

Darius Milhaud: **ESTHER DE CARPENTRAS** OPERA COMIQUE EN 2 ACTS

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Nihil est aliud falsitas nisi veritatis imitatio
(The false is nothing but an imitation of the true.)
—The *Novellae* (supplement to *Corpus iuris civilis*,
compiled under the reign of Justinian)

Non semper temeritas est felix.
(Temerity is not always successful.)
—Livy

Be serious, which does not preclude being funny.
—Susan Sontag

Darius Milhaud's *Esther de Carpentras*, a comic opera in the tradition of eighteenth-/nineteenth-century opera buffa, is an ingenious Purim farce that in effect fuses three Esthers into a single yet triple heroine: the Esther of the biblical Book of Esther, the Esther portrayed in a medieval or Renaissance-era Purim play, and Esther the professional actress who plays Esther in the play. In the event all three save their people.¹

Among Ashkenazi Jewry, which was not Milhaud's own family heritage (but rather, the much older, distinct Provençal Jewry), the entertainment known as the *Purimspiel* (Purim play) has a long-standing comic, often satiric tradition. It dates at least to the medieval period in Europe as a creative, evolving highlight of the annual Purim festivities, typically in the vernacular—whether German or Jüdisch Deutsch (Judeo-German) early on in German-speaking lands, or in Yiddish throughout eastern Europe. In its multiple forms and guises it has ranged from biblical reenactments, usually spiced with humor and clowning, to parodies, satires, burlesques, and spoofs—replete with clever joking, carnival spirit, and mockery of communal personalities. At various times in some communities the humor could descend to obscenity, insult, scatology, and sexual innuendo, until local rabbinical authorities stepped in to force modifications. In any case, the *Purimspiel* has been credited as a forerunner of actual Yiddish theatre in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the tradition has continued in lands of immigration, where it often became geared to children—and, except for Yiddish cultural and educational organizations, performed in the vernacular of the host country.

Beginning in medieval times, the Provençal community in the district known as the Comtat Venaissin—where Milhaud's family resided for many centuries—hosted its own French counterpart to the *Purimspiel*, known as “Esther plays.” As the opera's librettist, Armand Lunel,² explained, each year until the Revolution these were presented publicly in the town square. Papal permission was needed anew each year, but apparently it was typically forthcoming.

An Esther play forms the nucleus of the plot in *Esther de Carpentras*. Lunel published the play in 1926, but he and Milhaud began their collaboration on the opera in 1922, and by 1925 Milhaud had more or less completed it. Lunel is said to have based the play on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources, one of which was a *tragi-comédie* about Queen Esther, written by his grandfather in 1774.

Milhaud is one of the twentieth century's most famous and most prolific composers, as well as a member of the legendary Les Six. His biographical information is well known, but less commonly realized is the significance of his Provençal Jewish roots, which informed a number of his works before and after his immigration to America—one of which is this opera. He grew up in Aix-en-Provence, which he regarded as his ancestral city. His family had an established history of prominence in the Comtat Venaissin, a secluded region within Provence whose Jewish community was protected for centuries by the popes—largely out of financial and other economic interests, and later also as a hoped-for ally against the Reformation. Most of the rest of French Jewry was expelled in the fourteenth century, and apart from Provence, French Jewry was officially nonexistent for all practical purposes as a nationally permitted community until Napoleon.

Milhaud's paternal grandfather, Joseph Milhaud, was one of the founders of the synagogue in Aix, where he gave the inaugural address in 1840. And the family roots in the Comtat Venaissin are traceable at least to the fifteenth century—perhaps to the tenth century, if not earlier, as Milhaud wrote. Fifteenth-century documents with pontifical arms refer to a family “Milhaud from Carpentras.” So, as Mme. Milhaud expressed in a 2000 interview, her husband found the prospect of an opera built around an Esther play both intriguing and imaginatively nostalgic as part of his heritage.

Esther de Carpentras is, however, not just a traditional but new Esther play in operatic form, but a sort of “play within a play”—in some ways analogous in that regard to Cole Porter's musical *Kiss Me Kate*. The permission to present the play, casting, staging decisions, costume preparation, and rehearsal are all part of the opera, together with the actual sung performance of the play.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE CARDINAL, Bishop of Carpentras, Legate and Nephew of the Pope Tenor
 VAUCLUSE (his valet) Tenor
 HADASSAH (Esther) Mezzo-Soprano
 ARTABAN (prosperous Jewish financier) Tenor
 *CACAN (poor opera amateur; impresario and director of the play) Baritone
 **BARBACAN (caretaker of the synagogue) Bass
 MÉMUCAN (astrologer; Haman in the play) Tenor
 MARCHANDE (merchant for the masks, props, and costumes) Soprano
 JEWISH DOCTOR (for the plague; self-proclaimed doctor of the theater) ... Baritone

CHORUS(es) of JEWS (SATB, S/AS, T);

Friends of Esther (S/SA)

Cardinal's entourage (T)

Children's choir

Jews of the Carpentras community

*Also sings the role of head eunuch.

**Also sings the role of Mordecai.

TIME: Late Middle Ages or Renaissance
(NB. Some sources assume the late eighteenth century,
still during the *ancien régime*.)

PLACE: Carpentras—one of the main centers of Provençal
Jewry in the Comtat Venaissin, now in the department of
Vaucluse.

THE ACTION

The Jews of Carpentras wish to include in this year's Purim carnival a traditional Esther play performed in the town square in front of the synagogue. They need permission from the new cardinal-bishop, who happens to be a nephew of the pope and has recently arrived from Rome as his legate. A young priest of only eighteen or so, he has been "elevated" to the position and, as a consequence of some misbehavior (probably amorously if not sexually related) at the previous year's Roman carnival, has been assigned to this remote, "undesirable" place or diocese. This amounts to a quasi-banishment from Rome to an unrewarding position, with little hope of advancement. He is not pleased.

A delegation of three Carpentras Jews—Artaban, a prosperous financier; Cacan, an "opera amateur" and would-be impresario as well as the director of the play; and Barbacan, the caretaker of the synagogue—visit the cardinal at his official residence to seek his permission to mount the annual Esther play. When they arrive in the antechamber and tell the cardinal's valet, Vaucluse, that they have come to request an audience with the cardinal, Vaucluse asks if they have come to pursue conversion to the Church of Rome. He is angered at first by their vociferous negative replies.

When the cardinal arrives, in Scene 2, Vaucluse introduces the three men to him. They assure him that they, along with Carpentras Jewry as a whole, are nothing like the eastern European Jews he may have encountered—that Carpentras Jewry is of a superior character and cultural level. And Cacan reminds the cardinal that it was the Roman emperor Vespasian who dispatched the Jews to Gaul, which momentarily appears to impress him.

After the delegation leaves to await a promised timely ruling, the cardinal realizes that granting their request—which he has already decided to do out of an ulterior motive—will provide him with a self-serving opportunity. "You [the Jews] have given me a priceless moment," he says to himself. By that he means, as will be revealed in Act II, an opportunity to try to force mass conversion on the entire Jewish population of Carpentras—not to save their souls, but to score an impressive accomplishment all on his own. By that feat he might just earn the reward of being brought back to Rome.

While the three wait for their audience with the cardinal, Vaucluse derides them for their persistent adherence to Judaism. In a Christmas song ("*Noël Comtadin*") he demands that they agree to conversion. "You will renounce the Law of Moses (the Torah); you will no longer observe Passover." But the three interrupt him with vehement refusals even to consider his demands, declaring his beliefs false and proclaiming their Judaic tenacity by intoning a bit of the most basic Judaic doxology, *sh'ma yisra'el*, to demonstrate that they acknowledge and worship only one God and not the Holy Trinity of the Church.³

When Vaucluse returns to the cardinal, having ushered out the three delegates, he encourages him to follow through with the plan to attempt a mass conversion, estimating the number of Jews at about two thousand, a far more effective tactic than the common practice of kidnapping Jewish children for baptism. Persuading the entire assemblage at the play to convert will be far more difficult and thus more impressive, likely leading to an enviable career for the cardinal.

In Act II the semi-improvised Esther play commences. The cardinal's police are standing by, as requested by the delegates simply as a matter of crowd control and maintaining order.

The improvisation of the performance includes, initially and as it proceeds, the activity of the director onstage and his on-the-spot choices for who is to play which role; and the audience reacts almost as a group participant. To the enthusiastic approval of the crowd of spectators, Cacan begins by announcing his role as director, adding that he will also be playing the head eunuch of Ahasueros's harem. Artaban, he signals, will play Ahasueros, who then orders wine and a feast. To the crowd's initial disapproval, Mémucan, who apparently is disfavored in the community—not least for his astrological claims along with his self-trumpeting ego—is designated to play Haman, which makes sense as appropriate, so the crowd relents.

In this improvised version of the story, unlike in the biblical account, it is Haman who, after being told of Vashti's defiance, advises Ahasueros to seek a new queen. And it is Cacan who apprises the audience of the beauty competition.

Mordecai, played by Barbacan, reveals that his niece-cum-adopted daughter, Hadassah (her real Hebrew name), is actually a professional actress who has been living in Avignon. Moreover, she has been groomed and prepared for the role of Esther onstage. After some delay, she appears and announces that among all the candidates for the role, she is the only one from Avignon. At this point she launches into an aria in which she refers to her past starring in various professional roles. Here Milhaud's Brazilian influence is deliciously transparent, dating to his time in Brazil between 1917 and 1919, when he was medically exempt from service in the First World War. Several of his works—including two ballet scores—drew directly on that experience and leaned rhythmically and melodically on various Brazilian dance forms.

[MUS. EG — Esther's aria]

Hadassah is confirmed onstage as the one to play Esther, and she is costumed accordingly as part of the action by the Marchand, in turn playing the costume, props, and masks merchant. By Scene 12 Ahasueros reenters, announcing that he has found Esther (the most) desirable and has chosen her, even though he knows little about her. And he knows nothing yet of her Jewishness.

Just when Haman is about to reveal to Ahasueros his scheme for eliminating the empire's Jews by mass murder, the cardinal arrives with his entourage—soon to announce that he will take over the role of Ahasueros and play it himself onstage; and Vauclose, he has decided, will take over playing Haman. Meanwhile, Haman apparently succeeds in persuading the king about the need for the genocide, although at the moment Ahasueros seems more preoccupied with his interest in Esther.

Haman proceeds to determine the date for the Jews' annihilation, which is emphasized here as the date of the annual observance of the death of Moses. Mordecai therefore beseeches Esther to intercede with the king. Reluctant at first to approach Ahasueros uninvited, she relents and, as the chorus of Jews sings the "Canticle of Battle," agrees to take the risk for the sake of saving her people: "O jealous God, God who has always saved us from our enemies, God of the burning bush."

[Mus. EG.]

The cardinal and Vauclose take over the roles of the king and Haman, replacing Artaban and Mémucan. Upon ascending to the platform serving as the stage, the cardinal—now as Ahasueros—seizes the moment to proclaim his conversion decree, beginning with his "Air de Menaces."

[Mus. EG.]

In store for the Jews now, he declares, is their most critical moment of decision: conversion or eviction. Vauclose makes the official pronouncement of the edict. If by evening the Jews as a community have not consented to baptism and conversion, accepting the Holy Trinity, they will be expelled forthwith from the Comtat Venaissin, on pain of death.

Perhaps surprisingly, no one seems to question the cardinal's authority for either forced baptism or expulsion, even though the immunity of the Jews has always been papal policy. Upon hearing the edict, the crowd disbands and scatters, emptying the square as they cry out to Esther, leaving only the cast onstage. Having waited beneath the platform for her moment to make her entrance, Esther does so now as if nothing unusual has occurred—apparently not having heard the edict from below and unaware of what has been happening onstage. Shocked (or pretending dramatically to be shocked) at discovering the cardinal in place of Artaban as Ahasueros, she quickly regains her composure, realizes her opportunity, and, pretending to apologize for her mistake, feigns a loving wifely approach by fainting in his arms in a romantic gesture.

The cardinal is now terrified of word getting back to Rome that he'd been seen embracing a beautiful woman, play or no play, especially in view of his previous incident in Rome (perhaps with a Jewess, or so the rumor has been spread). Any such report will suggest an incurable attraction to women, with the expected consequences for his future as a priest. Sensing the possibility of an implied threat of blackmail, he cancels the edict and further stipulates that the privileges of the Jews are not to be revoked or diminished. Led by Cacan, the audience now returns gradually, praising the cardinal with *Alleluias*.

It is now time for the cardinal to proceed to the church, for mass. For the Jews it is time to recite the afternoon service (*minḥa*). Before leaving for the church, the cardinal looks upon Esther and the crowd and, considerately and graciously, offers the Christian doctrine of hope for them. The Jews respond with the Judaic affirmation of faith.

[Mus. EG.]

"Another Esther" has yet again saved the day for her people, this time by outwitting and entrapping their enemy in what amounts to a sort of double entendre and a contemporaneous take on the biblical story, albeit not as revision but for the sake of the comedy.

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The premiere originally planned for 1928 in Monte Carlo did not materialize. But following a radio broadcast in 1937, the staged world premiere was given in 1938 at the Opéra-Comique, as part of a Provençal festival that also featured Milhaud's opera *Le pauvre matelot* and a ballet score based on his *Suite Provençale*.

Wry, cleverly manipulated humor and buffoonery permeate the opera, juxtaposed against dramatic moments or brief scenes. Milhaud found this interweaving difficult, but clearly he succeeded. In rabbinic tradition, Ahasueros is called *melekh hatipesh*—the "fool king." Here it is fair to say that his dim-wittedness is transferred humorously to the cardinal, even before he takes over the role onstage. Inasmuch as the Jews of Carpentras live there by permission and protection of the Church and the pope—for the benefits the Jews can offer them—what makes him think that taking upon himself with no authorization the expulsion decree would be welcomed in Rome? (He refers as a precedent to the expulsions from what is today Spain and then from Portugal, in 1492 and 1497, but he doesn't know that by then it was too late for conversion.) And the very idea that the entire community of two thousand Jews would suddenly agree to conversion, whatever his threatened consequences for refusal, casts him humorously as a simpleton. Moreover, for advice, counsel, and encouragement, he relies foolishly on a simple valet, not on any statesman or Church official. Vacluse, too, exhibits humorously his stupidity, first in thinking he has a chance to persuade the three delegates to renounce their Judaism simply by his parroting age-old, anti-Jewish slogans and then by imagining that the cardinal's decree, whether obeyed by all two thousand Jews or by ridding Carpentras of all of them, could make the cardinal a hero in Rome, leading to some exalted position. Then there is the obvious prank in all "three Esthers" so easily making a double fool of him. We can imagine the audience roaring

with laughter once it grasps how she has seized the moment and how instantly the cardinal becomes a frightened victim, succumbing to what he assumes will be blackmail.

There were many favorable reviews.⁴ But some questioned the opera's Frenchness, implying that it could be regionally Provençal or Jewish, perhaps both, but not French per se in the sense of what was emanating nationally from Paris in terms of styles and artistic approaches. Others questioned Lunel and Milhaud's historical basis vis-à-vis the Jews in the Comtat Venaissin as an exaggeration of its past mutual tolerance between Jews and Roman Catholics. Some even went so far as to charge that the entire history of papal protection going back that far was a fabrication altogether. This bespoke nothing short of a transparently French anti-Jewish attitude. One biblically ignorant commentator charged that Lunel and Milhaud had sacrilegiously twisted a narrative of Scripture, when in fact nothing about *M'gillat Esther* is changed except for the intended farce based on it. Otherwise, anyone then or now would realize that nothing concerning the connection between the biblical account and the storyline in the opera is to be taken seriously. It is obvious that this is an opera about a Purim play, not about the Book of Esther—about calling the bluff of an enemy of the Jews. In the event, Milhaud knew a good opera story when he encountered one. That it was about Purim, Esther, and Provence only heightened his interest.

Moreover, some reviews were not without anti-Jewish overtones, even more blatantly proposing that only Jews could relate to *Esther de Carpentras*. And some went further to allege that as a Jew, Milhaud ipso facto could not write French opera.⁵

Milhaud, who was famous as the champion of polytonality, injected it ingeniously into the score—in relationships among vocal lines, in orchestral writing, and in character differentiation. In the 1920s, when he wrote the opera, he was considered something of a revolutionary and an enfant terrible, in part because of this technique, and by 1938 it still brought something new to the opera stage. At the same time, in its simplicity and directness there is an avoidance of superficial sentimentality. Milhaud was an admirer of the composer Erik Satie, who was known for—among other unelevated entertainments such as music halls and carnivals—the circus. And indeed there is a good bit of circus in the opera, beginning when the cardinal and Vaucluse take over the two roles onstage and of course when Esther emerges from beneath the platform.

The orchestral textures were criticized by some for interfering with vocal lines. Perusing the score now, however, it is difficult to understand that reservation, for throughout we hear Milhaud's signature focus on clarity.

Just as the final curtain is about to descend, Cacan, as the director within the cast, confirms the jubilant outcome by singing "*La mascarade s'achève en sermon*" (The Charade Has Ended as a Sermon). Typical opera audiences might recognize an adroit, deft allusion to the final line of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892), one of the most famous and most popular operas of all time, in which Canio—albeit in that case a tragic conclusion—brings down the curtain by singing "*La commedia è finita!*"

ENDNOTES

- 1 Milhaud also referred to the opera as a *dramma giocoso*, which is to say, a tragicomic piece. René Simon, “Trois Oeuvres d’un compositeur sur la même affiche,” in *L’Intransigent* (January 31, 1938)—shown to me by Mme. Milhaud in 2000 during our oral history interview in Paris, when she shared much other related information. Also quoted by Jennifer Walker in her master’s thesis, “Darius Milhaud, *Esther de Carpentras*, and the French Interwar Identity Crisis” (University of North Carolina, 2015).

- 2 As a Provençal Jew with deep family roots in the region, Lunel apparently wanted his version of Esther to be as “authentic” as possible vis-à-vis his Provençal heritage. It displeased him that accounts of the story (including this one, which he viewed as a translation to standard French) had not been written in the patois of Judeo-Provençal, in terms of its “local color” as the dialect of Comtadin Jews, which, for him, contrasted “pleasantly” with what he called the “harsh Yiddish of the Ashkenazim” and a “macaronic jargon.” Lunel, “*Pourim dans les lettres Comtadines*,” in *Esther de Carpentras ou le carnaval hébraïque* (Paris, 1926). Shared with me by Mme. Milhaud, 2000; also quoted in Walker, op. cit.

Typical of non-Yiddish-speaking and/or non-eastern European Jewry, Lunel’s disparagement of Yiddish betrays a common ignorance of the language and its literature, assuming Yiddish to be a German dialect. Moreover, even its dyed-in-the-wool antagonists have not heard Yiddish as “harsh”—if anything, the opposite.

Historically, the annual Esther plays were typically performed in the dialect of Judeo-Provençal. Originally Lunel wanted this opera to be composed in Judeo-Provençal as well, thinking that would render it more “authentic”—inasmuch he was eager in general to preserve the regional character of the Comtat through its dialect. Milhaud, however, prevailed in his insistence that the opera—since it was not an actual annual Esther play—should be composed in standard French, which is how it was published.

- 3 From Deuteronomy 6: *shma yisra’el adonai eloheinu adonai ehad* (Listen Israel! *adonai* is our God; *adonai* is the one and only God; His unity is His essence). This declaration is the central and oldest part of the Hebrew liturgy, recited by observant Jews twice daily as part of morning and evening prayers—and, if possible, upon one’s imminent death. This declaration of God’s unity and universal exclusivity applies ipso facto—and is intended to apply—to all monotheistic faiths. The Holy Trinity is often misunderstood by non-Christians as being in conflict with this unimpeachable certainty of one universal God of the entire universe.
- 4 P.c., Mme. Milhaud, personal interview and oral history, July 2000, Paris. Mme. was kind enough to share with me the various press reviews she’d saved, as well as other information concerning this opera and many other Milhaud works.
- 5 Walker’s thesis is propelled by the academically fashionable obsession with “identity,” arguing that the opera represents an agenda of Milhaud’s that not all of us accept either as factual or relevant. Walker connects the opera (and Milhaud’s other music of that period of its composition) to a quest for acceptance as truly French, even as a Jew—rather than of Provençal “identity.” (One wonders what the world of academia would do if that tiresome word, “identity,” did not exist. But attempts at finding a less shopworn, catchall, and more appropriate term, or at least a less irritating synonym, have yielded no satisfactory result.) After dwelling on the supposed identity issue, for example, Walker writes that “*Esther de Carpentras* was the composer’s attempt to validate the significance of his Judeo-Provençal heritage in the formation of his identity as a Frenchman, whether or not he would ever be accepted as such.” But that is not what the opera and Milhaud’s

inspiration to compose it were about. He wrote it to lampoon anti-Jewishness and anti-Judaism, making fools of enemies of the Jewish people and its religion in a work that, at the same time, harked back to Provençal history and, perhaps above all, appealed to his sense of an engaging, hilarious farce on a subject with which he was familiar.