm a helluva male who would come." And it keeps going, too.

So Adam auctions off Lilith as a sex slave to himself. Is that in the original story?

You caught me. That's the only thing that I put in myself. I'll tell you how that got started: My Canadian friend Tamara Bernstein sent me a recording of a livestock auctioneer's chant from Alberta. She said, "Isn't it unbelievable how close this sounds to Jewish davening?" That gave me the idea to poke at Jewish prayer a bit and so I created the soliloquy of Adam auctioning off Lilith to himself. Who else could he have auctioned her off to? He was the first man, so he's the only one who could buy her, or sell her for that matter. I've never quite understood how creationists could overlook the fact that, if we take the Bible literally, we're all the product of incest. I mean, if Cain and Abel were the first offspring, their progeny would have to have come from their own incestuous dealings with each other and the intervention of some male childbearing reproductive apparatus that was left out of the Bible's description of the event. Or... one of them would have to have procreated with their mother. Yikes! Anyway, since the story of Lilith itself is built upon a biblical anomaly, why not build upon that?

Then, the angels enter and things become even more bizarre. I imagine them to be these cute little gremlin-type beings.

Yeah, you're not far off there. They are supposed to be a combination of a bulbous doo-wop backup singer trio combined with the Three Stooges. They're immune from Lilith's power and are cheeky and to the point. Sometimes you don't even know if they have worldly attributes because they simply repeat what Lilith says in three-part harmony.

Lilith calls them Crap-filled Chapel Twinks at some point. Ya gotta love alliteration. It seems that the language sometimes upstages the music.

Yeah, language definitely has an important role. When you look at the songs of Schubert, many of them are set to very weak poetic texts. The reason for that is that with a weak text the music can provide so much of the meanings that are missing or dormant in the poetry. But with a strong text the listener is drawn more to it than the music. I planned it so that in many of the places where that happens the music tends to be sparse, leaving room for the text to shine.

There's an interesting part in the negotiation where Lilith enumerates the reasons why it's not good to have daughters, then later why it's not good to have sons. Where does that come from?

Actually, it's still from the Alphabet Ben Sira, but from the aphorisms, not directly from the story of Lilith. He actually only warns against having daughters, but I added the part about sons as well, not because I wanted to be egalitarian, but because I wanted the chance to lambaste boys as well as girls.

Okay, so at the end of that movement, Lilith sings that you shouldn't have boys because who knows, someday, one may claim to be the son of God. Clearly, a Jesus reference, no?

Yes, and aside from the sex stuff and the disturbing infant mortality theme, I think this may be the most problematic portion of the drama, especially since it's followed by a demented version of "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" with an altered text of curses from Deuteronomy, followed by Yiddish curses for different parts of the body. This movement has nothing to do

with my own feelings about Christianity, but is really an externalization of the paranoid 10th century Jewish mindset, that was constantly on the defense against Christian aggression. If a non-Jewish audience can accept that this is a portrayal and not a personal statement, then we're fine. But you can't always be sure, can you?

Think you'll get some death threats like Salman Rushdie?

I expect to get a box of chocolates from the Muslim community, and yellow roses from the Jewish community, but if fundamentalist Christians run me out of town, look for me in the kitchen of a Pakistani restaurant far away from home washing dishes.

I expected to hear only klezmer music in the instrumental portions of the work, but there are perhaps more other East European types of music than klezmer. Is there a reason for that?

We wanted to give a fairly broad spectrum of music that commonly surrounds Jews in East Europe, and Cookie composed some Moldovan and Polish flavored pieces, and Stu wrote some Bulgarian ones, and I composed one that was an amalgamation of Greek, Albanian and Turkish motives.

Then there's this moving vocalise that Lilith sings, that seems really bittersweet. Is there some kind of transformation that she goes through?

No, not at all. Lilith remains evil to the end, but in this movement that Cookie wrote and that we call the *Kindertoytnlid (Song for Dead Children)*, Lilith is mourning the death of her own children, and we also thought of it as a general lament. We had many discussions about this in the group, as I originally felt that Lilith doesn't have the capacity to mourn and is a one-dimensional character. Cookie felt that it was much more interesting to have her be more complex than that. But we agreed to leave an unambiguous text out of it, so as to preserve the idea of Lilith as a symbol of evil, rather than as a figure who may possess the possibility of redemption. This is really the point in the drama where the mood is more heavily weighted on the serious rather than the ridiculous. The piano accompaniment gets taken up by the choir as their melody in the following movement.

The following movement is Malokhim, which means angels, but I guess not the angels that Lilith was sent.

Right. the angels whose names form the text of Malokhim are protective angels that are sometimes found on amulets as well.

The style of that movement sounds almost late Romantic, with flowing chromatic lines.

Very true! In fact, I was inspired by the 1892 John Collier painting, that depicts Lilith with long flowing hair, which by the way, in some accounts is the same hair that strangles and castrates men (in contrast to the biblical pubic hair that was supposed to serve that function).

Then, after this, we get a movement called Kalliop, that sounds very sweet, but a little off.

Cookie dug up that melody from a turn-of-the-century Polish Hasidic tune. We set it as a simple, childlike tune that gives the effect of a broken calliope.

The effect is haunting. How did you achieve it?

The cello plays harmonics, the violin plays close to the bridge to give that glassy effect, and the accordion plays an accompaniment in 2/4 meter against the 3/4 meter of the melody. So

the accompaniment is always out of sync with the melody. The combination of all of these things makes it sound like a miscalibrated Calliope, almost like in a nightmare.

And this segues into a lullaby with the chorus, but again is not left alone like a normal lullaby.

I combined two different old Yiddish lullabies together, and set it for the choir, whereby the basses sing in 3/4 against 2/4 - kind of a reversal of the previous movement. Things are never straight in this work!

After the lullaby, we hear some pure folk music. What is that?

That's a Hutzul melody that seems to give the effect of a drunken Carpathian gang hovering outside the bedroom window. In the mind of a medieval Jewish mother, the feeling that your child is never really safe must have been profound, and to get that effect I had to play on the emotional associations that a modern listener may have when listening to that music.

And then we're shocked out of that by a love duet between Lilith and Adam?

Not exactly. It's the same Passacaglia that you heard split up in the faux "wedding scene" earlier on, but now it's sung in its entirety as a kind of reprise. There is no actual narrative reason why that's there. It was simply a decision to remind us of the existence of Lilith and Adam, and also to give the audience a chance to hear the coherency of that particular piece.

Then we get to hear some klezmer music.

Yeah, Cookie wrote those three pieces. They start to ground the audience and bring them back into the "real world" so to speak.

But not for long, right?

Right, kinda. I mean, we get a reprise of the prelude which is now a postlude, and the choir sings texts whose function it is to get rid of the fever demons.

How do they do that?

By diminishing the sound of each name till nothing is left. So Ochnotinos becomes chnotinos, notinos, otinos, tinos, inos, nos, os, s; and Shabriri becomes, briri, riri, iri, ri. The superstitious belief is that by diminishing the names of the demons, they themselves gradually disappear.

But there's a last choral section at the very end, where it sounds like hokus, pokus, and the choir sings what sounds like a Medieval mixture of trumpets blaring.

The choir sings the names of Lilith that disempower her. One of them is ayalu hikpodu, which sounds a bit like "hokus pokus." Its in 4-part harmony, but the voices cross, which means the basses gliss above the tenors and the altos cross above the sopranos. This is normally considered a heinous flaw in vocal writing (all the more reason to do it in my opinion) but the effect is, number one, to strain the voices a bit, so as to increase the shouting effect, but also, the timbre of the choir sounds eerily like brass instruments when you do that. Plus, it allows the melody line of each voice to go a greater distance, allowing for the glissandi in every voice. The Medieval thing you heard was a type of ending called the "Landini Cadence," which I always thought sounded much like a typical klezmer cadence. Its very cool and I used it in a few places throughout the work just to give that Medieval touch.

The work ends in unbridled joy, basically a happy ending. Has Lilith been subdued?

That's almost a joke, though nothing beside the last words of the narrator would tell you that [In the Kalliop movement, he says, "There Lilith will hoard and lurk"], so I went to the happy place. The irony is that demons are attracted to joy, as there they can wreak the most havoc. But in human terms we're solaced by the illusion of happiness, even though we know the world is flawed and dangerous and no amount of triumphant music will change that, in spite of the comfort it gives us at the moment. On that happy note...