

OPERA REVIEW

# Lowell House Opera

## Yossele Solovey: work of genius

*Yossele Solovey*  
World Premiere of a new opera by  
Noam Elkies, libretto by Jeremy Dauber  
Conducted by Joel Bard  
Dax Kiger, Stage Director  
Lowell House Opera  
Lowell House, Harvard University  
March 10, 12, 14, 17, 19 & 21 at 8pm.  
\$10 general admission, \$6 for students.  
Tickets available through BOSTIX  
or call 496-2222 for reservations.

By Jonathan Richmond  
ADVISORY BOARD

Websearch “Noam Elkies” and you’ll come to the site of Harvard undergraduate Zachary Shrier and this: “Who is Harvard’s most powerful mind? Those in the know say it’s Noam Elkies.” But those who might think that the cranium of Harvard’s youngest ever — tenured-at-26 — full professor of mathematics contains no more than one of the world’s most productive human computing machines should take a trip to view Yossele Solovey.

Elkies’ new opera, which opened Wednesday night at Lowell House, Harvard, provides extraordinary insight into the human condition through music at once powerful, sensitive, and subtle. It is a work of genius that not so much bridges the genres of musical theatre and opera as moves beyond the expressive limits of so much music written for Broadway while providing an audience accessibility lacking in the work of so many “serious” music composers of the twentieth century. Yossele has the potential to join the international repertoire as one of the great works of our age. The impassioned performances to be found at Lowell House, with the composer himself at the piano, provide yet more reasons why this production is not to be missed.

The Sholem Aleichem story on which the opera is based is wonderful. It tells of a cantor besotted by music and the power of his own voice to produce it. It follows a tragic path as Yossele leaves the insular life of his community for a life of fame that turns out to be a catalog of loss: disconnection from the woman who loves him, from family, from tradition and, ultimately, from sanity.

Characterization is superb and manages to be at once larger-than-life yet profoundly compelling on a human scale. There’s Yossele the dreamer who rises and falls, Esther his anemic yet tender lover, Gedalye Bass the creepy-crawly impresario who leads him to fame, Perede the calculating society widow who seduces him, and Shmulik the father — a figure out of Greek tragedy who is

the first to spot Yossele’s talent and who both foresees and experiences the suffering that is to result from it.

Elkies says he found inspiration in Mozart, yet the link is not immediately obvious. The music does not sound Mozartian. Reacting to the action in progress, however, it becomes apparent that Elkies has adopted Mozart’s unusual gift for using music to reveal truth. Mozart’s *Così fan Tutte* sets off two pairs of lovers and through sublime music goes past their lies to provide access to the truth in their hearts. Elkies’ music also penetrates to the heart of alternative relationships and underlines the God-given legato of one in contrast to the inevitable discord of the



Interview  
Noam Elkies

Why did you end up in Math, rather than music?

I knew for many years that I had an aptitude for both of them and at some point I had to make a choice. Even if I did manage to make a career out of my music it would have to be at the expense of not doing math. And I can make a living of one, and a reasonable showing of the other.

What was your musical background?

My mother was a piano teacher, so there was piano music all the time. I started playing piano at three, and taking lessons in composition — I was putting notes on paper just a few months after starting to play.

So you were four?

No I was still three.

I started getting actual training in composition and theory at about 6. I was in Israel at the time.

Isn’t it unusual to compose so young?

Not unusual if also starting to play the piano at an early age. Children learn everything by imitation.

Were you influenced by your early teachers?

That’s how everyone from before Palestrina got started.

What was your first real composition?

What I usually label Op. 1 was a piece I wrote between six and seven in memory of my grandmother. It was a five-minute piece for piano.

Was Chopin an influence?

There were lots of early influences. There was a Viennese sonatina which takes after Mozart, a prelude which takes after Debussy, a string trio after the manner of Schonberg, although I didn’t enjoy it then and I don’t enjoy it now — I was 10 or 11 at the time.

What are your current inspirations?

They’re all over the place. I’ve been introduced to music from before Bach from choruses, Bach, Brahms, Chopin as a pianist, Shostakovich, Schubert and certainly Mozart. I omit Beethoven — I’ve great respect but haven’t been able to assimilate it yet.

Of the more moderns: Bartok and especially Britten.

What drew you to Yossele Solovey?

It’s little known that Sholem Aleichem was himself a great aficionado of music. There are lots of specific events in the novel that have specific musical references — and there’s the whole fact that the lead character is a cantor. Towards the end Shmulik is giving what is normally a very cheerful blessing in mournful tunes of lamentation; it’s another thing to hear someone do it. The story has shows a wonderful panorama of Jewish life and aspects of vanishing Shtetl life.

What was your musical approach?

There are all these tunes, musical concepts that I had swirling in my mind. Someone heard a bit of the music here and thought of Mozart doing Fiddler on the Roof. I haven’t much performed Mozart, but if one’s going to write opera that’s where to go to see how it’s done. There are these various unifying musical ideas that are drawn from Jewish music but treated in other ways. The first few notes are from Havah Nagilla — in a key not normally done. The main Kaddish tune comes from the cantillation from Bereshit [Genesis].

What’s significant about Bereshit?

The whole musical picture there is of the primordial we have injected into this Yossele who has this incredible talent and is driven by it to break the bounds of the society

What’s special about the art of music?

With music you can say things that you cannot express in words. Specifically this is a story about a musician and how wonderful his music is, music of a great cantor, music of an almost-lapsed Jew. Writing the music is like me being an actor and doing part of the interpretation.

How the solo piano here spells an intense loneliness. The music becomes

deeply disturbing as the father pleads “hear my prayer,” the rawness of his torment bringing to mind the tortured biblical Jephtha and the unworldly music Handel wrote for his oratorio of that name.

Shmulik, however, has yet to have the most startling music of all in this opera, for he is asked to give the blessing on the arranged marriage of Esther and Reb Alter, the ill-matched groom taking the place and promise of the cantor’s son. Yes, Shmulik can bring himself to utter the words of benediction, but Elkies’ music will not allow any lies and there seems no alternative but to hear the sound of lamentations.

Elkies music also evokes the essence of Klezmer — and there are brilliantly spirited sounds of celebration — yet the hearty brass oom-pah for this tragic wedding only makes the agony deeper. Esther stands frigidly, while bass pizzicato depicts disturbance, a solitary heaven-sent flute siddling up to offer what at first seems like the legato of solace but is perhaps no less than the presence of the Angel of Death.

Elkies sets the Kaddish — the prayer for the dead — with profundity. Yossele appears in a vision to Esther to sing Kaddish at her

soul or does it, indeed, reveal the presence of God?

The piano also plays an essential role — playing solo for many of the darker and most critical moments. The wicked Perede seduces the naive Yossele with music on the piano, in a magical passage that has parallels with the emotional transitions of another famous aria where emotional loyalties change, Mozart’s *Il core vi dono*. Yet the love exchange seems more than from one human to another.

Yossele begins singing solo in the form of a niggun — a song without words that shows delight in the love of God, yet moves to join in wordless song with his temptress, their words and heartbeats fusing with the passion that rightly belongs not only to Esther but also to the Heavens.

Once Yossele is snared, it is also the piano that hurls contempt at him as Perede demands money for her hats and dresses. The cello comes in here, acting the part of Yossele’s anguished soul and begging for pity as if separated from and urgently trying to redeem the flesh-and-blood character on stage. The piano hits like a hammer; Perede tells Yossele “if I can’t have your love [equated with his money], I’ll make your life hell.” The cello replies with such gentle poignancy that one can almost hear the angels sobbing.

Shmulik the father comes on stage, asking “where is my little boy?”

Elkies score is amazingly complex. This is a deeply intellectual work, yet one with a human scale that gives it ready appeal and with a spiritual dimension that manages to leave the audience revitalized after watching scenes of deepest suffering. As Mozart’s operas can be appreciated on different levels, Yossele is a work for all audiences — one that will reward a casual approach, but which also has multiple layers of depth to be explored for those who care to seek them out.

The libretto is written by Jeremy Dauber — like Elkies, a former resident of Lowell House. The text has punch and wit, even if we are ever aware that it’s main purpose is to be the vehicle for the music.

Cast and orchestra on opening night were excellent — the best I’ve ever heard at a Lowell House production. Anne Harley was simply riveting in the part of Yossele (a woman was chosen to sing the part because a male with a sufficiently high-pitched voice could not be found), her singing pure and affecting and her acting dramatic.

While her whole performance was glorious, it was in the rendition of the Kaddish that she especially shone.

Perhaps the light she cast was frightening — that of someone who has sold his soul to the Devil yet is singing God’s praise — yet the beauty of sound gave repose. Heidi Clark’s Esther was fabulously sung too and Clark’s acting turned this simple love-lost-lass into a tragic heroine by opera’s end. She clearly felt as well as understood the part and the result was powerful.

Paul Soper’s Shmulik was exceptional. The deep cantorial voice and traditional Ashkenazic pronunciation was entirely authentic, making his religious singing a wonder. Yet Soper’s greatness lay in his depiction of the soul’s torment, which became increasingly vivid as the opera progresses. His singing — along with that of Heidi Clark — was very intense as Shmulik stands with Esther pondering the impending loss of his son in “Yossele, Dream of Me,” close to the start. Yet, as Shmulik prays for the return of his son later on — when it is too late — Soper sings with an inner passion that makes the pain his character suffers fathomless.

Meara McIntyre was a deliciously evil Perede. What a malicious twinkle in the eye of another of the evening’s singers who knows how to wondrously act the part as well as she sings it. Her singing in Perede’s wordless seduction song was dreamily blissful (as was Harley’s), making us wonder if this shrewish character does indeed really love Yossele. Her pure staccato-nastiness to her husband once the marriage vows are sealed and settled was vivid. Jennifer Harney did a nice job of Perede’s maid, Leahzi, singing with great clarity as well as character and drawing some

extraordinary pain.

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wedding to deathly disembodied violin music illuminated with one of the evening’s most ravishing cello settings. Heartbeats seem audible in this scene of horror.

The other religious settings, from a choral singing of Ein Kelo’hainu to Yossele’s intense rendition of the Mussaf service, combine splendor with depth. Perhaps, just as Yossele can’t resist absorbing the music of an off-limits church (the act that gets him into trouble in the first place), Elkies has informed his intensely intimate depiction of timeless Jewish melodies with his knowledge of church choral traditions.

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CONCERT REVIEW

# Eagle-Eye Cherry

## “Save tonight” for Paradise

By Michael K. Dowe

Monday, March 8, 7:28pm: I arrive at the Paradise Rock Club with Evan, my photographer. There are supposed to be tickets waiting for us at the box office, but I simply pull out a press pass, and the thick-necked bouncers let us in without a hassle. As we walk down the long corridor, we can hear a band warming up, cueing the engineer. Eagle-Eye and his crew spout bits and pieces of a few tunes, and I can already tell this will be a dope concert.

7:55 p.m.: I’m completely geeked like a pathetic, star struck groupie. I met Eagle-Eye along with other members of the press and some jerks who won a contest. I already knew he was the son of jazz legend Don Cherry, and younger brother of Neneh Cherry of Buffalo Stance fame; he was born and raised in Stockholm, where his hippie parents often

took the whole family across Europe for summers at a time; he studied acting at the “Fame” school — the New York School for Performing Arts — then spent a few years pursuing a successful acting career; his creativity soon turned to music, so he relocated to Sweden and concentrated on his opus, which is already platinum-plus.

I don’t know why, but with such a history of artistic expression and wanderlust, I expected Eagle-Eye would be one of those snotty, self-absorbed types. But when I approached to give him dap, he gripped me up like one of the boys. It turns out he’s quite down to earth. We chatted a few minutes about his music and my writing, he autographed a poster and CD for me, and we even posed so Evan could take a picture. My half-fro was a little mishapen, but Eagle-Eye’s was too, so it’s all good. I was stoked, ready for loud music, cold beers, head bobbing, and



Eagle Eye Cherry performs his mix of jazz, funk, and blues.

# Landmark world premiere probes deeply into human soul

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niche laughs. Perede’s servant, Berl-Isaac was brightly sung and smartly acted by Jesse Hawkes.

John Whittlesey played the part of Gedalye

it’s just as well they didn’t have any at the time. Whittlesey also sang the part of the cantor Pitzzi — whose choir Yossele joins before attaching himself to Bass — and I loved the way he showed Pitzzi’s self-adoring reveling in his own voice as the cantor leads his choir.

David Howe nicely depicted the unfeeling Reb Alter, underscoring the cruelty with which Alter strikes out at Shmulik as the latter suffers on account of his son.

Joel Bard — who recently completed his Phd in Molecular and Cellular Biology — was the evening’s Music Director and achieved astonishing success in preparing a student orchestra for an intense and difficult new work. He was doubtless helped in his task by the presence of some wonderful musicians, with no sign of weakness in any parts of the orchestra. String playing was rapturous, with none more so than that of Sarah Siska whose cello part was so important to the development of the opera. Siska’s tone was very spe-

Bass, the impresario. His depiction of this small-time essay in human greed was well-studied and entertaining, gestures of voice as well as of body giving a distinct impression that this wouldn’t be the sort of person from whom to purchase a second-hand car. Perhaps

presence of some wonderful musicians, with no sign of weakness in any parts of the orchestra. String playing was rapturous, with none more so than that of Sarah Siska whose cello part was so important to the development of the opera. Siska’s tone was very spe-



David Mead opens for Eagle Eye Cherry at the Paradise Rock Club Monday.

more cold beers.

7:57 p.m.: I bought the first cold beer, and my wallet cried. For such a lager and ale crazed city, a pint sure is expensive up here. I’m from Virginia, where cigarettes and trailer homes are always cheap. So what the hell is going on in Boston?

9:05 p.m.: The crowd, a bizarre mixture of ages, races, and styles, slowly begins to fill the room. The show should begin soon, and I’m wondering who’s this special guest, David Mead. A quick survey indicates that no one else has heard of him either. I’ve spent the past hour chumming it up with Evan, chain smoking through getting-to-know-you conversation.

9:25 p.m.: Long Island native David Mead has taken the stage and performs a few songs. He plays solo, switching between acoustic guitar and keyboards. With his funky attire and blonde bouffant resembling Brian Setzer, I figured Mead would try a solo jump, jive, and wail, but his style is an odd mixture of Tom Petty’s folk and Billy Joel’s croon, and it’s no wonder why the audience is pretty dead. This was his first time in Boston, and his lack of stage presence and energy left the performance lacking.

Mead’s only high point was an acoustic version of the Bee Gee’s “Stayin Alive,” where he got a bit of audience participation. His songs weren’t that bad, but love song after love song gets tired quickly. In June, Mead will be releasing his RCA album, *The Luxury of Time*. If there are any insomniacs out there looking for a soft lullaby, Mead’s your man.

10:33 p.m.: Eagle-Eye Cherry and his band finally take the stage, and the audience energy surges. He starts out with a mellow groove, followed by his next single, “Falling in Love Again.” Eagle-Eye’s songs are smoky, influenced by acid jazz, funk, and the blues. He wrote most of them on acoustic guitar, which also heavily influenced his sound. As he

works through most of the tracks from his album, “Desireless,” I can hear people beckoning to hear his hit, “Save Tonight,” but that will have to wait.

Eagle-Eye’s songs deal with a number of issues and emotions, such as drug use in “Shooting up the Vein” and “Death Defied by Will,” and gang related violence in “Indecision.” Lead guitar player Mattias Torell rips several solos during the set, and percussionist Dominic Keyes is most impressive, especially on the African drums in an animated rendition of Bob Marley’s “Exodus.” From the force of the crowd, I’m sure heads in Kenmore Square can hear the screams of “Jah people.” The concert has a few new songs, including “Heaven,” and the story of a disastrous love affair, “Misfortune,” which Eagle-Eye dedicates to Billy the Pimp and Monica. He also explained that “Desireless,” the last track on the album, was written by his father, who died while the album was in progress. Eagle-Eye produced this song and dedicated the album to his father, making the track a moving, if not haunting piece that I definitely suggest people look out for.

The crowd is bursting at the seams, waiting for one song. They all want “Save Tonight.” Eagle-Eye begins the first guitar lick, and the audience erupts, jumping, bobbing, weaving. Afterwards, he and the band bounce off stage, leaving the crowd wanting more. For a full minute, everyone is screaming, pumping their fists, and banging against the walls, and Eagle-Eye comes out again to play a few more tunes. The cheers from the crowd alone tell of Eagle-Eye’s ability to energize and entertain.

11:44 p.m.: The band has left, and the thick-necked bouncers perse the crowd to make sure everyone’s moving out. People scramble to pull posters off the wall, and at least half the crowd stands in line to buy t-shirts, CDs, and stickers.

Woodwind scoring is often dark and dense, but the flute is allowed on occasion to float free and the solo playing of Denise Gaz was a delight. The brass section not only performed demanding music with great accuracy but was full of spirit. And Noam Elkies held command of the piano — playing his own music with a knowingness as well as vigor that comes from a special sense of ownership.

Dax Kiger provides taut and well-managed stage direction that shows a keen understanding of the necessary link between music and action — and of the fact that much of the action is in fact within the music. Stephanie Richardson has supplied terrifically evocative costumes. Mathew Myhrum’s set is possibly a trifle minimalist, perhaps reflecting the constrained level of resources available to pay for it, but his use of a series of tumble-down houses supported on sticks as if children’s lollipops successfully evokes the spirit of the Shtetl.

The last time we hear Yossele sing Kaddish he is alone in the cemetery. Kaddish may not be sung alone, however, for mourning requires a minyan of ten. Such is the unworldly beauty of the music, however, that we can only imagine that Yossele was not really alone, but that the angels in

their great grief had come down from the Heavens to silently join him in invoking the glory of God’s name even in the face of distress. It is in the essence of our humanity that we can find balm amidst impossible suffering and it is Noam Elkies’ great achievement to have composed a work that finds revelation in his exploration of humanity, and of the relationships of human souls not just one to another but with God, their creator.

