

AMS Pittsburgh – 7 Nov 2013

TWO WITNESSES, ONE KADDISH:
REFLECTIONS ON THE PISAR-BERNSTEIN REVIVAL (2009)

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In his preface to *Findings*, Leonard Bernstein remarked with some astonishment on what he considered a “gaping hiatus” in his writings from the 1940s, namely his relative lack of written response to the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. Bernstein relays that he felt “somewhat traumatized by the Holocaust,” a statement that David Schiller uses to contextualize Bernstein’s self-recognized “crisis of faith” in the postwar period. As Schiller notes, the composer did engage with Jewish topics and themes in two works composed in the 1940s: his first symphony (*Jeremiah*) and second symphony (*The Age of Anxiety*). Each of these works engages Jewish persecution and suffering either through musical topoi or textual references, but address of the Holocaust remains implicit. As Schiller contends, “neither symphony seems to have satisfied [Bernstein] as an adequate response to the Holocaust,” and thus he embarked on the composition of his third symphony, *Kaddish* (1963).

Ultimately, Bernstein was never satisfied with *Kaddish*; he would later revise its text, but never to any critical advantage. In a final effort, he contacted Samuel Pisar—a Holocaust survivor and personal friend—to compose a new narrator’s text, one that more openly referenced the Holocaust as the subject of the work’s meditation. Only after Bernstein’s death did Pisar finally agree to compose his own testimonial text for *Kaddish*, a version that premiered in 2009. This revival of *Kaddish* has been celebrated throughout the globe, with performances ranging from Yad Vashem and Moscow to Washington DC and Chicago (often with Pisar narrating the performances himself), but little critical attention has been paid to the aesthetic difficulties that arise when two testimonial voices—Bernstein’s music and Pisar’s text—are merged without the benefit of direct collaboration. This paper thus seeks to engage Pisar’s text critically as a poetic form of witness and questions how its incorporation into Bernstein’s fixed musical setting affects the tone, presentation, and performative context of both memorial voices.