The Golem Psalms
Avodath Hakodesh (*Sacred Service*)

Performed May 7, 2006

It is something of a surprise to realize that the world had to wait until 1933 for the first large-scale setting of the Jewish worship service by a mainstream composer, Ernest Bloch's magnificent *Avodath Hakodesh* (*Sacred Service*), which forms the centerpiece of today's concert. Mendelssohn Club also continues its tradition of commissioning new music to be paired with masterworks. The concert opens with the premiere of Andrea Clearfield's *The Golem Psalms*, set to a newly written text created by Ellen Frankel and based on the famous legend of the Golem of Prague.

A golem is a creature from Jewish folklore, created from mud or clay and brought to life through ritual and mystical incantations. The incantations are derived from the Kabbalistic tradition and feature both words made up from combinations and permutations of the Hebrew alphabet and the sacred, mystical names of God. The golem is often animated through a word of power which is either inscribed on the golem itself or written on a bit of paper and slipped into the golem's mouth. Golems are completely lifelike, having hair, fingernails, and skin with the warmth and color of human skin, but they lack a soul and the power of speech. They are immensely strong and bound to obey their creator, which they occasionally do with a disastrous single-mindedness. There are many accounts of golems, but the most famous is that of the Golem of Prague and his creator, Rabbi Judah Loew.

The creation of golems is bound up with the Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah. The Kabbalists believed that there were hidden meanings in the words of the Torah in which God revealed himself. These meanings were divined using gematria, assigning numerical values to letters and calculating the value of words from the sum of their letters. (The word *gematria* itself is an example: gamma—third letter of the Greek alphabet—equals tria—three.) They also believed that some words held intrinsic power which could be invoked with the proper pronunciation, and they divined a number of mystical names of God. Misspeaking the name or mistaking the pronunciation could have fatal consequences.

That there can be words of uncertain pronunciation stems from the Hebrew alphabet, which contains only consonants. Hebrew originally was written as a continuous string of letters, with no punctuation, breaks between verses or indications of vowel sounds. The most significant name of God is the Tetragrammaton or Four Letter Name, YHVH, read as yud-hay-vav-hay. Traditionally, it was only spoken once a year, at Yom Kippur, by the High Priest in the seclusion of the inner sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the pronunciation has since been lost. Medieval Christian scholars suggested Jehovah or Yahweh, but Jews do not attempt a pronunciation. When it appears in the Torah, a permitted name such as *Adonai* (Lord) is substituted. Other Kabbalistic names of God are

derived by various arcane formulas and are known by the number of letters in the name: the 12 Letter Name, the 22 Letter Name, the 42 Letter Name and the 72 Letter Name.

Prague was the capital of the historic kingdom of Bohemia and a center of both learning and commerce in the sixteenth century. It boasted a large Jewish community, in which Rabbi Judah Loew (1525-1609) played a leading role. He was known as the Maharal, an acronym for the Hebrew phrase meaning “our teacher, Rabbi Loew.” He was a scholar, writer, teacher, philosopher, and civic leader, and was a strong advocate for social justice. He was acquainted with some of the leading scientists of the day, including the astronomer Tycho Brahe. But he was also a mystic who had great knowledge of the Kabbalah, which is what attracted the notice of Emperor Rudolph II. Rudolph had a great interest in science, alchemy and the occult, and invited Rabbi Loew to meet with him and discuss the Kabbalah.

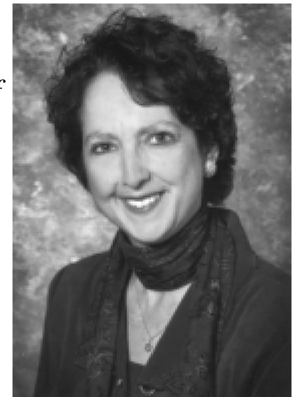
The story of Rabbi Loew and the Golem of Prague appeared sometime in the 19th century, a time in which rapid technological advances were changing people’s lives in unpredictable and unintended ways. This is also the time of such cautionary tales as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which illustrate what can happen when man’s abilities exceeded his wisdom.

This golem story is centered around the “blood libel,” an accusation that Jews used the blood of a Christian child to prepare *matzoh* for Passover. Often the body of a Christian child who had died of some other cause was smuggled into the Jewish quarter and left to be “discovered” as proof of the libel and a justification for violence and rioting. Rabbi Loew was directed in a dream to create a golem to defend the Jews of Prague against the blood libel, and with the aid of two assistants, fashioned a body out of mud on the banks of the Moldau River. Circling the body seven times, they performed the prescribed rituals and incantations, and carved the word *emet* (truth) on the golem’s forehead. When the golem had been brought to life, they dressed him in workman’s clothes and brought him to the rabbi’s house, where he was passed off as a servant answering to the name Joseph. Joseph’s main task was to watch the Jewish quarter at night to make sure that no children’s bodies were smuggled in, and in this he was successful. He did in fact catch two men with the corpse of a child, and dragged them off to the magistrate. With this deception laid bare, the Emperor Rudolph enacted a decree protecting the Jewish people, and trouble was averted, at least for a while. But Joseph’s single-minded obedience also made him dangerous. There are several stories of him running amok, the most benign of which had the rabbi’s wife asking him to bring a fish for Sabbath dinner, and Joseph, like the sorcerer’s apprentice, relentlessly filling the house to overflowing with fish until the rabbi returned and commanded him to stop. Darker stories tell of his roaming the streets of Prague by night, committing violence and even murder, and holding the city in a grip of terror. Rabbi Loew eventually decided that the golem must be uncreated, so he and his assistants performed the ritual of creation in reverse, reciting the incantations backwards. And they erased from his forehead the first letter of *emet*, changing the word to *met* (dead.) When they were done, they placed the lifeless clay body in the attic of the synagogue and covered it with old shawls and pages from prayer books. The ancient

synagogue still stands in Prague, and legend has it that the golem is still lying in the attic, waiting to be wakened again.

Composer Andrea Clearfield's works for instrumental and vocal soloists, chamber ensemble, chorus, orchestra and dance have been performed by noted artists around the world. She has received numerous prizes for her compositions, and was recently awarded the Theodore Front Prize for Chamber and Orchestral Music for her cantata on breast cancer, *The Long Bright*. Recent premieres include *The Rim of Love* for soprano and chamber orchestra, commissioned by Astral, and the west coast premiere of *The River of God* for chorus and organ by the Los Angeles Master Chorale at Disney Hall. A Philadelphia native, Clearfield received a doctorate in composition from Temple University and a masters in piano from University of the Arts, where she currently serves on the composition faculty. She is the pianist with the Relâche Ensemble for Contemporary Music. A strong believer in creating community through music, she is the founder, host, and producer of the Philadelphia SALON concert series featuring contemporary, classical, jazz, electronic and world music, now approaching its 20th year.

To create the libretto for *The Golem Psalms*, Clearfield turned to Ellen Frankel, who brings an impressive authority to the text. Frankel is a writer and scholar of Jewish folklore, and travels widely as a storyteller and lecturer. Among her eight books are *The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore*, and *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols*, co-authored with artist Betsy Teutsch. She holds a doctorate in comparative literature from Princeton University and is currently CEO and Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish Publication Society, the oldest nondenominational publisher of Jewish works in English and a Philadelphia institution since 1888.



In preparing the text, Frankel writes, "Several evocative themes emerge from the golem legend: the mystical power of words, especially holy names; the power of magic and its dangers; human vulnerability; the loneliness of a solitary creature, who, though possessing power, lacks a soul, a voice, and human companionship; evil and redemption; technology run amok. Each of these themes is quite contemporary and universal. I've chosen the form of psalms for two reasons: first, because the Latin term is a translation of the Hebrew word *mizmor*, meaning sacred songs accompanied by musical instruments. *The Golem Psalms* are meant to convey a similar mood of solemnity and grandeur. Secondly, I borrowed several poetic forms from the biblical psalms: the dramatic monologue, expressing various states of human feeling such as despair, thanksgiving, vengefulness, and wonder; the song of praise; the lament."

Unlike the golem of legend, Frankel's golem is not a mindless automaton. She has imbued him with awareness, intelligence, and understanding, and tells the story mostly from his point of view. The Kabbalists sought to emulate God's act of creation, and in

this Judah Loew has exceeded their ambitions, for Joseph the Golem possesses more than the outward form of a man. He also shares the same aspirations, desires, uncertainties, and anxieties, but being without voice is unable to express them, and being compelled to obedience is unable to act on them.

The Golem Psalms is set for baritone, chorus and orchestra. Clearfield divides the work into seven parts, a ritually significant number which recurs throughout the piece—seven chords or chimes which punctuate the music, seven-note motifs, measures of seven beats. It opens with a spoken prologue which has been recorded and is then played back as the baritone stands mute on the stage. The first section, *Creation*, opens with a driving and somewhat ominous beat. Lines of text weave in and out of each other with overlapping rhythms and suggest both the creation of the world as well as the creation of the golem. A seven-note motif set to the phrase "form and life and change and death" spins endlessly like a wheel, suggesting the circle of life which the golem himself experiences in very compressed form.

Clearfield cleverly inserts several musical gematria into the score, with notes rather than numbers assigned to letters. One is found in the shimmering music which opens the second movement, *Abracadabra*, and represents that word itself. *Abracadabra* is a corruption of the Hebrew phrase *avra kedavra*—I will create as I speak. It is a text which emphasizes the importance and power of the word, and by contrast the powerlessness of the golem who cannot speak. Another gematria is found in the angular phrase first heard in the low instruments which begins the actual incantation. There are seven Hebrew letters which can be pronounced with two sounds, and these letters had great significance in the Kabbalah. It was believed that permutations of these letters were used to create the world. This musical phrase is repeated in different permutations and with ever-increasing intensity as the golem is created. It will reappear in other permutations when the golem is later uncreated.

In the third movement, the Tetragrammaton, the sacred name of God, is chanted as an incantation over and over as the music builds with an inexorable intensity, suggesting not only the power of the Name but also the danger when it is misused. *The Fountain of Voices* is the emotional center of the piece. It provides an immediate contrast to the frenzy of the preceding movement, opening with a beautiful *a cappella* psalm. This is an allusion to the central movement of the Bloch *Sacred Service*, the *Silent Devotion*, which opens with a similar *a cappella* chorus beginning with the same ascending third, and is sung to the same text that the chorus chants *sotto voce*. A litany of the names of God is spoken again, but this time quietly and reverently. It again reinforces the importance of the word in the Jewish tradition, and the contrast to the silent golem who can neither praise God nor pray. The *a cappella* psalm continues with an excerpt from Psalm 139, the one scriptural allusion to the golem, a name derived from the Hebrew *golmi*, my unformed limbs.

The fifth movement offers a bit of comic relief in the story of Joseph, the rabbi's wife and the fish. There is a kind of breathless, run-on quality to the text which Clearfield adroitly captures in the music, a very graphic picture of Joseph dutifully (and perhaps even a bit

enthusiastically) filling the house with fish. The sixth movement begins with the chorus rhythmically speaking a text filled with delightful word plays. The men continue the chanting while the women's voices sing a lament for Joseph.

The final movement recounts the unmaking of the golem. The incantations are sung in reverse, with the accompanying music using variations on the original seven-note theme that begin to pile up on one another. There is a reprise of the "form and life and change and death" music from the opening movement, as the cycle of life continues its endless turning. Above the sound of the chorus, the baritone sings fragments of melodies based on hasidic *niggunim*, wordless songs meant to express feelings and emotions that cannot be put into words. The *niggunim* that Clearfield chose are particularly poignant in this context—the *Song of Yearning* and the *Song of Redemption*. As the music fades the wordless voice of the golem continues softly, until it too fades away.

Swiss-born Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) had extensive studies in composition and violin with some of Europe's finest teachers, moving from Geneva to Brussels to Frankfurt to Munich to Paris. But he still found himself at age 24 working in his father's business selling Swiss tourist goods. He continued composing and conducting in an off-and-on fashion, even scoring a modest success with the premiere of his lyric drama *Macbeth* in Paris in 1910. But it was not until 1916 that he made the decision to devote himself entirely to music. Arriving in New York as the tour conductor for a dance troupe, he obtained a position teaching at the Mannes College of Music and began composing in earnest. His music quickly began to attract considerable attention. He conducted his *Tres poèmes juifs* with the Boston Symphony in 1917, led a performance of his rhapsody for cello and orchestra *Schelomo* in New York, and conducted a concert of his "Jewish" music with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1918. In 1920 he became the founding director of the Cleveland Institute of Music and in 1925 became director of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In 1930, he returned to Switzerland after obtaining a grant which allowed him to devote himself to composition. After ten years there, he returned to the United States and taught briefly at Berkeley, retiring in 1952 and living in relative seclusion in Oregon until his death in 1959.

Bloch's grandfather was a well-known lay cantor and his father, who had intended to study for the rabbinate, was active in the local Jewish community, but Bloch himself was rather ambivalent about his Jewishness. As an adolescent studying abroad, he distanced himself from Jewish religious practice and custom, and he developed a kind of universalism with respect to religion that permeates even his most Jewish music like the *Sacred Service*. It was while studying in Paris in the early 1900's that he reconnected with his Jewish roots, but even then it was much more from a cultural and ethnic perspective than a religious one.

His new enthusiasm for all things Jewish was reflected in his music. He set out to produce a body of music inspired by Jewish tradition or incorporating elements

suggesting traditional Jewish music, although quotations of actual Jewish musical material are rare. His "Jewish Cycle" includes *Tres poèmes juifs* (1913), settings of Psalms 137 and 114 for soprano and orchestra (1914), a setting of Psalm 22 for baritone and orchestra (1914), his symphony *Israel* (1916), and *Schelomo* (1916). His later music tended to move away from obvious Jewish connections, with the notable exceptions of the *Sacred Service* (1933) and the *Suite hebraïque* (1951).

Bloch had long considered setting the Jewish worship service, but the project did not begin to crystallize until 1927, when he met Cantor Reuben Rinder of the Reform Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco. Rinder secured a commission from Gerald Warburg in 1929 for Bloch to write a service based on the American Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship. Bloch re-learned Hebrew, which he had all but forgotten since his *bar mitzvah*, and began an intense study not only of the Saturday Morning Service, which he committed to memory, but also of sixteenth century counterpoint. He labored over the composition for four years, writing that it took a full two years to satisfactorily set the 25 measures which conclude the work. Set for baritone, who has the role of the cantor, four smaller solo parts, chorus and large orchestra, the *Sacred Service* was premiered in Turin in 1934 with Bloch conducting.

In setting the *Sacred Service*, Bloch was determined to look at the text with a fresh eye, and in doing so produced a work which deviates significantly from the usual liturgy. He has carefully selected phrases from the text, omitting some parts, occasionally substituting others, setting some parts out of order and having some parts sung which are normally recited silently. He has set the bulk of the text in Ashkenazic Hebrew, an interesting choice for a Reform service, which is largely in English. It is unclear if Bloch ever envisioned the *Sacred Service* being used as a liturgy. Although he included notations in the score suggesting alterations for a worship service with organ accompaniment, he never prepared an organ reduction, and often referred to the work as a "Jewish oratorio." His goal was to emphasize the universality of the religious experience embodied in the text he selected. He wrote, with characteristic hyperbole, "It far surpasses a Jewish Service now. It has become a cosmic poem, a glorification of the Laws of the Universe."

Bloch sets the text using short, distinct musical phrases linked together by brief orchestral phrases. This allows Bloch to invest each line of text with its own unique musical and emotional character. This *durchkomponiert* character, where the music freely evolves rather than having a fixed melodic structure, also suggests the improvisational style of cantorial music. The piece is unified, though, through several recurring themes. The most important is heard in the opening notes—G A C B A G—a theme found in one of Bloch's early notebooks with the comment "for a possible Jewish service." Above all, the music is highly rhythmic, dramatic, and intensely lyrical.

Bloch divides the *Sacred Service* into five parts. The first part opens with an orchestral meditation followed by the *Mah tovu*, a prayer recited upon entering the synagogue to place you in an appropriately reverential frame of mind (and a prayer not included in the Union prayerbook). The music moves through a call to prayer (*Borechu*) to the *Shema*,

the prayer embodying the central tenet of Jewish faith. The movement ends with the *Tzur Yisroel* (Rock of Israel) and contains the only music actually taken from the worship service. Here Bloch makes one of his emendations to the text, omitting a line he felt was too oriented to the Jewish people and inserting the more universal blessing “Praise Him and His holy Name.”

Part II contains a series of prayers in praise of God. The music starts out quietly, with an almost awestruck character, but each succeeding phrase builds in intensity and animation until the movement ends with a majestic Hallelujah. The third part opens with the *Silent Devotion*, a quiet orchestral section followed by an *a cappella* chorus (*Yihyu lerozon*) containing some of the most beautiful music in the *Sacred Service*. This is the preparation for the moment when the Torah is removed from the Ark, which Bloch sets with a very dramatic orchestral introduction followed by a quiet and mysterious *Torah tzivoh*. There is a reprise of the *Shema* and the section is brought to a close with the solemn procession of the Torah through the congregation (*Lecho Adonoy*.)

In Part IV, the Torah is returned to the Ark. The movement closes with *Etz chayim*, and in Bloch’s interpretation of the text, it is a song of peace. His excerpt of the text ends with the word *sholom* (peace). The prospects of war were all too real in 1933, and there is a special poignancy to Bloch’s quiet and hopeful repetition of the word peace which closes this movement. Part V opens with an excerpt from the closing prayer, *Alenu*, sung in Hebrew. But Bloch then turns to English for the first time, in the continuation of that text. The music is set for a “recitant” in “spoken voice”, but is notated with pitches and rhythms, and in Bloch’s own recording of the *Sacred Service*, that music is sung by the cantor. Bloch was so concerned that this part of the text be understood by audiences that he prepared German and French versions as well. Bloch saves his most innovative treatment for the concluding hymn, *Adon olom* (Lord of the Universe.) Bloch rejects the customary strophic setting (each verse having the same melody), instead setting each verse to its own music reflecting the text, which to Bloch represented man’s universal response to God. Perhaps more than any other section, this represents what Bloch characterized as “the unexpressed music which has been latent—for centuries—which has been awaiting this marvelous text.” The *Sacred Service* ends with the three-part blessing of Aaron sung by the cantor, to which the chorus answers “Amen.”

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Program Notes *by Michael Moore*