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Musical and Dramatic Roles of the Chorus in Hugo Weisgall’s "Esther"

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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by

Michael Capobianco

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Music in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Musical and Dramatic Roles of the Chorus in Hugo Weisgall’s Esther

by

Michael Capobianco

Advisor: Bruce Saylor

Hugo Weisgall is considered one of America’s most important opera composers. He invariably chose subject matter of high artistic or philosophical importance, composing operas that dealt with significant 20th-century moral, social, and philosophical issues. In writing his final opera, Esther, which the New York City Opera premiered in October, 1993, Weisgall was able to make a larger statement about his Jewish heritage, the history of Jewish persecution and ultimate survival. The dissertation suggests that we enter the music and meaning of the opera most deeply through a consideration and study of the Chorus. The Chorus’s roles are as essential as any single protagonist. Weisgall’s opera features the Chorus as an entity coming to terms with the more recent Jewish persecution. The Chorus also moves along the dramatic action and fills in historical and psychological background, rendering the choral music substantial to the dramatic power of the work. Dramatically, the consequences and actions of the story’s heroine are dependent on the existence of her people (Chorus). The Chorus also transmits Weisgall’s overarching message of Jewish preservation in the face of unyielding oppression.
The dissertation focuses on four aspects of Weisgall’s treatment of the Chorus: 1) the Chorus as representing the Jewish People; 2) a subset of Chorus members projecting a Group Character; 3) the Naming Role, where the Chorus names or describes singular identities, such as Esther; and 4) the Philosophical Commentator (essentially a Greek Chorus). Of the four choral functions discussed, the Jewish People Chorus emerges as providing the totality of Holocaust emotional experience, the choral pieces rendering various moods. In Act I, Scene 12, the Chorus portrays shock and fear of imminent genocide, the words “unassimilated,” “perverting society,” “exterminate,” “annihilate,” and “make our lands secure and peaceful,” speaking directly to 21st-century ears. In Act II, Scene 8, the Chorus projects the lamentation, wailing, and praying of the survival experience. Finally, in Act III, Scene 11, the statements of “forever” express eternal Jewish preservation despite constant persecution, most concretely for us, the 20th-century Holocaust. The notion of identity is a significant theme in the story of Esther and in its other two functions—oftentimes co-existing, projecting a Group Character and the Naming Role—the Chorus helped to amplify our understanding of the protagonists. The Chorus as Philosophical Commentator touches on the eternal at the opera’s conclusion.

While Weisgall’s highly chromatic music in Esther clearly resides within the world of the Second Viennese school—a constant throughout his career—the dissertation examines the importance of diatonicism to Weisgall’s musical language, which juxtaposes specific uses of chromaticism and diatonicism to illustrate dramatic moments and to contrast or support the inner development of the protagonists or the Chorus. Weisgall consistently bases musical choices on the exigencies of the drama; therefore, his use of chromaticism underlies the Holocaust experience of terror and extinction and, by
contrast, his diatonicism captures survival and preservation. While Weisgall’s sound world cannot be explained by an overall centricity of pitch or a referential collection, he employs rotating diatonic collections, reoccurrences of diatonic subsets, and the reiteration of particular pitch classes.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

At age 80, Hugo Weisgall finished his last opera, *Esther*, which represents the composer’s final triumph. National and international press enthusiastically greeted the work at its 1993 New York City Opera premiere, and more than a decade after Weisgall’s death in 1997, the opera company revived *Esther* during its 2009–10 season. Charles Kondek’s libretto forms a dramatic retelling and interpretation of the biblical story of Esther, a young Jewish girl who becomes Queen of Persia and saves her people by challenging a decree to exterminate all Jews of the empire on a single day.

Weisgall set Kondek’s libretto on a grand scale, featuring twelve lead singing roles, a large chorus, a children’s chorus, and full orchestra. In an interview, Alison Weisgall (the composer’s granddaughter) remarked that in writing the opera Weisgall was able to make a larger statement about his Jewish heritage, the history of Jewish persecution and ultimate survival. She noted he had felt powerless to do more during and after the Holocaust of World War II, in which many of his relatives perished.

The Chorus in Weisgall’s *Esther* is as essential as any of the protagonists. Whereas George Frederic Handel’s 1732 oratorio *Esther* closely follows the biblical story, Weisgall’s opera features the Chorus as an entity coming to terms with the more recent Jewish persecution. The Chorus also moves along the dramatic action and fills in

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1 In this essay, I will mainly reference the piano/vocal rather than the orchestral score, since my topic and musical analysis essentially concerns the choral music.
historical and psychological background, rendering the choral music substantial to the
dramatic power of the work.

My main concern in this dissertation is to show how Weisgall’s Chorus
dramatizes the opera overall, accounting for its emotional ebb and flow. The Chorus
provides a context in which the audience might understand the Jewish experience of the
Holocaust as including specific psychological impacts: 1) in Act I, Scene 1, the
triumphant and bloodied Chorus portraying the ambiguity of war; 2) in Act I, Scene 12,
the fear of imminent genocide; 3) in Acts II and III, the sadness and lamentation over
looming genocide; 4) in Act III, a sense of triumph through the Elders Chorus ensemble
with Mordecai, who has obtained an important position after Esther’s rescue of her
people; and 5) the ideas of preservation in the repeated settings of the word “forever” at
the conclusion of the opera. This overall dramatic trajectory emphasizes the composer’s
message of the perseverance of the Jewish people despite intense, ongoing persecution.

Weisgall also uses the Chorus to portray specific dramatic roles and to fulfill
more abstract functions in advancing the action. I will focus particularly on these four
aspects of Weisgall’s treatment of the Chorus: 1) the Chorus as representing the Jewish
People; 2) a subset of Chorus members projecting a Group Character, for example, the
Astrologers; 3) the Naming Role, where the Chorus names or describes singular
identities, such as Esther; and 4) the Philosophical Commentator (essentially a Greek
Chorus). By using the Chorus to represent the Jewish people, for example, Weisgall also
underscores Esther’s heroism in achieving their deliverance, as she represents them in
microcosm.
Weisgall’s musical language juxtaposes specific uses of chromaticism and diatonicism to illustrate dramatic moments and to contrast or support the inner development of the protagonists or the Chorus. Thus, he combines diatonicism and chromaticism to achieve varying degrees of consonance and dissonance. This results in highly chromatic melodic material and quickly changing dissonant harmonic pitch structures, but also more settled consonances, where the composer draws from revolving diatonic sets. Weisgall consistently bases musical choices on the exigencies of the drama; therefore, his use of chromaticism underlies the Holocaust experience of terror and extinction and, by contrast, his diatonicism captures survival and preservation.

In examining the Chorus as guide to the overall dramatic trajectory of the opera, I discuss how Weisgall moves the narrative within choral sections, transitions, and climaxes in each act. In Chapter 2, I show how the Chorus drives Act I. I include instances of the first two functions of the Chorus described above, illustrating how Weisgall harnesses the Chorus onstage as actor and commentator. In Chapter 3, I examine similar processes in Act II and the first scene of Act III, the Chorus expressing the lamentation and despair of the Holocaust. In Chapter 4, I discuss the Naming Role and the reclamation of Jewish identity in Esther’s character. In Chapter 5, I illustrate how the Chorus expresses the central theme of Jewish survival and historical preservation, particularly in settings of the word “forever.”

I begin with a brief overview of Weisgall’s life and music, specifically his operas and the use of the chorus.
Hugo Weisgall: A Brief Biography

Hugo Weisgall (1912-1997) was born in a German-speaking region of Czechoslovakia and emigrated with his family to the United States in 1920. His family’s serious involvement in music stretches back four generations. His father Adolph Joseph Weisgal, a composer of synagogue music and a professional opera singer before becoming a cantor, had the greatest early impact on Weisgall. As a young man, Hugo Weisgall displayed an interest in singing and conducting, in addition to composition. Formally, he studied piano and composition at the Peabody Conservatory (1927-32) and, from 1932 to 1941, studied composition privately with Roger Sessions. After receiving degrees from the Curtis Institute in conducting (1938) and composition (1939), Weisgall received a PhD in German literature (in 1940) from Johns Hopkins University, writing on 17th-century German poetry. During his World War II service, which included responsibilities ranging from combat to intelligence and diplomacy, Weisgall also appeared in London and Prague as composer and conductor, heavily promoting American music as well as standard repertory. Throughout his career, he functioned as an administrator, teacher, composer, conductor, and even singer; he taught at Johns Hopkins University (1951-57), the Juilliard School of Music (1957-70), and Queens College, CUNY (1961-83).

Weisgall’s extensive background as singer and conductor influenced his compositional style. As a result of his father’s work as a cantor, he became steeped in Central European Jewish musical traditions. So extensive was his knowledge of this area that he later served as chair of the faculty of the Cantors’ Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (1952-96). Moreover, as conductor of the Chizuk
Amuno Choral Society of Baltimore, Weisgall directed two commercially released recordings of synagogue music. As a young man he acted and sang professionally; from childhood he grew to know intimately the standard opera and song literature. This background yielded a compositional style that places the vocal line at its center. Weisgall said, “I can sing anything I write. If I can’t sing it, I don’t write it.” These ideas had a profound effect on his rhythmic writing for voice. Bruce Saylor writes that Weisgall is particularly fond of irregular rhythmic units and written-out expansion and contraction. This rubato style may come from the traditional freedom in performing German lieder or from the rhythmically vague and melismatic cantillation of the Bible. In any case, the connection between Weisgall’s rubato and his vocal impulse seems clear.

Though his earlier works are influenced by Neo-Classicism, Weisgall’s study with Sessions dramatically impacted his compositional style. (Sessions himself had moved away from the Neo-Classicism his works reflect up until about 1930; his works written between 1930 and 1940 are more or less tonal, but harmonically complex. Beginning with his Solo Violin Sonata (1953), Sessions’ musical language shifts into serialist techniques, although not consistently employing Viennese twelve-tone ideas.) Weisgall gravitated toward the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, and he unapologetically held fast to this language throughout his compositional career. Though twelve-tone procedures figure in Purgatory (1958), Athaliah (1960-63), and elsewhere, Weisgall’s music largely employs “free atonality,” often with mixtures of rich polychords and highly dissonant structures.

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4 Ibid., 243-244.
The entry in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* describes Weisgall as “one of America’s most important composers of operas and large-scale song cycles.”

His ten operas, each with its own character and form, range from a one-act monodrama to five full-length grand operas. Weisgall invariably chose subject matter of high artistic or philosophical importance, composing operas that dealt with significant 20th-century moral, social, and philosophical issues. Such important themes were paramount to Weisgall: the librettos of his operas are taken from works of Frank Wedekind, August Strindberg, Luigi Pirandelo, W. B. Yeats, Jean Racine, Yukio Mishima, Shakespeare, and from the Bible. Always with a practical approach to stageworthiness, however, Weisgall set librettos that “appeal to my musical imagination, characters I am interested in, interesting situations, a point of view, good language, a sense of drama.”

The uniqueness of each Weisgall opera derives from his singular musical structures and idioms. They display extraordinary range, from intimate chamber works to sweeping grand operas. Although he wrote earlier, unperformed operas, Weisgall’s *The Tenor* (1948-50) is generally considered his first. This one-act, 75-minute opera employed six singers, an orchestra with single winds, one set, and one curtain. Five entrance-exit scenes with arias shape the drama.

Weisgall’s one-act chamber operas include *The Stronger* (1952), *Purgatory* (1958), and *Will You Marry Me?* (1989). *The Stronger*, a short opera (25 mins. duration) with only one singing role and a chamber ensemble of eight players, is perhaps Weisgall’s best known work. The music embodies the singer’s deepening psychological

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7 From a taped interview quoted in Alfred Balkin, “The Operas of Hugo Weisgall” (Ph.D diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1968), 34.
crisis in a progression of small musical segments. *Purgatory* (1958) employs twelve-tone procedures, continuous vocal arioso, and no set numbers. *The Gardens of Adonis* (begun in 1959, resumed 1977-81) is a full-length opera without chorus for which Weisgall uses recitatives, arias, and ensembles; he contains free atonality within Neo-Classical rhythmic features. *Will You Marry Me?*, Weisgall’s penultimate opera, is his only comedy.

Weisgall employs a chorus in five of his operas, including *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1953-56), his first work performed by the New York City Opera, and which also confirmed his reputation as an important American composer. In *Six Characters*, Weisgall explores illusion versus reality, musically differentiating between the two (for example, blander music and melodies referencing the *Dies irae* set against riveting “speech-melody”). He also employs smaller musical units and epigrammatic musical ideas to punctuate events or sections. Weisgall structures *Athaliah* (1960-63) on the biblical character as a “numbers opera,” and features a large chorus and massive set pieces. *Nine Rivers from Jordan* (1964-68), in three acts, concerns ethical dilemmas raised by World War II. Though filled with music of power, variety, and great beauty, the 1968 New York City Opera premiere of the work was unsuccessful, and its poor reception discouraged the composer, leading to a fallow period. *Jenny, or The Hundred Nights* (1975-76), set to a libretto by John Hollander, relocates Yukio Mishima’s modern Noh play to 19th-century London.

*Esther, an Overview*

The New York City Opera premiered *Esther*, Weisgall’s last stage work, in October, 1993. In the Stagebill program for the performance, Weisgall recounts the genesis of his writing *Esther*, the only opera topic for which the initial idea came from
someone besides himself. Around 1985 Terence McEwen, the general director of the San Francisco Opera, offered Weisgall a commission. The composer suggested several ideas, which McEwen rejected, proposing instead the biblical story of Esther. While the subject matter was not Weisgall’s first choice, it appealed to him as rich and worthy of operatic treatment. (Thus, Weisgall also became the second important opera composer after Handel to write large-scale works on two powerful biblical women, Esther and Athaliah.) Weisgall enlisted Charles Kondek, who had written the libretto for *Will You Marry Me?*, and after meeting with McEwen, librettist and composer began work. The San Francisco Opera withdrew from the project in 1990, due to a change in directorship, but the opera was premiered at New York City Opera’s 50th-anniversary celebrations in 1993. *Esther* was Weisgall’s third opening at that opera house, a critical success, and in 2009, New York City Opera revived the work.

The story of Esther is found in the Hebrew Bible in shorter form, with additional chapters in the Greek Apocrypha. Parts of the story are commemorated by Purim, the annual Jewish festival. The story takes place in ancient Persia. Esther, a young Jewish woman, is selected for the harem from which King Xerxes (King Ahasuerus, in the Bible) chooses a new queen. Haman, Xerxes’ Amalekite vizier, despises Esther’s uncle Mordecai, a clerk at the court, because of his refusal on religious grounds to bow to Haman. In retaliation for this dishonor, Haman and Zeresh, his manipulative wife, propose a plan to the king to eliminate all Jews in the Persian Empire on the 13th of Adar, a date chosen by lots (*pur*), thereby destroying Mordecai. The decree is issued; Esther, however, wins the heart of King Xerxes, reveals her Jewish identity, and asks the
king for Haman’s life—and for a new decree that will allow the Jews to defend themselves. The intended day of slaughter becomes one of triumph for the Jewish people.

Weisgall’s *Esther* is structured in three acts, and even contains a dance in Act III, Scene 2. Musical traits present in Weisgall’s music throughout his compositional career are evident. Vocal lines derive from an intimate reading and setting of the text, with a deep concern for both vocalism and the rhythms of American speech. There is often a forceful propulsive drive in *Esther*, especially in the orchestra. Weisgall’s musical language draws on his own version of free atonality. While *Esther* consists of closed forms—recitatives, arias, duets, trios, choruses and orchestral interludes—it is primarily through-composed, with musical scenes and panels, almost cinematic, seamlessly woven together.

**The Roles of the Chorus in *Esther***

Weisgall breaks no new ground by his use of the chorus in opera, generally. My concern here is rather how the chorus functions within this particular work to help shape the drama. Weisgall employs operatic conventions and historical functions of the chorus to suit dramatic ends.

precedents for some aspects of Weisgall’s treatment of the Chorus can be seen in a variety of earlier operas. In Handel’s *Esther* (1732), discussed in further detail below, the composer employed a Chorus of Israelites, a less significant Chorus of Persian Soldiers, and a group of Israelite Women. Verdi, in *Nabucco* (1841), used the Chorus to embody “the people”—Hebrew slaves. In Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (1873), the Chorus personifies the Russian people, assuming almost equal weight to the protagonists.
In Saint-Saëns’s *Samson and Delilah* (1876), the Chorus plays two roles, both the Hebrews and the Philistines. In Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* (1932), the full Chorus portrays the Israelites. (In the opening scene, six choral soloists join the speaking Chorus to represent the “Voice from the Burning Bush.”) In Britten's *Peter Grimes* (1945), the Chorus plays the significant role of the Townspeople; towards the opera’s conclusion, the Chorus, demanding justice, first angrily shouts “Peter Grimes!” as they search for the murderer, then, in the final scene, sing his name from a distance *sotto voce* as Grimes contemplates ending his life. These few but significant examples demonstrate the chorus in the standard opera repertory, those which have resonance in Weisgall’s *Esther.*

Weisgall and Kondek, through music and text, assign the Chorus a variety of functions that help to shape the drama and add philosophical depth to the work. Of the delineated four functions of the Chorus in *Esther*, the Jewish People is the most important, second only to the title role. The Chorus, as one of the opera’s leading protagonists, represents the persecuted, ultimately victorious Jewish people. It expresses the corporate thinking of the Jewish population, which consists of powerful and conflicting emotions. The Chorus sometimes interacts with individual protagonists, provoking them into action, or commenting on behavior. Patricia Howard, referring to Gluck’s *Alceste*, notes the particular significance of choruses, as “essential to the full portrayal of the principal characters, since it is so often on the relationship between the

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8 It is beyond the essay’s scope to provide detailed examples of the Chorus in other operas. As stated above, Weisgall does not use the Chorus in novel ways. Schoenberg, for example, in *Moses und Aron*, employs far greater variety and uniqueness in his usage of the Chorus. A succinct review of the role of the Chorus in opera historically may be found in Moss, “The Chorus as Character in three American Operas of the Late Twentieth Century,” 1998.
principals and the chorus that the drama depends.” This statement applies particularly well to *Esther*; the development of Esther’s character is at every stage inextricably linked to the Chorus. For example, in Act I the Women’s Chorus delineates her identity as a member of the harem; in Act III the Chorus in the Naming Role implores her to act on behalf of the Jews. Thus, over the course of the opera, Esther transforms from a young, innocent Jewish girl into the role of heroine—the bold and (more) mature Queen of Persia. This transformation necessarily involves the Chorus because, without a people (the Chorus) to save, no heroine is necessary; hence, no *Esther*.

The diverse emotions of the Jewish People in the opera reflect the varied human feelings associated with crisis. Weisgall structures the shifting emotional state of the Jewish People in an inverted arc-like form, reaching its nadir in the center. It may be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act I</th>
<th>Act II</th>
<th>Act III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Victory, pride, defiance</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shock, fear</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Despair, lamentation, anguish</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Scenes 11, 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal deliverance</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Scene 12
Defensiveness, rage against oppression

A Group Character refers to moments when the Chorus represents a collective character, such as the Women of the Harem or the Astrologers. The protagonists interact with the Chorus as a particular group. Further, these group characters often form a mixture or blend with one or another of the protagonists as part of the group. For

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example, Esther belongs to the Women of the Harem and Mordecai belongs to the Elders. These group character roles of the Chorus, therefore, amplify our understanding of the solo protagonists.

Names are extremely important in *Esther*, reflecting the idea of identity as one of the crucial dilemmas of the opera (an idea I explain further below). The Chorus in a Naming Role sings a character’s name for various dramatic reasons, including 1) to highlight an upcoming event; 2) to indicate an emotional state; 3) to provoke him or her to action; or 4) to redefine a character’s status. Of the four choral functions, the term Naming Role is most original to my essay, though the Chorus in Britten’s *Peter Grimes* has a clear Naming Role; the Townspeople’s transition from loud, angry shouts to soft, ethereal callings of his name marks the end of Grimes’ life.

The role of Philosophical Commentator appears when the Chorus inserts an immediate parenthetical commentary on a dramatic situation. It may also make a broader philosophical statement. The Chorus as commentator concludes the opera.

Weisgall presents a postmodern interpretation of the biblical story, laced with dualities, a nuanced reading that sees multiple sides of the issues of war and Jewish identity. For example, while the Jewish people prevailed, many Jews died; while Haman and other enemies of the Jews were defeated, it was still a day of great bloodshed—leaving a widowed mother with ten dead sons; and while the Jewish people survived Haman’s proposed extermination, their history became partially defined as one of continued persecution. This post-Holocaust reading of the biblical story resonates with

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10 By comparison, Handel presents a straightforward ending, within the context of the eighteenth century: God, through Esther, saves the Jewish people from the plot to destroy them; instead of slaughtered they end up killing their enemies, and the Chorus sings a rousing, exuberant finale, praising God’s deliverance.
contemporary society. Rather than adhering to Handel’s simpler story, Weisgall shows a complex of dualities, which the Chorus helps to articulate.

The Chorus not only concludes but also opens the opera. A crucial dramatic decision by Weisgall, to begin the opera foreshadowing the victorious Jewish people, creates another significant duality, that of the 13th of Adar, first a date of looming terror, then one that marks victory. Even though Haman threatens Jewish extermination on the 13th of Adar, the opening scene has already revealed the opposite meaning—that the 13th of Adar is a day of triumph for the Jews. Thus, instead of beginning the opera with a young, naïve Esther—as does Handel—Weisgall begins with the bloodied Chorus brandishing their weapons. Their triumph conflicts with their loss: many Jews have died, and even as Haman and his ten sons hang from the gallows, the Jewish People chorus is concerned about the idea of so many deaths, even of their enemies.

Scene 1 is essentially a prelude, set apart from the chronological narrative, which begins to unfold in Scene 2. Its import echoes throughout the course of the opera; therefore, at every dramatic moment, the framing device of the 13th of Adar (with its dual significance) returns.

Throughout the opera, the choral music helps to articulate these dualities. My analysis is considerably influenced by the views of Joseph Kerman who argued that in the best works “music articulates the drama.”\(^{11}\) The music in an opera, he argues, offers a telescopic lens into meaning and action, and transcends text by expressing specific, dramatic intent. Kerman’s concept is particularly relevant to *Esther* and Weisgall’s version, in particular. Saylor, a student of Weisgall (and who gave the pre-opera lecture in 2009 as part of New York City Opera’s revival), asserted that Weisgall ardently

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 subscribed to Kerman’s position. Analysis of the choral music from motivic, melodic,  
harmonic, rhythmic, and orchestral perspectives reveals not only Weisgall’s  
compositional approach, but also the musical and dramatic functions of the Chorus.  

Musical Expression  

Weisgall’s musical language, which might be characterized as free atonality, also  
displays fluid interplay and juxtaposition of chromatic and dissonant elements against  
more diatonic ones, including more consonant, quartal and whole-tone harmonies. The  
following example provides a glimpse into diverse pitch structures Weisgall employs in  
the opera.  

Example 1.1. Chromatic and diatonic pitch structures employed in Esther.  

\[ \begin{align*}  
\text{Chromatic pitch structures} & \quad \text{Diatonic pitch structures} \\
\begin{array}{c}
\text{(0167) \textit{x}} \\
\text{(01235689)} \\
\end{array} & \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{(027) (027)} \\
\text{E major extended} \\
\end{array}
\end{align*} \]

12 Bruce Saylor, New York City Opera pre-concert talk, Kaplan Penthouse, Lincoln Center,  
November 15, 2009.
In terms of both chromatic and diatonic writing, Weisgall’s musical leaning towards the Second Viennese school translates into the language of a multitude of set classes and collections. Three in particular appear with such plenitude and purpose that I refer to them as set classes $x$, $y$, and $z$ throughout this dissertation (see Ex. 1.1).

Set class $y$ (012), a chromatic set, is the source of the only leitmotif of the opera and associated with the phrase “the 13th of Adar.” Set class $x$ (0167) is a chromatic set from which Weisgall derives motivic and melodic material to capture the terror of the 13th of Adar. Set class $z$ (0257), a more consonant set, includes melodic and harmonic material that often alludes to Jewish deliverance and triumph.

The $x$ and $z$ set classes relate as versions of each other by chromatically inflecting two internal elements. Thus, Weisgall articulates the opera’s dramatic duality by associating these two sets: a potential day of terror becomes a day of triumph.

In broader terms, I regard Weisgall’s consonance and dissonance as organizing principles of his post-tonal influences. We might view the widespread variance of consonance and dissonance within *Esther* on a scale, with different dramatic moments at different points. Thus, the relative levels of consonance or dissonance in a few notable passages are as follows:
Table 1.1. Consonance and dissonance within the dramatic structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Musical Character</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 10</td>
<td>Predict terror of 13th of Adar</td>
<td>Astrologers</td>
<td>More Chromatic / Dissonant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 1</td>
<td>Bloodied, victorious</td>
<td>Jewish People Chorus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 12</td>
<td>In fear and shock</td>
<td>Jewish People Chorus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 1</td>
<td>Defensive</td>
<td>Jewish People Chorus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 9</td>
<td>Joyful</td>
<td>Chorus of Elders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scenes 8-9</td>
<td>Sensuous</td>
<td>Women’s Chorus</td>
<td>More Diatonic / Consonant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weisgall also uses consonance and dissonance simultaneously to express the idea of duality, by combining, for example, more chromatic melodic material with consonant harmonic underpinnings. Hence, a chromatic melody may receive structural diatonic support to represent the eventual Jewish survival against a failed attempt at extermination.

In addition to the melodic and harmonic vocabulary, vocal texture figures prominently in helping to musically shape the drama. Unison, homophonic, and polyphonic passages, a cappella, or accompanied sections contribute to density or sonoric variety. In addition, Weisgall infuses rhythm and orchestration with dramatic meaning. For example, rhythmic variance in settings of the name “Esther” help to articulate sensuality, or the Chorus’s fear and elation around her actions or lack thereof. Similarly, terse, acerbic dissonant orchestral gestures contrasting swaths of harmonic diatonicism support functions of the choral music.
Weisgall’s *Esther* concludes not with loud, victorious music but rather with a slower, prolonged, more abstract choral section. The Chorus becomes the vehicle through which the composer makes broad, philosophical statements about the opera’s topic.

**Choral Appearances in *Esther***

The following list provides an overview of Weisgall’s choral sections and where they appear in *Esther*, which might serve as a guide while reading this dissertation:

Table 1.2. Map of choral sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act / Scene</th>
<th>Page Nos. (Vocal Score)</th>
<th>Choral Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 1</td>
<td>3-8</td>
<td>Jewish people, victorious; Naming Role, Haman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scenes 8-9</td>
<td>8-9, 70-80, 84</td>
<td>Group Character, Harem chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>88-91</td>
<td>Harem; Naming Role, Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 10</td>
<td>94-99</td>
<td>Group Character, the Astrologers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act I, Scene 12</td>
<td>105-124</td>
<td>Jewish People, terrified and aghast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act II, Scene 9</td>
<td>177-184</td>
<td>Jewish People, lamenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 1</td>
<td>212-217</td>
<td>Jewish People, despairing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 3</td>
<td>232-234</td>
<td>Group Character, banquet guests; Naming Role, Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 5</td>
<td>257-260</td>
<td>Group Character, banquet guests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 6</td>
<td>264-265</td>
<td>Philosophical Commentator (or Greek Chorus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>267</td>
<td>Naming Role, Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 7</td>
<td>270-271</td>
<td>Naming Role, Esther</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>272</td>
<td>Jewish People, retribution-seeking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act / Scene</td>
<td>Page Nos. (Vocal Score)</td>
<td>Choral Role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 8</td>
<td>273-285</td>
<td>Group character, Children’s Chorus; Naming Role, Haman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 9</td>
<td>286-290</td>
<td>Jewish People as Elders Chorus; Naming Role, Mordecai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 11</td>
<td>303-312</td>
<td>Jewish People, triumphant, transition to Philosophical Commentator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act III, Scene 12</td>
<td>313-314 (end)</td>
<td>Philosophical Commentator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2

The Chorus in Act I: Dramatic Propulsion and Emotional States

In this chapter I discuss Weisgall’s use of the Chorus to shape the narrative and the emotional ebb and flow in Act I of *Esther*. Weisgall manifests the opening mood in Scene 1, depicting the outcome of the story as a kind of preamble, the intense image of the bloodied Chorus in the role of the Jewish People standing triumphant and vengeful, having overcome their fate on the 13th of Adar—the day Haman and Xerxes have set for their extermination. In Scenes 8 and 9, the Women’s Harem Chorus sets the context for the ensuing romantic relationship between Esther—at this point a member of Xerxes’ harem—and the King. In Scene 10 the Chorus, now as the Astrologers, announces the date of the Jewish extermination. In Scene 12, the final scene of Act I, Weisgall depicts the mood with a shocked and terrified Chorus, again in the role of the Jewish People, as they hear and read the decree announcing their impending extermination.

**Act I, Scene I: A Bloodied But Triumphant Chorus**

The emotional arc of the opera opens with the Chorus, first heard offstage, then seen bursting loudly onto the stage. The composer’s marking reads: “a wildly jubilant mob, smeared with blood, brandishing swords.”\(^\text{13}\) In this scene, the Chorus invokes the Jews’ sense of triumph over their enemies:

> Chaff in the wind, mighty cypress, deep rooted in the earth.

> They are chaff before the wind!

The nations have fallen into the pit they made, but we are risen and stand,

We stand upright as the mighty cypress deep rooted.

Throughout the opera, the text of the Chorus weaves together various passages from the Bible, most notably from the Psalms and Lamentations. In Act I, Scene 1, these passages combine fragments from Psalms 1, 9, and 20: 1) Psalm 1:4, “The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away”; 2) Psalm 9:16, “The nations are sunk down in the pit that they made; in the net which they hid is their own foot taken”; and 3) Psalm 20:8, “They are brought down and fallen; but we are risen, and stand upright.”

Kondek’s use of phrases from the Psalms adds historical and cultural resonance to the text, and elevates corporate prayer using the Jewish people’s own “prayer book.”

The audience is presented with the opera’s first duality in the opening scene: The Jewish people’s triumph has occurred at the expense of a father—Haman—and his ten sons, who have been killed in revenge. As the curtain opens, a gruesome scene appears, reflecting Kondek’s stage directions. In his review of the New York City Opera production, Harold Blumenfeld noted the “affecting, evocative, and sometimes overtly descriptive score.”

Dark and ominous on a barren hillside stand eleven gibbets, from one—set apart—hangs Haman’s body; from the others hang his ten sons. After lugubrious string music captures the macabre image onstage, at Rehearsal 1 (R. 1), the Gravedigger sings the first words of the opera: “Not a pretty sight, is it? A father, Haman, his ten sons.” The Gravedigger then begins to list the names of Haman’s sons, but his words become overpowered by the raging Chorus, who sing of their triumph and vengeance. This choice perhaps reflects Weisgall’s desire for the audience to see events

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from the Jews’ perspective. Nevertheless, with the names of the enemies’ dead Weisgall also reminds us of our collective humanity.

Weisgall expresses this emotional triumph of the Jewish people viscerally, particularly through the choral lines, which are jagged, fast, often consisting entirely of sixteenth notes. Other examples demonstrate how emotion is captured by the music, how Weisgall uses consonance and dissonance to help articulate the drama. His sections of free atonality consist of a harmonic vocabulary utilizing dissonant and chromatic set classes, often in conjunction with more chromatic linear motion, and more consonant set classes, extending to diatonic collections. Two dissonant set classes, (0167) and (012), occur with such frequency throughout the opera that I refer to them as set class $x$ and set class $y$. The $y$ set appears throughout the opera, most significantly in the leitmotivic “13th of Adar”—the source material of the Chorus’s fear and anxiety.

In Act I, Scene 1, the Chorus sings “the nations have fallen” (Ex. 1). The quick-tempo music, short note values, intermittent rests, use and placement of accents, *forte* dynamic level, the indication “menacingly” in the score, and the use of the dissonant set classes $x$ and $y$, all serve to build up an emotional peak of bloodied triumph over vanquished enemies. In m. 3, the tenors [C, B$^b$, B, A] state an extended version of the set class $y$ trichord; so do the choral octaves [C, B, B$^b$] in m. 4. At the end of m. 4, Weisgall sets “have fallen” to [G$, G$, D, C$^#$], or set class $x$; the descending melodic motion [$-i1$, -$i5$, -$i1$] graphically illustrates the text (Ex. 2.1).
Example 2.1. Act I, Scene 1, R. 3, mm. 3-4, dissonant set classes $x$ and $y$ in Chorus build up to emotional peak describing bloodied triumph over vanquished enemies.

Weisgall melodically uses chromatic set classes in the Chorus singing of the vanquished nations. In m. 5, sopranos’ $[D\# , E, F]$ altos’ $[B_b , A, B]$ and tenors’ $[F, E, F\#]$ constitute statements of set class $y$, symbolizing the “heathen nations” (those who oppose Israel) falling “into the pit,” the intended fate of the Jews on the “13th of Adar” (Ex. 2.2).

Example 2.2. Act I, Scene 1, R. 3, m. 5, chromatic set classes in Chorus’s singing of vanquished nations.
This opening scene also demonstrates the use of dissonance and consonance throughout the opera to express the Jews’ internal conflict with war. Here Weisgall expresses the conflicting emotions of the Jews in layered ideas of the Jewish triumph. On the one hand, Jewish survival symbolizes perseverance and Esther’s heroism. On the other, their triumph comes at the expense of the lives of Haman and his sons, which also represent the subsequent greater loss of life—some 75,800 lives according to the biblical account. Thus the Jewish people cannot ultimately rejoice; theirs is a pyrrhic victory with so many left dead. Esther will emphasize this sentiment in Act III, Scene 10 when she sings “It must not be forgotten. It must not be repeated. So much blood, so many, so many dead.”

Weisgall portrays this duality toward the end of Act I, Scene 1; the rising melodic line of dissonant set classes until the final word “cypress” depicts the Jews’ triumph. From R. 3, m. 7 to R. 4, m. 2, a breathless, more expansive choral passage appears with few rests. Melodic motion derives from interlocking statements of set class x: At R. 3, m. 7, Weisgall sets “are risen and stand” to [B, B♭, E, F]; in mm. 7-8, “we stand,” to [C#, G, G#, D]; in m. 8, “mighty cypress,” to [E, B, B♭, F]; and in m. 9, “stand upright,” to [C#, D, A♭, G].

We hear an implied chromatic ascent in the vocal line’s overall contour from C and C♯, in m. 7, and to D, D♯, E, F, in m. 8. On the last beat of m. 8, the vocal line descends an octave on F on the word “cypress,” allowing the line to recommence on a new chromatic ascent from C♯, D, E-flat, in m. 9, to the E, F, F♯, in m. 1 of R. 4 (see Ex. 2.3). However, at R. 4, mm. 1-2, a very clear diatonic setting of the word “cypress” appears, a musical depiction of the Jewish people’s eventual “rise and stand” stature as
mighty “cypress” after their great struggle. The longer note values on “cypress” highlight a diatonic melodic motion, \([C\#, B, F\#, G\#]\), a first statement of a consonant (0257) set class that I refer to as the \(z\) set (see Ex. 2.3). At the first scene’s conclusion, Weisgall establishes dissonance as articulating Jewish struggle, and consonance representing permanent preservation.

Example 2.3. Act I, Scene 1, vocal line with two chromatic ascents utilizing \(x\)-set, culminating in climactic \(z\)-set statement \([F\#, G\#, B, C\#]\) on “cypress.”
Group Character Roles in Act I

Scenes 8 and 9: Women of the Harem (or Women’s Chorus)

In Act I, Scenes 8 and 9, a women’s Chorus, in a conventional operatic domestic scene, represents the virgins invited to King Xerxes’ harem. The choral passages in these scenes 1) identify Esther as no longer a Jewish girl but a member of the harem; 2) interact directly with Esther, soliciting her to describe her naïve desire to become queen; and 3) intimate, through Weisgall’s heightened use of lush and diatonic material, that Esther might win the heart of Xerxes.

Example 2.4 demonstrates Weisgall’s use of a new harmonic vocabulary in these scenes, with more diatonic pitch collections and a static harmonic block. Furthermore, his quieter dynamics, slow tempo (quarter = 69-72), and diatonicism all serve to capture Esther’s sensuousness within the harem. For example, at R. 97, mm. 2-5, in Weisgall’s setting of “those who have yet to lie in Xerxes’ bed,” the pitches draw from the following diatonic collections: in m. 2, \([E^b, F, A^b, B^b, C]\) and \([E, F#, G#, B, C#]\); in m. 3, \([G, A, C, D]\), \([F#, G#, C#, D#]\) and \([F, G, B^b, C]\). All five chords are \(z\) set or extended \(z\) set members. At the end of this phrase, in mm. 4-5, Weisgall’s extended diatonic orchestral harmonic block appears, \([E, F#, G#, A, B, C#]\), with E the lowest pitch, against which the Harem chorus sustains the word “bed” for three beats on \((025)\) and \((027)\) subsets of the \(z\) set (see Ex. 2.4).
Example 2.4. Act I, Scene 8, R. 97, m. 2–5, Weisgall’s setting of the words “yet to lie in Xerxes’ bed” connects her winning Xerxes’ heart to idea of Jewish preservation.

Weisgall’s harmonic usages in this scene connect to Esther’s earlier character development, in Scene 2, when she is first told by her cousin Mordecai that she must join the harem—an act they both know will result in their separation. In this scene she and Mordecai dream of one day reuniting as they sing, “We’ll be together and we’ll be home,” a reference to an idealized return to the Jewish homeland. Weisgall’s setting of Esther’s “we’ll be home,” on pitches [F#, B, E, B]—a +i5, +i5, i7 motion—soars to a sustained high B (see Ex. 5). This passage contains one of the most settled harmonic
moments in the opera: a fermata on the sonority containing \([E, F\#, D\#, G\#, C\#, B]\), with E again in the bass, essentially an extended E-major chord, which appears in vocal and orchestral parts. Thus, Weisgall introduces the association of the notion of home and Jewish preservation with the E-major sonority (or pitch class E). These sustained harmonic moments also musically connect the notion of “home” in Scene 2 to the discussion of Esther’s winning Xerxes’ heart in Scene 8.

Example 2.5. Act I, Scene 2, R. 27, m. 2-3, E major setting of the word “home” representing Jewish preservation.

In another passage from Scene 8, when Esther asks if she will “please him,” the Harem Chorus (R. 102, mm. 4-6) responds, “with your perfect breasts and alabaster skin, you may.” At the end of the phrase this chorus again holds its final pitches \([F\#, G\#, B, E]\) against the same diatonic harmonic collection from Scene 2, \([E, F\#, G\#, A, B, C\#, D\#]\). Pitch class E in the sopranos (see Ex. 2.6) musically indicates that the “may” will be an
affirmative, that Esther will indeed please Xerxes. E major remains symbolically significant, as Jewish preservation rests on Esther being chosen queen.

Example 2.6. Act I, Scene 8, R. 102, mm. 4-6, E major symbolizes Esther’s access to Xerxes and, ultimately, achieving Jewish preservation.

After Hegai, the Keeper of the Harem, tells Esther that she has been called to Xerxes’ bed that very night, the chorus sings an extended “Ah” on lush sonorities that become the background for the ensuing conversation between Esther and Hegai. Weisgall uses diatonic pitch collections that extend multiple measures to harmonize the “Ah”: at R. 114, m. 1, [B, C, D, E\textsubscript{b}, F]; in m. 2 [B\textsubscript{b}, C, D, E\textsubscript{b}, F, G, A\textsubscript{b}]; in m. 3, [B\textsubscript{b}, C\textsubscript{b}, D\textsubscript{b}, E\textsubscript{b}, F, G\textsubscript{b}, A\textsubscript{b}]; and in m. 6, [B\textsubscript{b}, C\textsubscript{b}, D\textsubscript{b}, E\textsubscript{b}, F\textsubscript{b}, G\textsubscript{b}, A\textsubscript{b}] (see Ex. 2.7). This rich music, containing consonant melodic gestures and slow-moving harmonies, portrays Esther’s seductiveness and foreshadows her romance with Xerxes.
Example 2.7. Act I, Scene 9, diatonic harmonies foreshadow Esther and Xerxes’ romance.

**Scene 10: The Astrologers Cast Pur (Lots) to Select Date of Jewish Extermination**

In Act I, Scene 10, a small male subgroup of the Chorus—three tenors and three basses—represents six Astrologers, another Group Character, narrating the plot in casting *pur* (lots) in Haman’s presence to choose the future extermination date. Weisgall
juxtaposes the establishment of the day of doom in Scene 10 against Jewish salvation expressed through the Harem Chorus in Scenes 8 and 9. Scene 10 also provides a practical and dramatic contrast as men’s voices replace women’s onstage and Haman’s singing of his villainous scheme juxtaposes Esther’s youthful, pure thoughts.

Musically, Weisgall portrays Haman’s vengeful fury with a scherzo, the faster note values and tempo (dotted half note = 72-76) abruptly following the Harem chorus. Example 2.8 (R. 122, mm. 1-4) shows the opening melodic line of the Astrologers, jagged and dissonant, formed by the overlapping of two $x$ sets, $[A, B^b, E, E]$ and $[D, E^b, A^b, A]$; the upper orchestra doubles the Astrologers’ vocal line. The orchestra enhances the mood, playing chromatic webs that unfold the $x$ and $y$ sets; in the lower register, parallel (016) chords which derive from the $x$ set are hammered out (Ex. 2.8).

Example 2.8. Act I, Scene 10, R. 121 and R. 122, opening Astrologers Chorus music: jagged, dissonant setting of two $x$ sets.
At R. 127, mm. 1-4, as the Astrologers are set to reveal the day of carnage, they sing a chromatic and winding line on the syllable “Ah,” in eighth notes derived from the $x$ and $y$ sets (Ex. 2.9). The orchestra here both doubles the chromatic web and plays either dotted-half note $i_1$ or $i_{11}$ intervals. The Astrologer’s “Ah,” derived from the $x$ and $y$ sets, contrasts the diatonic and lyrical “Ah” sung by the Harem Chorus in the previous scene.

Example 2.9. Act I, Scene 10, R. 127, mm. 3-6, The Astrologer’s “Ah,” derived from $x$ and $y$ sets, contrasts Harem Chorus’s diatonic and lyrical “Ah.”
Scene 12: The Jewish People Chorus on Hearing Extermination Decree

The emotional arc of the opera has swung full circle by the end of Act I. The triumphant Chorus emerging after the Gravedigger’s introduction in Scene 1 contrasts with the full Chorus as the terrified Jewish people in Scene 12. It is in this last scene of Act I that Haman issues the decree that, on the 13th of Adar, Persia will slaughter all Jews in the Empire. Haman sings first alone, dictating the decree to scribes. Weisgall creates the effect of the passage of time as Mordecai, then the Jewish People Chorus, at different locations, simultaneously reads and sings the same decree Haman dictates. The Jewish People Chorus, representing Jews across the entire kingdom, at first echoes significant words, then sings entire phrases along with Haman and eventually Mordecai. It becomes clear that Weisgall’s *Esther* not merely retells the historical, salvific Jewish tale, but that its moralistic story is repurposed for modern audiences. The Jewish People Chorus emphasizes words and phrases that resonate with 21st-century, post-Holocaust societies: “unassimilated,” “perverting society,” “impediment,” “exterminate,” “annihilate,” and “make our lands secure and peaceful.”

Example 2.10 demonstrates Weisgall’s portrayal of the reading of the harrowing decree of impending genocide. At R. 144, m. 3, Zaresh joins her husband Haman and a horrified Mordecai in strongly declaiming “we have, therefore, commanded” with 32nd-note rhythms; at the next words, “that those designated in this communication shall be exterminated,” the Chorus joins the protagonists. The fear of genocide is captured by the sudden fortissimo of the vocal line on Weisgall’s first setting of the word “exterminated,” where the group’s forces increase from 1/3 to 2/3 to full chorus, then dissolves with a
descending line, voices and dynamics decreasing to musically depict the idea of extermination.

Weisgall also depicts the horror of extermination harmonically in this scene, the descending vocal line ends on the final sonority [B-flat, B, F, E, B-flat, A], a combination of dissonant $x$ and $y$ sets, contrasting the rising vocal line portraying their ultimate “victory” in Scene 1; there he had used the melodic diatonic $z$ set on the word “cypress.”

Example 2.10. Act I, Scene 12, Jewish Chorus reacts to reading of the decree; emphasis on “exterminated.”
The scene’s climactic moment occurs from R. 147, m. 3 to R. 148, m. 2, when the orchestral bass line leaves off its quarter-note rhythm abruptly, the orchestra doubling the chorus, giving the effect of a sudden narrowing of options, and emphasizing this pivotal moment in the text until the bass line resumes in m. 3. Weisgall gives the protagonists, the Jewish People Chorus, and orchestral forces, the \textit{fff} homophonic setting of the proclamation of the extermination date, the “thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar.”

The chromatic melody weaves through $x$ and $y$ statements until it climaxes on the words “Adar, Adar,” with forceful double-dotted quarter-note and sixteenth-note rhythms, to the leitmotivic and registrally extremely high $[A, B^b, A^b]$ set, the characteristic $[+i1, -i2]$ Adar motion (see Example 2.11). It is related by $i6$ to the following leitmotivic $y$ set, $[D^b, E^b, D]$, a $[+i2, -i1]$ motion.$^{15}$ The associated harmonies, often moving in parallel motion, are almost entirely a series of $z$ subset (027) chords; at R. 147 m. 4, beat 4, two stacked (027) chords form the $z$ set, $[E, B, C^#, F^#]$, again with structural bass note E. The melodic $y$ set, leitmotivically associated with the emotional terror of the 13th of Adar, is mitigated by Weisgall’s harmonic underpinning, essentially consonant perfect fourths and fifths, or the $z$ set.

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Example 2.11. Act I, Scene 12, R. 147 and R. 148, two melodic statements of the leitmotivic and chromatic set, $[\text{A}, \text{B}^\flat, \text{A}^\flat]$ and $[\text{D}^\flat, \text{E}^\flat, \text{D}]$.

Weisgall’s setting of the word “annihilated” demonstrates the coexistence of chromatic and diatonic elements, again, a deeper musical portrayal; the audience knows of the dramatic surface fear of annihilation, ultimately thwarted. Example 12 shows the
sopranos and altos singing the pitches [F#, C, F, B], an $x$ set statement. Simultaneously, the tenors and basses sing pitches [E, D#, G#, A#, B#, C#], a diatonic collection.

Example 2.12. Act I, Scene 12, R. 149, setting of “annihilated” with chromatic and diatonic collections.

Act I ends as the decree states that Jewish annihilation will make Persian “lands secure and peaceful, now and forever!” “Now and for-” is repeated, but the “ever” is cut off abruptly when “Haman grinds the seal into the wax” (as the stage directions indicate). In this last measure, the Chorus and protagonists sing, “Now, and for-” in four-part harmony, to pitches [C, F, B, F#] (Ex. 13), the final statement in Act I of set class $x$. Weisgall deliberately leaves this “forever” incomplete because—as Scene 1 has already revealed—the decree leads not to the Jews’ demise but to their eventual, unexpected triumph. Thus, Weisgall associates this partial word “for-” with the security of Persian lands at the expense of Jewish extermination. He will reverse it at the end of Act III,
when the Chorus employs the full word, “forever,” to refer instead to Jewish preservation.

This chapter examines two of the choral set pieces in *Esther*—the first in Act II, Scene 9, the second in Act III, Scene 1; both continue to develop the psychological impact of Jewish genocide, Weisgall implying either the one at hand (the 13th of Adar) or the Holocaust. The Chorus represents the changing sentiments of the Jewish experience, from triumph and fear in Act I to lamentation in Act II. From Act II, Scene 9 their distraught expression at the idea of potential annihilation moves to a related feeling of despair in Act III, Scene 1. In the latter, however, they are more defiant because of the belief that their potential execution has occurred for no crime of their own.

**Act II, Scene 9: The Chorus in Abject Despair and Lamentation**

Act II is more dramatically static than Act I. In Act II, Scene 1, Mordecai, who stands as a member of the Jewish people, sings an aria of lament, setting the emotional tone for the second Act. In Scene 9, the Jewish People Chorus expands on this lament; now it represents Jews in different parts of the Persian Empire (the stage directions indicate, “the scene changes to various parts of the empire”). The full Chorus in the role of the Jewish people remains fearful, despairing, their grief increasing as the date of extermination nears. In Kondek’s libretto, the Chorus sets fragments from Psalms 25, 55, and 116 and Lamentations, Chapter 5:

See our afflictions, see, see!
All of our people sigh and groan.
Virgins bow their heads, mothers are like widows!
Elders have gone from the gates, young men from their music.
Unclean! Do not touch us, our enemies cry!
Surely this is not the day we were promised!
Each morning, each night we raise our lament: oh hear our voice!
Snares of death confront us! Trembling and fear assail us!
Horrow overwhelms us; our eyes fail because of our tears!
Record our anguish, record our sorrow, and ransom us unharmed.

Weisgall’s music is a pleading, despairing, anguished prayer accomplished through various musical means: 1) slow tempo; 2) extreme dynamic markings (pp and fff juxtaposed, the music vacillating from subdued and sorrowful moaning to a loud, desperate wail); 3) arrhythmic and natural speech-driven patterns that capture the emotional volatility of the scene, suddenly accelerating and decelerating; 4) repetition of notes and words reinforcing the pleading; 5) generally four-part homophonic texture with bursts of unison lines at points of emphasis or articulation of particular text; and 6) orchestral interjections between phrases and many of the choral lines sung unaccompanied.

At R. 78, mm. 1-3, Weisgall’s vocal setting of “see our afflictions, see our afflictions, see, see!” rises in pitch, intensity, and dynamics until the final fff, “see, see!” Melodic gesture and harmonic underpinning draw on by now familiar chromatic and diatonic elements. The soprano line’s material (y set) rises in half steps, [B, C, C#], followed by two more i1 motions, [E, E♭] and [F#, G], while the four-note choral harmonies in this phrase are comprised entirely of z-set members (Ex. 3.1). The consonant harmonic fabric here indicates on a deeper musical level that God and Esther will indeed “see” their “afflictions.”
Example 3.1. Act II, Scene 9, Weisgall uses chromatic (y set and i̊l motion) material to set “see our afflictions.”
Weisgall uses extreme dynamic contrasts, for example, at R. 80, mm. 1-2, when the Chorus sings “Unclean! Unclean! Do not touch us, our enemies cry! cry!” Weisgall marks the beginning phrase *ff*, then “our enemies cry,” *f*, followed by a crescendo, leading to the second *fff* “cry,” with a fermata above the final note, marked “long.” Weisgall marks the subsequent phrase, “surely this is not the day we were promised,” *pp*. The dynamic contrast helps capture the double-edged nature of lamentation that encompasses both loud, gut-wrenching screaming and quiet hopelessness and anguish.

Example 3.2 shows an *i11* leap from A to G# on the first “cry,” leading to a final upward motion on A# with a sustained *fff*, a very high note for a choral soprano section. The next *pp* phrase melodically descends almost two octaves. The example also demonstrates Weisgall’s idiosyncratic rhythmic settings, which here include 32nd-notes within a triplet figure, accented for the words “touch us.”

Example 3.2. Act II, Scene 9, use of extreme dynamic contrasts to create emotional landscape.

Here in Scene 9, Weisgall introduces an important secondary choral role that propels the drama. The Chorus’s lamentation reminds Esther of her Jewish identity and her relationship to the Jewish people and convinces her to take action on their behalf. She
walks among them as they mourn. They not only pray to God, invoking the Bible, but simultaneously implore Esther for her help. The Jewish People Chorus thus provides the impetus for Esther to act, which will transform her from a naïve and fearful Jewish girl into the daring Queen of Persia. In the previous Act II, Scene 8, she had refused to help, afraid she would either be dismissed—the fate of the deposed Queen Vashti—or be killed for speaking out. Mordecai had sneaked into her apartment to remind her of her Jewishness, telling her that since “We are responsible each for the other.” He appealed to her to intervene on the Jews’ behalf and beg Xerxes to mitigate his decree. She remained unswayed in Scene 8, arguing that “. . . there’s no solution I can find, and nothing more to be said.” Mordecai dejectedly responds, “Then we are dead!” and exits, “stunned” (as the stage directions indicate).

The deep grief and sorrow of the Chorus’s lamentation in Scene 9 (R. 77, m. 11 through R. 84, m. 2) is the opera’s emotional nadir, and so moves Esther that she will overcome her fear of taking action. From R. 80, m. 5, to R. 81, m. 2, the “lamentoso” phrase begins at a $p$ dynamic and rises to $ff$: “Each morning, each night we raise our lament: oh hear our voice!” The repetition of the final plea adds to the intensity of despair expressed by the Chorus. The sopranos’ line, as if stunned by the anguish, oscillates among only three pitches, $[A, A\#, B]$, a $y$-set statement, for the first four and a half beats before rising to $E$-flat in a partial $x$-set statement; the vertical simultaneities in the first two measures employ a mixture of structural and free harmonies. When the Chorus sings “hear our voice, oh hear our voice,” Weisgall again employs the $z$-set harmonically for six beats, another example of diatonic harmonic underpinning, which portrays Esther
hearing their voices and readies her for action, even if she must put herself in mortal
danger (Ex. 3.3).

Example 3.3. Act II, Scene 9, partial x statement portraying despair, z-set manifesting
Esther’s response to Chorus’s plea.
Within a largely four-part homophonic setting, Weisgall employs bursts of unison lines. At R. 81, m. 5, *fff* unisons intensity the word, “horror.” Altos and tenors sing “horror” to pitches [E♭, D] on the first beat, and all voices sing this word on the second beat to pitches [F, E], after which the unison statement continues with another descending *i1*, [D♭, C]. The unison line also draws from both *x* and *y* sets (Ex. 3.4).

Example 3.4. Act II, Scene 9, unison setting, employing *x* and *y* sets, for Jewish People Chorus reacting to horrible act of extermination, “horror overwhelms us.”

The Chorus is then exhausted and Weisgall shifts the mood, setting the next phrase, “our eyes fail because of our tears!” *piano.*

The orchestra contributes to the emotional intensity of the scene, in four specific ways:

- In the scene’s first four measures, an independent, low, slowly-moving bass line in octaves accompanies the Chorus (Ex. 3.5a).
• Subsequently and throughout, the orchestra provides fast, leaping, rhythmic interjections, generally interrupting unaccompanied choral phrases (Ex. 3.5b).

• At R. 82, mm. 1-2, a brief interlude brings closure to the deafening, raw feeling of anger and despair in the scene, and prepares the scene’s final prayer in a sense—“ransom us unharmed” (Ex. 3.5c)

• From R. 83, m. 1 through R. 84, m. 2, the orchestra, in unison doubling, accompanies the chorus in the final quiet plea (Ex. 3.5d).

Example 3.5a. Act II, Scene 9, opening low orchestral bass line for Chorus’s final plea.

Example 3.5b. Act II, Scene 9, intense rhythmic orchestral interjections.
Example 3.5c. Act II, Scene 9, orchestral interlude material.

Example 3.5d. Act II, Scene 9, orchestral doubling of chorus.

In the Chorus’s final plea to God and to Esther, the repetition of the words “ransom us unharmed” echoes the Choral reiteration of “see our afflictions” at the scene’s opening. As Table 3.1 shows, Weisgall, at the conclusion of Scene 9, writes the final six utterances of the Chorus, which inspire Esther to take action, with varied permutations and specific dynamic shadings:
Table 3.1. Dynamic structure for text of Chorus’s plea, Scene 9, R82-R84.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Text and Dynamic Marking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altos and basses</td>
<td>( p \quad \text{cresc.} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record our anguish, record our sorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( p \quad \text{cresc.} \quad \text{mf} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full chorus</td>
<td>. . . record our sorrow, and ransom us unharmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(all parts)</td>
<td>( \text{mf} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half chorus</td>
<td>and ransom us unharmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \text{mf} \quad \text{f} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full chorus</td>
<td>record our sorrow, and ransom us unharmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \text{pp} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half chorus</td>
<td>unharmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \text{pp}, \text{molto rit.} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full chorus</td>
<td>ransom us unharmed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In R. 83, mm. 3-4, after the final “record our sorrow,” Weisgall draws the next four chords from an extended diatonic pitch collection, \([C, D, E, F, G, A, B]\). He concludes the section with several \(z\)-set statements, using diatonicism to portray that they will indeed remain “unharmed” (Ex. 3.6). When the Chorus sings the last line, “ransom us unharmed,” Weisgall marks the final syllable with a fermata, a telling foreshadowing of ultimate survival. Weisgall’s \(z\)-set \((B^b, C, E^b, F)\) with an added note \((G^b)\), I refer to as the “unharmed” harmony \((z^+)\), because it appears both here and at a later structural point in the opera when we return to the Jewish People as rescued.
Example 3.6. Act II, Scene 9, z-set diatonic statements to foreshadow “unharmed.”

Immediately after the Jewish People Chorus concludes, Esther sings a short soliloquy that makes evident that the Chorus, through their lamentation and despair, has reminded her of her Jewish identity and her attachment to the Jewish people. When, at R. 85, m. 5, she sings, “We are, responsible, yes, responsible each for the other,” she
embraces the same words Mordecai had used in Act II, Scene 8 when she rejected his request, just prior to the choral lamentation.

This lamentation scene removes Esther from her isolated world in the king’s harem and reminds her of her responsibility to her people and the tremendous opportunity afforded her. The Chorus has empowered Esther to act and to become the heroine who will save her people. Her transformation, as a result of the Chorus in Act II, Scene 9, leads her, in Act II, Scene 12, to approach Xerxes—without being called for (an act which could lead to death)—to request a banquet in which she will reveal Haman’s evil scheme and convince Xerxes to issue a new decree allowing the Jewish People to defend themselves.

**Act III, Scene 1: Despairing Chorus**

Act III, Scene 1 begins with another stand-alone piece for the Chorus as the Jewish People continue to “despair” (as the vocal score indicates) at their impending extermination. Esther’s actions at the end of Act II, however, while unbeknownst to the Chorus, have initiated their salvation; in Act III, Scene 1, Kondek and Weisgall portray this reality through text that expresses anger at the unjustness of their situation and music that uses more extended diatonic sets, significantly as orchestral flourishes. The text for this scene combines Psalm 2:1 and Psalm 59:1-5:

Why do the nations assemble with uproar and confusion of voices?  
Why do people devise an empty scheme?  
Deliver me from those who work evil,  
from the bloodthirsty men who have joined against me,  
not for my transgressions, not for any sin of mine.
The emotional contrast between this scene and Act II, Scene 9 is evident in the initial choral entrance at R. 1, an intense, rapid, ff unison line in octaves with a ff opening grace note, \([E, E^b]\), giving a sense of combativeness. The Chorus sings “Why do the nations assemble with uproar,” set to unison choral lines that derive from the \(x\) and \(y\) sets, a musical nod to the future bloody day against the heathen “nations,” “assembling” because of Haman’s decree (Ex. 3.7).

Example 3.7. Act III, Scene 1, R. 1, unison choral lines using \(x\) and \(y\) sets allude to Act II, Scene 9.

Weisgall uses more extended diatonicism to show the Jews’ salvation as closer at hand. For example, at R. 2, the Chorus sings, “Why do they devise an empty scheme?” The Jewish People Chorus’s lamentation in Act II and Esther’s subsequent actions to save them will render Haman’s scheme “empty” (or unfulfilled). The increase in diatonicism is evident at R. 2, m. 1, where Weisgall utilizes and sustains diatonic sets: \([C^b, D^b, E^b, G^b]\) for three consecutive choral chords: \([D, E, G]\), a (025) chord, and \([G^b, A^b, B^b, D^b, E^b]\), from which the Chorus sustains the word “scheme,” on pitches \([G^b, A^b, D^b]\) (see Ex. 3.8).
While the interrupting orchestral gesture appears dissonant against the sustained choral harmony, the flourish seems to me like an additional diatonic melodic gesture drawn from the $z$ set, $[C, D, F, G]$ (Ex. 3.8). In fact, I believe it foreshadows Esther’s actions at the Scene 3 banquet that ultimately saves the Jews. The repetition of the $i5$ (D-G, C-F) and $i7$ (C-G) melodic intervals foreshadows the Chorus’ Naming Role “Esther” music in Act III, Scene 3, which I discuss in the next chapter. The Chorus’ $[G^b, A^b, B^b, D^b, E^b]$ and Esther’s $[C, D, F, G]$ harmonies reside in different diatonic worlds because she has yet to deliver them.

Example 3.8. R. 2, mm. 1-3, orchestra’s diatonic gesture from $z$-set, $[C, D, F, G]$, expressing the ultimately “empty” ending to Haman’s scheme.
At R. 4, mm. 1-4, the final phrase of Act III, Scene 1, “not for my transgressions, not for any sin of mine,” invokes another emotional nuance of Esther’s story: the Jewish people have been unjustly persecuted (the Persians, of course, perceive them as Other, their “crime” being that they have their own laws; therefore, they “threaten” Xerxes’ people.) Weisgall similarly expresses their innocence through diatonicism. Sopranos and altos, in unison, melodically state a diatonic (0235) set, \([E_b, D_b, C, B^b]\), followed by a descending consonant i7 leap, \([B, E]\). In m. 4, tenors and basses join to create homophonic four- and five-part textures. The pitches are drawn from the following consecutive diatonic sets: \([C, D, E_b, F, G^b, B^b]\), \([G^b, A^b, B^b, D^\flat, E^b]\), \([B^b, D, E^b, F, F^\#]\), \([E, F^\# , G, A, B, C^\#]\), \([D^\flat, E^b, F, G^b, A^b, B^b]\) and \([C, F, G]\). The final, cadential vertical simultaneity on “mine,” held for two beats, is also a diatonic (0157) set (Ex. 3.9).
Example 3.9. Act III, Scene 1, Diatonicism, (0235), $i^7$ leap (B to E), (0157), expressing Jewish deliverance.
Conclusion

The two choral set pieces in Act II, Scene 9, and Act III, Scene 1, contribute to our understanding of the interconnectedness of Esther and the Chorus: first, in the anguished Chorus earlier motivating Esther to risk involvement in their salvation and, second, in Esther’s decision to take future action that empowers the Chorus. In Act III, Scenes 2-7 (also discussed in Chapter 5), the Chorus remains the underlying motivating and empowering force propelling Esther to save her people. Additionally, in the two scenes discussed in this chapter, we see that Weisgall’s use of diatonicism underpins the salvation of the Jews. Weisgall’s decisions regarding pitch, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, orchestration, and juxtaposition of homophonic and unison voicing propels the emotional trajectory of the Jewish people. These two scenes musically express the real horror at potential Jewish genocide and the subsequent protest against the threat of extermination.
Chapter 4

The Naming Role

A subsidiary role of the Chorus in *Esther* is its “Naming Role.” The musical manner in which the Chorus portrays certain protagonists contributes to the dramatic arc of the opera, and to its narrative propulsion, and assists in delineating the specific character of “named” protagonists. The notion of identity is a significant theme in the story of Esther; in this chapter I use, as a backdrop, the context of Jewish identity in history to consider the function of the Chorus in its Naming Role.

Jewish Identity in *Esther* and the Holocaust

Similarities exist between the Jewish condition in the Persian diaspora during the time of Esther (470s BC) and during the 20th-century Holocaust. In both cases, the Jewish people had lost their connection with their historical homeland and remained scattered among hostile nations. In *Esther*, we learn that Mordecai advises Jews in exile in Persia to hide their customs to avoid bringing unnecessary attention to themselves. Similarly, Jews during WWII would emphasize their assimilation into local populations and cultures, or flee, physically hide, or conceal their identity, to avoid concentration camps. Ultimately, their very identity was threatened by the risk of annihilation, seen in Haman’s scheme and Hitler’s “final solution.” In Weisgall’s opera, the Chorus empowers Esther by calling her name repetitively, ultimately causing her to reclaim her Jewish identity and setting in motion the sequence of events that leads to a new decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Esther’s ability to save her people also reclaims their
identity; in the post-Holocaust era, Jews were able to reclaim their identity. Weisgall’s opera, through Esther’s actions, presents the composer—who himself lost family members in the Holocaust—a chance to symbolically highlight his own Jewish identity and the sacrifice of those who died.

*Esther: Act I*

Over the course of the opera, the Chorus calls Esther’s name in various emotional states—mysteriously, beseechingly, and victoriously. These varied acts of naming serve two purposes: to draw attention to the heroine in the title role, and to establish her as Jewish. The first time the Chorus names Esther, in Act I, Scene 8 (first discussed in Chapter 2), Weisgall introduces the Women’s Chorus in the harem. At R. 93, mm. 9-15, in the introduction to the scene, the Harem repeatedly sings her name; simultaneously Xerxes (still onstage from the previous scene, in dimmed lights) twice sings, “Where is she?” (Example 4.1)

To reference their romantic relationship, the Chorus makes the initial connection between Esther and Xerxes, who muses on finding a new queen. The Chorus delivers seven iterations of her name at a slow tempo, elongated rhythmic pace, and *pp* dynamic level. This contrasts with the agitated, triumphant settings that occur in Act III. In Act I, they raise the question of her identity in an atmosphere of mystery, “Who is Esther?” Esther has appeared in Scene 2 as a young, naïve Jewish girl. In Scene 8, however, the Harem Chorus through its Naming Role refers to her as a harem member living among pagans, thus without her Jewish identity.
Example 4.1. Act III, Scene 8, first Choral naming of Esther, establishing her identity as harem member, having lost her Jewish identity.

In Act II, Scene 8, the libretto addresses the meaning of Jewish identity, during Esther’s discussion with Mordecai in her apartment (discussed in Chapter 3). In the scene, in response to Mordecai’s “Esther, you are one of us,” she states “No longer, no longer! I eat food I should not, and do things I once knew should not be done. I no longer pray, I live differently from the way I did with you, once so long ago.” In addition, Esther draws attention to Mordecai’s advice for the best avenue of Jewish survival in Persia: “Deny certain customs, deny certain rules. Those who don’t are fools. Your words, your advice.” Esther and Mordecai, therefore, as the two Jewish protagonists of the opera, are intrinsically linked.
Act III: Chorus Empowering Esther

In Act III, the choral naming rises to utmost importance as it motivates Esther to act and ultimately signals the regaining of her Jewish identity. The Chorus names “Esther” in Scenes 3, 6, and 7, the settings carrying a variety of dramatic significance. Rhythm helps differentiate the passages and establish mood and meaning.

In Scenes 2-7, the setting is Xerxes’ banquet held at Esther’s request (it begins with an elaborate dance to one of Wesigall’s favorite scherzos in Scene 2). There she will request a favor of Xerxes (which he as yet knows nothing of) — to thwart Haman’s scheme and instead hang him. In Scene 3, Wesigall sets the Chorus’s first calling of Esther’s name boldly and energetically, a proclamation of her name that captures the excitement of the guests as they await her request of the king. As the banquet begins, Xerxes speaks glowingly of his wife, the queen, then the Chorus (R. 36, mm. 1-5), to fast and energetic music, excitedly repeats “Esther.” Rhythmic activity increases in intensity in the orchestra as they repeat her name. Example 4.2 shows successive elongations of her name (mm. 4-5), as the orchestral rhythms accelerate to 16th and 32nd notes. Wesigall draws all choral and orchestral pitches in m. 4 from the diatonic set, [B♭, C, D, E♭, F, G, A]. The final two orchestral sonorities (m. 5) are six- and seven-note chords. The soprano melody (mm. 4-5), which states pitches [G, D, G, D, G, D, A, A], unfolds the z subset, (027) (Ex. 4.2). The Naming Chorus here fulfills the diatonic orchestral allusion to Esther in Act III, Scene 1, discussed in the previous chapter.
4.2. Act III, Scene 3, Naming Chorus repeats “Esther” to show excitement in anticipation of her announcement, with diatonic setting, emboldening Esther to reclaim her Jewish identity.

Example 4.2

This, I suggest, is the opera’s turning point. Weisgall repeats the notion of potential Jewish salvation in the use of diatonic pitch collections, even as the last call of her name significantly increases the level of dissonance and register.

In Scene 4, Esther shocks Xerxes, Haman, and Zeresh as she reveals that she is Jewish, and demands Haman’s life in exchange for the Jews’. In Scene 5, prodded by the Chorus (discussed in Chapter 5) Xerxes agrees to hang Haman. In Scene 6, however, a final issue remains, for which Xerxes can find no answer: that Haman’s decree, once issued, cannot be revoked, thus necessitating the Jews’ extermination and with it, Esther’s death. At R. 85, mm. 1-4, in response to Xerxes’ consternation, the Naming
Chorus again vigorously repeats “Esther.” In this dramatic moment, a dynamic crescendo, rhythmic acceleration, and initially repetitive then ascending melodic lines create a sense of musical propulsion that becomes the Naming Chorus’s urgent, anxious final plea of the opera: for Esther to devise a solution for Xerxes’ dilemma. To portray this emotional intensity, the sopranos twice sing [D, G#], ascending to depict their pleading. The phrase begins pp, building at each statement. The sopranos repeat the [D, G#] a third time in eighth notes, followed by an ascending motion, [A#, B#, D#, A, D#, E], that utilizes another +i6 (Ex. 4.3). (These unfold fragments of whole-tone collections, in distinct contrast to the x structure).

Example 4.3. Act III, Scene 6, Naming Chorus’s six repetitions of “Esther,” their final plea

![Example 4.3](image)

The choral plea inspires Esther to propose a solution: that Xerxes should issue a new decree allowing the Jews to arm and defend themselves. He immediately agrees.

In Scene 7, the stage directions note “a victorious Esther watches as Haman is dragged off by guards.” In the final instance of its Naming Role, in R. 87, m. 10- R. 88, m. 2, the Chorus signals her victory with six unaccompanied repetitions of her name. At this dramatic moment, Esther’s work as savior is complete. Compared to previous settings, here the rhythms are steadier and more consistent, dynamics remaining bold (ff) throughout (Ex. 4.4). The diatonic sets are longer in duration, extending across two measures. At R. 87, mm. 10-11, the sopranos sing [F#, C#, F#, G#, F#, C#, D#], a
melodic unfolding of the consonant z set, [C#, D#, F#, G#]. The pitches in all voice parts form members of diatonic sets: in m. 10, beats 1-2 and m. 11 we see [F#, G#, A#, B, C#, D#, E#], and m. 10, beat 3 [F#, G#, A, C#, E]. At m. 12, the diatonic set shifts to [F, G, A, B♭, C, D, E]; the soprano line, [F, C, D, E, F, B♭], features another –i5 and +i7. The following diatonic sets are stated in m. 13 through R. 88, m. 2: [D♭, E♭, F, G♭, A♭, B♭, C], [E♭, F, G♭, A♭, B♭, C, D] and [F, G, A, B♭, D♭, E]. (Ex. 4.4).

Example 4.4. Act III, Scene 7, Naming Chorus’ final, victorious setting of “Esther”
This final Naming moment signals Esther’s having achieved victory. The diatonicism connects Esther’s new regaining of her Jewish identity to generalized Jewish salvation and the idealized notion of returning “home,” symbolizing a return of the lost Jewish identity. At R. 88, m. 2, after six measures of melodic $i5$s and $i7$s, a final melodic $+i6$ appears. The culmination of the diatonic setting with the dissonant interval points to the duality of the outcome of the 13th of Adar: no matter how victorious Esther may be at this moment, many lives are lost in the process.

**Naming Haman**

*In Act I*

Twice in the opera, the Chorus names Haman. The first time, at the end of Act I, Scene 1, is after Weisgall’s first depiction of victory (discussed in Chapter 2). At R. 4, m. 4, the full Chorus, at *fff*, shrieks “Haman!” in three octaves on F, while the orchestra recapitulates its opening-measure $x$-set gesture at the original pitch level, [C, F, F#, B] (Ex. 4.5). Weisgall contrasts this choral statement with that of the Gravedigger, who sings of Haman with sadness, as a father of ten sons.

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16 The B# in the vocal score is an obvious error; it should be B-natural.
Example 4.5. Act I, Scene 1, first Choral Naming of Haman.

In Act III, Scene 8, after Haman is seized to be hanged, a Children’s Chorus sings his name, a name that had heretofore been associated with the terror of extermination on the 13th of Adar. Weisgall’s setting now becomes a child’s taunt. Set in a city square, Haman is “led to the gallows, followed by a crowd of jeering children, carrying drums, whistles, and ratchets.” Weisgall’s Children’s Chorus mocks Haman, and he puns on the “Ha-” syllable of the character’s name as children’s laughter, “Ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha!” (The use of this “Ha, ha, ha!” suggests the particular pronunciation of his name in this...
opera, which differs from the traditional “Hā-men,” in English.) Weisgall’s use of noise-makers refers to the traditional children’s games at the Jewish festival of Purim.

In Act I, Scene 5, Haman had boasted of his future greatness: he sings with militaristic dotted rhythms, “I am Haman” (R. 59, mm. 2-3) to the $y$ set, pitches [F, F#, E], the $[+i1, -i2]$ motion (Ex. 24). By associating him with the leitmotivic $y$ set (for 13th of Adar), Weisgall connects Haman’s name to the terrible date, the 13th of Adar.

Example 4.6. Haman’s name in $y$ set [F, F#, E], connecting to leitmotivic $y$-set associated with the heinous act on the 13th of Adar.

By contrast, in Act III, Scene 8 (R. 102, m. 1 through R. 103, m. 2) the Children’s Chorus sings “Ha, ha, ha, Haman, Haman!” the rhythmic patter laced with rests that infuse levity to their jeering. In the lower orchestral voices, a sequential statement of the $y$ set traversing an octave represents the reversal of fortune on the 13th of Adar. The music and text emphasize the transformation (Ex. 4.7).
Example 4.7. Act III, Scene 8, Children’s Chorus now mocking Haman’s name.

Scene 8 ends as the Children’s Chorus sings “Ha-man, Ha-man, Ha-man, ha!” to a sustained (025) vertical simultaneity (Ex. 4.8). The diatonic (025) $z$-subset replaces the $y$-set, depicting Haman’s foiled scheme to exterminate the Jews. The threatening “Haman” triple-octave F’s harmonized with [C, F, F#, B] at the end of Act I, Scene 1 have been rendered impotent by the Children’s Chorus F-major sonority.
Naming Mordecai

As with Esther, Weisgall develops the issue of Jewish identity in Mordecai’s character. In fact, Mordecai’s identity as a Jew, and his refusal to bow to Haman (Jews bow only to God), causes Haman to become enraged and propose extermination, an act that would eliminate Mordecai’s identity altogether. Weisgall first captures the threat to Mordecai’s identity in Act II, Scene 7: at R. 53, m. 7-R. 54, m. 1, Haman and Zeresh suggest destroying Mordecai on the 13th of Adar, singing “I proclaim the thirteenth of Adar Mordecai’s Day! Mordecai’s Day!” emphasizing the day he will be killed along with his people. The dissonant $x$-set, $[D, E_b, G\#, A]$ captures the irony (Ex. 4.9).

In Act III, Scene 9 (directly after the Children’s Chorus), Mordecai confers with the Jewish Elders as they discuss preparations for defending themselves on the 13th of Adar. This Chorus of Elders, consisting only of tenors and basses, represents a subset of the Jewish people. After Mordecai rallies the Elders with talk of “destroying the wicked [Persians],” the Elders Chorus assumes the Naming Role. The purpose here is a reinstatement of Jewish identity through two-fold means: first, the Chorus exalts the stature of Mordecai; second, Weisgall portrays the emotional upheaval of the drama as the Jewish Elders sing hopefully of triumph while they prepare themselves for battle on 13th of Adar. From R. 108, m. 1 through R. 109, m. 4, the Chorus calls the name “Mordecai” several times:

Mordecai! Mordecai! Mordecai! Mordecai! Mordecai!

From this time on until history ends,

This day shall be known as Mordecai’s Day! Mordecai’s Day!
First (R. 108, m. 3), for Weisgall’s setting of the Elders Chorus’s fourth and fifth iterations of “Mordecai!” (the music is identical for mm. 3 and 4), he alternates the $z$ set, [E, F#, B, C#], with the $z$ subset, [B♭, C, F] (Ex. 27). Diatonic sets here exemplify Weisgall’s use of diatonicism to signal the recovery of Jewish identity, as able to successfully defend themselves on the 13th of Adar.

Example 4.10. Weisgall’s use of diatonicism in $z$ set ([E, F#, B, C#]) and subset ([B♭, C, F]).

Subsequently, Weisgall’s most heightened use of diatonic material in the opera accompanies the singing of the phrase “From this time on until history ends, this day shall be known as Mordecai’s Day! Mordecai’s Day!” contrasting markedly with Haman’s and Zeresh’s setting of “Mordecai’s Day” to the $x$ set. At R. 108, mm. 5-8, the
Chorus sings a mainly two-part texture, drawn from the following diatonic sets: [F, B♭, C], [E, F♯, G♯, A, B, C♯], [B, C♯, D♯, E, F♯, G♯, A♯], [E, G♯, A, B, C♯, D♯, E, F♯, G♯, A♯] and [C♯, D♯, E, A♯, B♯] (Ex. 4.11). At R. 109 m. 1, however—on the words, “This day,”—the orchestra states the x-set at its original pitch level [C, F, F♯, B]. In inserting this dissonant harmonic x-set Weisgall perhaps refers to the proposed specter of destruction. At mm. 3-4, however, the Chorus’s “Mordecai’s Day! Mordecai’s Day,” melodically and harmonically resounds as a “triumphant” z-set, [E, F♯, B, C♯] (Ex. 4.11).

Example 4.11. Act III, Scene 9, primarily diatonic material with inserted x-set referring to Haman and Zeresh’s previous iteration of “Mordecai’s Day” as specter of destruction.
The Jewish triumph over Persian power is thus multilayered. It is not simply an expression of a future military victory against Persian forces, but a triumph of Jewish identity against Haman’s scheme to eliminate the Jewish population as a whole. The triumph of Esther and Mordecai resonates with the post-Holocaust repair and re-establishment of Jewish identity. Identity may be established by a return “home,” the new 20th-century state of Israel, or by the reestablishment of Jewish practices in other lands. The story of Esther, therefore, presents a moment of a consistent historical pattern: the survival of Jewish identity against threats to eliminate it. Weisgall again expresses the permanence of Jewish identity at the end of Act III, discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

Act III: The Triumph and Preservation of the Jewish People

In this Chapter, I discuss the Chorus’s expressions of triumph and preservation in Act III. The composer also uses the Chorus to comment on events, much like a Greek Chorus, in this Act. In its dramatic functions the Chorus expresses 1) the return of the Act I triumphant chorus; and 2) at the end of Act III, the Jewish People Chorus representing the survival of persecution throughout Jewish history.

Act III, Scene 5: Return of the Revengeful and Triumphant Chorus

In Act III, Scene 5, the Chorus returns more emphatically to previous material Weisgall and Kondek had used to foreshadow the fate of the Jews, expressing emotions of revenge, reminiscent of Act I, Scene 1, in contrast to the despair and lamentation of Act II. At R. 74, m. 7, Esther asks Xerxes for Haman’s life ("Hang him!"), and the Jewish People Chorus sings with blood lust, at R. 74, m. 9: “Hang him, hang him, hang him!”

In this scene, Esther and the Chorus alternate one-to-four measure phrases, as the Chorus immediately repeats Esther’s words, reinforcing and adding weight to them. At R. 74, m. 12, the Chorus sings, “Hang him on the gallows that he built for Mordecai.” This phrase begins with a continuous stream of 16th notes, reminiscent of Act I, Scene 1, depicting the victorious “Jewish People”; the melodic gesture draws on elements of the $x$ and $y$ sets, an expression of their thirst for revenge. On the word “Mordecai,” the gesture ends on a four-part $x$-set vertical simultaneity, [C, B, F#, F] (see Example 5.1). This is
one of the rare moments when the Chorus states the \( x \) set harmonically; here, it implies a musical nod to Haman’s proposed destruction of Mordecai, now turned on its head.

Example 5.1. Act III, Scene 5, R. 74, mm. 12-13, Chorus echoes Esther’s words, musical texture reminiscent of the Act I “Triumphant” Chorus.
At R. 75, mm. 1-4, the Chorus echoes Esther’s final sentiment, “Hang him and his sons along with him!” The Chorus and their heroine raise the emotional stakes, demanding not only Haman’s life, but that of his sons as well; the unison melodic gesture, with multiple chromatic x- and y-set statements, which Weisgall marks “sempre ff,” express the carnal excitement (Ex. 5.2).

The retaliatory demand of bodies for bodies reflects the opera’s opening scene, when eleven bodies hang from the gallows. Further, the demand expresses the desire to completely reverse Haman’s decree (that all Jews must die, although innocent, because associated ethnically with Yair, Kish and Saul). Esther and the Jewish People Chorus demand that Haman’s sons die—though they may be guiltless—merely for their filial relationship to him.
Example 5.2. R. 75, mm. 1-4, Esther and Chorus raise ante, calling for Haman’s sons’ lives; ff unison gesture drawing on \( x \) and \( y \) sets.

The Chorus’s reiteration and intensification of Esther’s request for Haman’s life and that of his sons reinforces her plea. Their power in combination drives the drama as Zeresh (Haman’s wife), at R. 75, m. 5, responds directly to the Chorus’s demand when she pleads (to no avail), “No, no, no!”

**Act III, Scene 6: The Chorus as Philosophical Commentator**

In Scene 6, guards descend upon Haman and Zeresh (to arrest him). The Chorus, as Philosophical Commentator, sings a short set-piece that comments on Haman’s demise. The choral pitches for the phrase, “Haman, he who opened his mouth like a
ravening lion,” a combination of $x$ and $y$ sets, are identical to those used for the line in Act III, Scene 1, “Why do the nations assemble with uproar?” Through this recapitulatory pitch gesture, Weisgall musically associates the text, “nations assemble with uproar,” with Haman, who “opened his mouth like a ravening lion;” the phrase derives from Psalm 22:13, the “uproar” from Haman’s “mouth” (Ex. 5.3).

Example. 5.3. Act III, Scene 1 and Act III, Scene 6 comparison. Recapitulatory pitches connecting “nations assemble with uproar,” with Haman, who “opened his mouth like a ravening lion,” drawing from $x$ and $y$ sets.

Another example drawn from Act III, Scene 6 shows how Weisgall musically handles the thematic duality that Jewish survival nevertheless leaves Zeresh a motherless widow. At R. 81, the Chorus sings, “let his children be fatherless, his wife a widow,” a sentiment drawn from Psalm 109:9. Weisgall sets the words, “let his children be fatherless,” to [E$^b$, F, G$^b$, A$^b$, G, C, B, D]. The first five pitches invert the line from Act III, Scene 1, “(deliver me from those who have joined against me) not for my transgressions”; the sixth pitch is related, the $+i5$ replacing the $+i7$ that an exact inversion would require (Ex. 5.4). These phrases are thematically linked; Haman’s children will die
not for their own transgressions but, rather, for their father’s. Weisgall sets the final words, “his wife a widow,” $[B^b, A, D^b, G]$, with $-i1$ and a $+i6$, the characteristic intervals in the $x$ set, though not a full $x$-set statement. The text relates to the Jewish People Chorus’s line from Act II, Scene 9, “Mothers are like widows.” Weisgall harmonizes this setting of “his wife a widow” with the orchestral chord, $[A^b, B^b, E^b, F]$, a diatonic $z$-set member; using this set he links Haman’s destruction and Zeresh’s widowhood to Jewish salvation. Through softer dynamics Weisgall utilizes the Chorus to capture the somber concession that Jewish revenge renders a wife widowed and her sons dead—a significant detail to Weisgall’s postmodern reading.

Example 5.4. Act III, Scene 6, R. 81, mm. 1-4, Greek Chorus invokes the duality of a motherless widow.

![Musical notation](image-url)
Act III, Scene 10: Esther and Xerxes’ Final Discussion

In Scene 10, Esther and Xerxes discuss the twofold nature of the 13th of Adar: as a day that witnessed much death and bloodshed, but that also saved many more lives. When Esther says, “It must not be forgotten. It must not be repeated,” she speaks not simply to Xerxes but to the audience—none of us must ever forget this historical moment, nor—by extension—any holocaust experience. Esther’s words will resonate across the final two scenes (11 and 12) as the Chorus references Jewish preservation in the face of oppression.

Act III, Scenes 11-12: Triumphant Jewish People Represent Survival of Jews in History

In the opera’s final two scenes, the Chorus transcends the action and the Esther story; midway through Scene 11, a dramatic transformation occurs as the Jewish people of Esther’s distant era come to represent Jewish people through history, and their experience of surviving quotidian and horrific persecution. At the beginning of Scene 11, the Jewish People Chorus expresses triumph and rejoicing with Mordecai, who, having replaced Haman as vizier, is depicted as “resplendent in the trappings of his new office.” At R. 128, Mordecai sings, “you turned my mourning into dancing!” Then, he adds, “with the voice of,” and the Chorus, at R. 130, m. 3, completes the phrase with “Triumph!”; Weisgall draws from the diatonic set [E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D#]. The text, rhythm, pitches and contrary motion in soprano and bass give the measure a cadential feeling (Ex. 5.5).
Example 5.5. R. 130, m. 3, Diatonic, cadential setting of “Triumph” using [E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D#]

The Chorus continues its exultant expression at R. 131, m. 4 - R. 132, m. 3, with a statement deriving from Psalm 9:15 and Psalm 57:6:

They have fallen into the pit they made,
Their foot caught in the net they hid.

The triumphant emotions are rendered through ff dynamics, a tremolo figure in the percussion and an almost entirely unison vocal line, which includes multiple and overlapping x- and y-set statements. This chromaticism depicts the vanquished enemies who “have fallen” (see Ex. 5.6). The concomitant use of diatonic z sets as vertical simultaneities, [C♭, D♭, G♭, A♭], [E, F♯, B, C♯], and [F, G, B♭, C], references the Jewish victory, when enemies fall into the “pit they made” and the “net they hid”; the spacing of the final z-set, [F, G, B♭, C], with three stacked i7s, contributes to the phrase’s cadential motion. This phrase forms the last segment of new text the Chorus sings in *Esther*. 
Example 5.6. R. 131, m. 4 - R. 132, m. 3, Weisgall’s depicts fallen enemies through use of $x$ and $y$ sets; resultant Jewish salvation referenced with chordal $z$ sets.

Meno mosso

They have fallen into the pit they made.

Their foot caught in the net they hid!

They have fallen into the pit they made.

Their foot caught in the net they hid!

Their foot caught in the net they hid!

They have fallen into the pit they made.
The orchestra captures the Jewish People Chorus’s expression of triumph as diatonicism pervades the orchestral music as well. At R. 132, m. 4, the orchestra plays a triumphant musical gesture that prepares the Chorus’s next phrase; the triplet rhythms and repeated three-note figure simulate a bugle call. The orchestral phrase draws from diatonic sets, including the z set (Ex. 5.7).

Example 5.7. Orchestral setting acts as a bugle call. Weisgall ties the orchestral music to choral setting using similar material (diatonic sets, including z set).

A significant recapitulation of choral text occurs in the second half of Scene 11, the foreshadowing text reflecting the Jewish triumph in Act I, Scene 1. In Act I, Scene 1, Weisgall sets the text to chromatic music; in Act III, Scene 11, he sets the identical text to more diatonic music. At R. 133, m. 1, the Chorus sings the phrase, “The nations are brought down, but we are risen and stand upright!” Compared to Act I, Scene 1, the slow maestoso tempo and the wide melodic leaps invoke a greater sense of finality and confidence; each syllable is set to only one note, with no melismas. In mm. 3-4, the Chorus repeats, “but we are risen and stand,” the final word again harmonized in open i7s.
(perfect fifths) of the \( z \) set \([A, E, B, F\#]\) (Ex. 5.8). At m. 4, the Chorus sustains the word “stand,” and Weisgall draws from the same \( z \) set for the 16th-note orchestral flourish, a melodic gesture. In mm. 5-6, the soprano melody draws from the diatonic set, \([C, D, E, F, G]\), the vertical simultaneities from either various \( z \) or other diatonic sets.

Example 5.8. R. 133, mm. 1-6, Recapitulated text utilizing diatonic sets, and orchestral flourish drawing from \( z \)-set \([E, F\#, A, B]\).
Just here, midway through Scene 11, the Chorus encompasses Jewish people and identity throughout history. The Chorus sings, “We are as the mighty cypress deep-rooted in the earth forever.” From R. 134, m. 7 until the conclusion, they sing “forever” (the only word they sing from this point forward) multiple times, in three separate sequences, as follows:

**Scene 11**
- R. 134, m. 7-R. 135, m. 9: Chorus sings “forever” nine times
- R. 136: Musical interlude
- R. 137, mm. 1-5: Chorus sings “forever” four times

**Scene 12**
- R. 137, mm. 5-8: Gravedigger: “Who are You?”
  Esther: “I am Esther”
- R. 137, mm. 9-12: Chorus: “forever, and ever, ever, ever.”
The repetition of “forever” accomplishes two dramatic functions. First, these reiterations complete the half-utterances of the word (“for-”) from the conclusion of Act I, when the end of Haman’s decree states that the 13th of Adar would “make these lands secure and peaceful now and for-,” the last word abruptly interrupted. Second, and more importantly, Weisgall now broadens his statement to include the entire Jewish survival experience, particularly, I would speculate, the 20th-century Holocaust. By reiterating the word “forever” for the final three minutes of the opera he expresses another meaning, preservation; even though historically the Jewish people have suffered and continue to suffer persecution, God’s promise of eternal preservation continues to be fulfilled.

In the first “forever” sequence, Weisgall sets the three syllables of the word to the identical, placid rhythm: quarter, dotted-half, quarter, followed by a quarter rest. At R. 135, m. 4-5, the climax of the first sequence is a $ff$, triumphant expression of diatonicism that draws pitches from the $[C\#, D\#, E, F\#, G\#, A\#, B]$ set, an E#$\flat$ substituting for the E on one chord (see Ex. 5.9). The repetition of the word, the rhythmic consistency, and a long-range crescendo and decrescendo, imbues the section with weight and monumentality, allowing time for the audience to perceive Weisgall’s more expansive message.
Example 5.9. R. 135, mm. 4-7, fifth through eighth iterations of “forever,” with rhythmic uniformity, drawing from the diatonic [C#, D#, E, F#, G#, A#, B] set.

In the second “forever” sequence, at R. 137, mm. 1-4, Weisgall’s recapitulatory pitch choices help to articulate the idea of Jewish survival over time. In m. 3, Weisgall harmonizes the Chorus’s third iteration of “forever” with the vertical simultaneity, [E♭, F, B♭, C], adding a G♭ in the bass of the orchestral part. These pitches reference the Act II, Scene 9, “ransom us unharmed” harmony, discussed in Chapter 3. At R. 137, m. 4, the final “for-” states a (02468) whole-tone chord, while the “ever” returns to the previous pitches, [G♭, E♭, F, B♭, C], which the orchestra sustains for ten long beats (Ex. 5.10). With the recycling of this harmonic vertical simultaneity Weisgall musically links the Chorus’s despairing plea (“ransom us unharmed”) to its fulfillment in the word “forever.”
Example 5.10. R. 137, mm. 1-4, Second “forever” sequence, final recapitulatory pitches, \([E^b, F, B^b, C]\), with \(G^b\) bass, referencing “ransom us unharmed,” from Act II, Scene 9.

![Musical notation with text](image)

Significantly, the Chorus’s four-note vertical simultaneity, \([E^b, F, B^b, C]\), lies a half-step below what I have referred to as the triumphant \(z\) set, \([E, F#, B, C#]\). Thus, Weisgall’s dramatic intention in pitch selection is perhaps to acknowledge that while the Jewish people survived the 13th of Adar, represented by the consonant \([E^b, F, B^b, C]\) pitch set, this constitutes only one of many survival experiences, all fraught with suffering and persecution. The triumphant \(z\) set, \([E, F#, B, C#]\), represents on a deeper level the idealized Jewish salvation, triumph and peace—to this day still unrealized.

Writing in the New York Times in 1993, Edward Rothstein commented, “there was something . . . anticlimactic about the story’s slow winding to a close.”\(^{17}\) Clearly, Rothstein is referring to the deliberate and elongated choral ending with multiple

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repetitions of the same word, “forever,” and, while I have shown otherwise, the criticism may be dramatically justified: the multiple iterations and slow tempo of the final measures would seem anticlimactic without the understanding of the long history of Jewish persecution. However, in my interpretation Weisgall consciously allows the opera’s “slow winding to a close,” the musical text, the duration and sense of space expressing his message of preserving the Jewish identity.

In the final, connected Scene 12 (essentially a recreation of Act I, Scene 1), after Esther responds to the Gravedigger with, “I am Esther,” Weisgall concludes the opera by stretching out vertically and horizontally the word “forever.” At R. 137, mm. 9-12, the Jewish People Chorus sings “Forever, and ever, ever, ever. (m.),” ending on a two-octave E, while the orchestra plays very softly, ethereally, an upper register seven-note verticality, [F#, D, G#, C, E, F, B] (Ex. 5.11). The Chorus’s final E now represents each of the dramatic functions of the pitch throughout the opera: the ideal of home, salvation, triumph, and preservation.
Example. 5.11. R. 137, mm. 9-12, Opera conclusion, final pitch (E) in Chorus represents eternal preservation.

The trajectory of the E sonority over the entire opera begins when Weisgall first connects it to the idea of “home” in Esther and Mordecai’s “home” duet, in Act I, Scene 2. In Act I, Scene 8, the key of E major symbolizes Esther’s access to Xerxes and future resultant Jewish salvation. In Act III, Scene 9, the triumphant z-set, [E, F#, B, C#], with E in the bass, represents the imagined and idealized triumph of the Jews over their enemies as Mordecai prepares with the Elders for the 13th of Adar. Although no evidence has shown that Weisgall used symbolism based on note names, the opera’s concluding
note, E, represents eternal preservation. We might even imagine the letter E symbolically referencing the Eternal.

This ethereal setting brings the audience to a resting place psychologically, in the ideas of preservation and the eternal. The opera’s ending also concludes the story of Esther (another E reference?) and speaks philosophically to the history of Jewish salvation. The musical texture, the dissonant orchestral chord sounding against the Chorus’s unison E, represents their redemptive history, filled with persecution, pain and suffering, yet resting on the idea of everlasting preservation and the promise of God’s salvation.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

As Joseph Kerman remarked, “Weisgall’s operas are always about something,”\(^\text{18}\) and with \textit{Esther} both he and Kondek transcend its biblical subject matter, speaking to issues that resonate into the 21st century. The difference between Handel’s and Weisgall’s versions of \textit{Esther} is not simply a matter of musical styles that might be expected in comparing the Baroque to the late-20th-century opera, but rather, in interpretation and effect. Handel’s \textit{Esther}, which proceeds in linear fashion, presents a straightforward look at a celebrated biblical story, the Jewish triumph over enemies resulting in a joyful choral ending. Weisgall’s \textit{Esther} is a postmodern, nuanced reading with concern for the ambiguity of its subject matter; the Chorus helps to articulate the back-and-forth between the biblical and the modern holocaust, that it might resonate with contemporary society and raise listener awareness of our shared vulnerability. Benjamin Ivry’s preview before the 2009 revival expressed this well: “Eight years after the 2001 terrorist attacks, the opera’s refusal to exult over the massacre of an enemy has a new resonance. After Haman’s defeat, bringing with it thousands of casualties, Esther laments in an aria that this loss of life ‘must not be forgotten. It must not be repeated. So much blood, so many, many dead.’”\(^\text{19}\)

The underlying purpose of my reading of \textit{Esther} is to suggest that we enter the music and meaning of the opera most deeply through a consideration and study of the Chorus. The Chorus’s roles are as essential as any single protagonist. Dramatically, the

\(^{18}\) Saylor, NYCO pre-concert talk, 2009.
consequences and actions of the story’s heroine are dependent on the existence of her people (Chorus). The Chorus also transmits Weisgall’s overarching message of Jewish preservation in the face of unyielding oppression. Thus, my consideration of the roles and functions of the Chorus might contribute to an understanding of the composer’s choices, conveying his musical language and philosophical statement.

As I illustrate in this essay, the Chorus provides a platform through which the 20th-century Holocaust might be considered. Of the four choral functions discussed, the Jewish People Chorus emerges as providing the totality of Holocaust emotional experience, the choral pieces rendering various moods. In Act I, Scene 1, this Chorus role outlines the duality of the 13th of Adar. In Act I, Scene 12, the Chorus portrays shock and fear of imminent genocide, the words “unassimilated,” “perverting society,” “exterminate,” “annihilate,” and “make our lands secure and peaceful,” speaking directly to 21st-century ears. In Act II, Scene 8, this Chorus projects the lamentation, wailing, and praying of the survival experience. Finally, in Act III, Scene 11, the statements of “forever” express eternal Jewish preservation despite constant persecution, most concretely for us, the 20th-century Holocaust.

I also showed how, in its other two functions—oftentimes co-existing, projecting a Group Character and the Naming Role—the Chorus helped to amplify our understanding of the protagonists. For example, it defines Esther as both a member of and outsider to the Women of the Harem. The Astrologers Chorus helps contextualize Haman’s frenzied hatred, and the Chorus of Elders provide backdrop to Mordecai’s triumphant reversal. Additionally, the Chorus in its Naming Role delivers the message of
survival against threats to eliminate Jewish identity. The Chorus as Philosophical
Commentator touches on the eternal at the opera’s conclusion.

In a review of Esther following the 1993 performance, Harold Blumenfeld wrote,

Weisgall’s score is masterly, strong, gorgeous. Its idiom is difficult to pin down. Most reviewers slickly place it in line of descent from Berg and Schoenberg, labeling it “acerbic” and “dissonant.” Nonsense. If tags must be applied, then there is as much impressionism as expressionism.20

While Weisgall’s highly chromatic music in Esther clearly resides within the world of the Second Viennese school—a constant throughout his career—I have shown in this essay the importance of diatonicism to Weisgall’s musical language, which perhaps explains Blumenfeld’s reference to impressionism. While Weisgall’s sound world cannot be explained by an overall centricity of pitch or a referential collection, the insertion of rotating diatonic collections, the reoccurrence of diatonic subsets, and the reiteration of particular pitch classes (for example, E) lend a “tonal sound” to an overall atonal work.21

In his thematic usages of chromaticism and diatonicism within the choral music, Weisgall’s Esther veers primarily toward the highly chromatic; therefore, I present a summary of the listed moments of chromaticism and diatonicism, in no way meant to be representative of the entire opera, but as specific instances within unifying themes. The following examples highlight unmitigated chromaticism in dramatic moments:

• The Jewish People Chorus describing its vanquished enemies (Act I, Scene 1)
• The Astrologers predicting the 13th of Adar as reference to potential terror (Act I, Scene 10)
• Choral settings of the word “exterminated” (Act I, Scene 12)

The Jewish People lamenting their fate, “death confronts us” (Act II, Scene 8)

The Chorus and Esther demanding Haman’s life, “Hang him” (Act III, Scene 5)

Two other examples appear where a concomitant usage of chromaticism and diatonicism expresses the duality of the 13th of Adar:

- The Chorus and protagonists singing the words “the 13th of Adar,” with linear uses of the chromatic y set against the harmonic use of the diatonic z set (Act I, Scene 12)
- The Chorus in lamentation, expressed in chromatic melodic gestures supported by harmonies comprised of z-set members (Act II, Scene 8).

The juxtaposition of chromaticism and diatonicism also expresses issues of Jewish identity:

- The diatonic material in the Children’s Chorus contrasts to Haman’s naming himself with the y-set (Act III, Scene 8)
- The Chorus hails “Mordecai’s Day! Mordecai’s Day,” the “triumphant” z-set, [E, F#, B, C#], reclaiming Mordecai’s identity under threat by Haman and Zeresh’s ridicule, x-set (Act III, Scene 9)

Weisgall uses extended diatonic material in the following instances:

- To express the idea of a Jewish “home,” with an extended E-major sonority (Act I, Scene 2)
- To capture Esther’s sensuousness, a quality she relies upon to capture Xerxes’ heart and later convince him to save her people (Act I, Scene 8-9)
- To express the idea of Jewish rescue, for example, the “unharmed” harmony, [B♭, C, E♭, F] with G♭ bass (Act II, Scene 8)
To express the idea of preservation in the “forever” sequence (Act III, Scene 11)

As I have enumerated above, Weisgall’s harmonic language functions within the exigencies of the drama in his use of both acerbic, dissonant chromatic music and lush, diatonic passages.

In the 2009 interview, Allison Weisgall also stated that *Esther* was Weisgall’s “crowning achievement.” She noted how important Judaism was to him, and that the story resonated with him particularly because it was a story about “standing up for who you are and standing up for Judaism.” The opera thus confronts the idea of war, generally, but emphasizes the Holocaust as the seminal moment around which contemporary Jewish identity rests. We might speculate that for Weisgall, who had many relatives die in concentration camps (as his granddaughter related), composing *Esther* would have provided some relief from the guilt of surviving them, a formidable challenge for many Holocaust survivors and their families.

In his review of the premiere, the critic Edward Rothstein wrote, “On Friday night, the composer’s triumph could not have been more complete. By the opera’s end there was a sense of genuine excitement in the audience.” Indeed, while the sum total of Weisgall’s music is intelligent, complex, and worthy of detailed study, the positive critical reception of *Esther*, and the importance Weisgall attached to this opera, compelled me to research and write particularly on this topic. One of my goals was to contribute a serious study, in particular a detailed examination of the musical language of *Esther*, to the literature—which has lacked detailed analytical consideration of Weisgall’s

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final opera. For a composer of his stature, there remains a dearth of studies on his compositional style and practices.

**Future Studies**

While this essay addresses aspects of *Esther* specifically regarding the Chorus, further analysis and study of *Esther* would be valuable, for example, in the specific musical ways in which Weisgall paints each of the main protagonists—Esther, Haman, Mordecai and Xerxes—and develops their characters dramatically through the music. Like Handel, Weisgall composed works on Esther and Athaliah; thus, as a companion study to *Esther*, future research might include the biblical subject matter of *Athaliah*, and Weisgall’s use of large choruses.

Also of interest for future research is Weisgall’s final work, *Evening Liturgies*, a setting of the synagogue service, performed as a concert work in June, 1996 at St. Peter’s Church in New York. In conversation in the early 1980s, the scholar of Jewish music Neil Levin noted, Weisgall had planted a seed to write *Evening Liturgies*: “‘Don’t you think it extraordinary,’ the composer asked, ‘that I’ve never been asked to write a synagogue service?’ Finally, in the mid-to-late 1980s, that situation changed.”

24 But although Temple Emanu-El in New York commissioned Weisgall to write a Sabbath-eve service in the 1980s, the work was never finished, and the commission cancelled, since the musicians at the temple were, in Levin’s words, “put off by Weisgall’s characteristic astringent chromaticism, angular lines, avoidance of traditional tonality, and overall

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uncompromising sophistication . . . . They were unable to appreciate the underlying lyricism and the harmonic richness.”

In the early 1990s, JoAnn Rice (one of Weisgall’s students at the Cantors Institute) and the Florilegium Chamber Choir commissioned the completion of Weisgall’s service. Levin describes the work as follows: “Though the work as a whole is nontonal, or not tied to tonality, there are subtle tonal implications throughout, with harmonic and chromatic enrichments.” The style appears similar to elements in my discussion of Esther, and one might compare Weisgall’s writing in Esther to his writing in Evening Liturgies, two final works that expressed his ideas about Judaism.

Weisgall was working on various projects at the time of his death, in 1997. It nevertheless seems appropriate that Esther was his final opera. He received public accolades and recognition towards the end of his life for Esther, and it also served as a personal statement, a testimony to his century, to his Jewish faith and identity.

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25 Levin, liner notes.
26 Ibid.
Bibliography

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