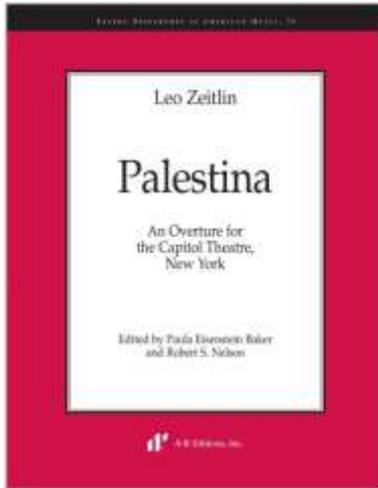


Review

Leo Zeitlin, *Palestina: An Overture for the Capitol Theater, New York*, ed. Paula Eisenstein Baker & Robert S. Nelson. A-R Editions, Inc., 2014. Full Score, 11” x17”, xix + 59 pp. ISBN: 978-0-89579-800-8 <http://www.areditions.com/zeitlin-palestina.html>



Containing:

An Introduction with background about the composer and the work, followed by a score analysis.

Two pictures of composer Leo Zeitlin.

Facsimile of the manuscript's front page and score sample pages.

Instrumentation: Large symphonic orchestra including alto and tenor saxophones, harp, celesta, and organ.

Parts are available from A–R Editions, Inc.

It was a real pleasure to have the opportunity of seeing the publication of *Palestina*—an orchestral overture by Leo Zeitlin (1884–1930), critically edited by Paula Eisenstein Baker and Robert S. Nelson. Following their previous, landmark critical edition of Leo Zeitlin's Chamber Music corpus,¹ this volume is the first print issue of a large-scale symphonic overture composed by Zeitlin. Not only is this an addition to the repertoire of Jewish style suited to the concert hall, but it is also a showcase of new contexts within what is referred to as the “Jewish School” in music. The Introduction includes a detailed score analysis and a discussion of the work's historical background, Premiere performances by the Capitol Theatre orchestra, and a 1929 radio broadcast in New York, two weeks before *Rosh Ha-Shana* High Holiday.

By way of conveying the special circumstances of the work's composition, Baker Eisenstein sheds light on the symbiotic relations between the classical music—popular music—motion picture triangle in New York of the 1920s. Zooming in on the Capitol Theater Orchestra, which was highly praised by critics of the time—as quoted in the article—the reader is presented with a premier concert orchestra that finds a home at the Picture Palace. The beautifully decorated Capitol Theater, built to accommodate several thousand patrons, was a first-rate theater during the grand era of the Picture Palaces. There, as was customary at the period, music—classical and popular—was a major part of the program, preceding or accompanying the featured show. A musical overture was a standard opener before the screening of the movie. In addition, the Capitol's musical programs included both indoor and open-air summer concerts of works ranging from the Masters' symphonies and the *Nibelungen* to light classical works and arrangements to popular songs. The orchestra's concertmasters in the 1920s were Eugene Ormandy (later the orchestra's conductor) and Josef Fuchs. A symphonic-size orchestra, a

¹ Paula Eisenstein & Robert S. Nelson, *Leo Zeitlin, Chamber Music* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2009); reviewed in *Min-Ad* 2009 by Marina Ritzarev.

“Baby Grand orchestra” of nine pieces, and smaller ensembles created the musical endeavors of the Capitol Theater. The flagship enterprise of the Capitol—a venue for music, entertainment, and show promotion—was *The Major Bowes’ Capitol Family*, the Theater’s ninety-minute Sunday night radio show, aired from 1922 on WEA, the predecessor of NBC.

On his arrival in New York in August 1923, Leo Zeitlin joined the Capitol Theater’s orchestra as a section violist. As a result of the constant need for new communicative works and arrangements for the various performing ensembles, Zeitlin was able to increase his work engagements and income within the framework of the Capitol Theater. Considering Zeitlin’s classical training—he graduated with highest honors from the Imperial Russian Music School in Odessa and the St. Petersburg Conservatory as performer and composer—he was certainly suited to these tasks. His studies included composition with Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and instrumentation with Glazunov. His professional experience included the role of principal violist in a major St. Petersburg orchestra and orchestral conducting at Ekaterinoslav and Vilna. Zeitlin was already a published composer in St. Petersburg from 1908 on. At that time, he had strong connections with the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg, and he composed works on Jewish themes throughout his career. His output before his arrival in New York included 27 works of chamber music, 22 works for full or small orchestra, and an operetta.

It is not so simple to trace Zeitlin’s first arrangements, as the arranger’s name was not mentioned as a rule on the radio playlists or advertisements of that time. From an assortment of small items from the radio-playlist archives, Baker Eisenstein’s description shows how Zeitlin worked his way from a 1925 arrangement of an Earl Carroll and William Axt ballad, “When Love Sings a Song in Your Heart,” to premieres and commissions of his original orchestral overtures in 1929. The increase in Zeitlin’s orchestral overtures composed that year coincided with the nomination of Ukrainian-born cellist Yakov/Yasha Bunchuk (1896–1944) as the new conductor of the Capitol Theater Orchestra in June 1929. It is suggested in the Introduction that the two probably knew each other from their professional period in the Ukraine, where their paths crossed. Overall, from July 1929 until Zeitlin’s death in July 1930, four more overtures credited to him were performed, in addition to *Palestina: Neapolitan Scenes*, *The Glory of Russia*, *Rachmaninoffiana*, and *Themeology*.

The matter of credits given to composers, performers, and arrangers were often in question during the emergence of show biz, commercial recordings, and radio. The excess of fine musicians emigrating from Europe to the United States, seeking work and survival, added to the fragile predisposition of musicians to stand up for their rights. Such a case of dubious credit is recounted in the introduction to *Palestina*. As mentioned above, Baker Eisenstein delved behind the scenes in order to seek credit for works. It seemed that many overtures credited to Bunchuk were in fact arranged by Zeitlin, or others such as Tony Gale, William Schulz, or Arthur Lang. Moreover, Bunchuk’s record after the Ukraine showed mediocre achievements during his studies at the Imperial Russian Music School at Kharkov, which had included no compositional or arrangement training at all. This, however, did not prevent him and the management of Capitol from publishing that he had been presented with a precious Guarnerius Violoncello on graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he had studied with Glazunov. As was discovered, however, Bunchuk in fact did not attend the prestigious Conservatory and this entire

house of cards—including the provenance of his cello and his relationship with Glazunov—came tumbling down.

The press release and reviews on the performance of *Palestina* were written along such lines as: “an exotically descriptive overture ... compiled by Mr. Bunchuk from ancient Hebrew melodies and folk-songs and symphonically arranged by Leo Zeitlin of the Capitol’s music staff” (*The Metronome*, 1929). Obviously, “The contrast between Bunchuk’s and Zeitlin’s musical training is striking” as Baker Eisenstein wrote, however, Bunchuk and the Capitol’s management certainly had a strong penchant for publicity and self-enhancement.

Another example of the Capitol’s flair for publicity, albeit a more legitimate one, was the matter of the overture’s title. Included in this publication is a plate of the original manuscript’s cover page, courtesy of Ruth Zeitlin Roes, the composer’s daughter. The composition is entitled *Rhapsodie on Hybrew Themes*—in Zeitlin’s own handwriting. Since the overture is indeed a rhapsody based on well-known Jewish folksongs and folk dances, Zeitlin’s title obviously is more suitable than the final title *Palestina*. Zeitlin used the term *Hebrew* (spelled “Hybrew” in his script) for Jewish, as was customary in his home country, Russia. Baker Eisenstein explains: “Throughout the 1920s the Capitol often programmed a minor work employing Jewish motives to mark the Holidays of *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* ... and probably to appeal to the Jewish audience.” That year, the Theater’s management took it a step further, and commissioned a larger scale dramatic work, re-titling it *Palestina*, a title that would reverberate both with the Jewish spirit and the Jewish audience’s sympathy with the exotic Land of Israel.

As for the work itself, *Palestina* is a symphonic work of grand proportions—308 measures. The sections, played uninterruptedly, are differentiated by key, tempo, and by the Jewish tunes quoted. Right from the very opening, the character is established with the augmented second interval, so typical of Jewish music. The first full section of the work (mm. 35–92), includes the music of a Yiddish folk tune “Oy, Abram” and a tune from the Purim song “Shoshanas Yakov.” The second section (mm. 93–168) is constructed on “Freilichs,” a piano piece by Hirsch Shmulovich Kopyt. Kopyt actually used the well-known Yiddish folk song “Khanuke, oy Khanuke” that is sung during the Chanuka celebrations. The third section of the overture (mm. 169–200) is based on Josef Cherniavsky’s “*Di Yiddishe Trern*” (*Jewish Tears*). The fourth and final section (mm. 201–308) is an adaptation of his unpublished orchestral work *Scene Hebraique und Chsidischer tants*.

Through the overture (mm. 31, 51, 75, 160, 203 and 295), we have an imitation of the sound of the *shofar* (spelled “Schojfer” in the composer’s manuscript). The horn imitates the motives that are played on the *shofar* at the synagogue on the High Holidays called *Tekiah*, *Shevarin*, *Teruah* in Hebrew. These motives are characterized by ascending intervals of fourths and fifths and by repeated tones. Full of fanfare and force, well suited to a festive overture for the Capitol Theater, the fourth section is marked three fortes throughout. Interestingly, although entitled *Tempo di Marcia*, this section is in 3/4 meter, with a tune somewhat recalling a klezmer’s *Jok* dance tune (m. 225) playing against an ostinato 2/4 pattern in the timpani.

The musical analysis presenting the piece itself is meticulous and helps us understand the sources of the tunes and motives used. Since the work is now in print, it may be available for orchestras and youth orchestras that seek communicative, unknown Jewish music. We hope that this will also encourage

performers, and audiences to enjoy a corpus of music that, on the one hand, is not included in the standard repertoire, but, on the other, presents a style that, today, may sound very familiar and reminiscent of traditional folk music.

RACHELI GALAY