



The Goldkorn Variations

a trilogy

Leslie Epstein

THE DEFINITIVE EDITION

ALSO BY LESLIE EPSTEIN

Hill of Beans: A Novel of War and Celluloid

The Eighth Wonder of the World

San Remo Drive

Pandaemonium

Pinto and Sons

Regina

King of the Jews

The Steinway Quintet Plus Four

P. D. Kimerakov

The Goldkorn Variations

The Goldkorn Variations

a trilogy

Leslie Epstein

THE DEFINITIVE EDITION



2022
Un-Gyve Press
Boston

Copyright © 2022 Leslie Epstein
Copyright © 2022 Un-Gyve Press, an imprint of The Un-Gyve Limited Group
Cover ESQUISSE 2.8.62 II Pablo Picasso August 2, 1962 sketchbook illustration,
courtesy Pace Gallery
Copyright © 2022 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

All rights reserved.

Reproduction, transmission, or storage of this work, in whole or in part, is prohibited in any form,
by any means without written permission from the publishers.

This is a work of fiction. Although some characters may bear some resemblance to historical and
living figures, the narrative is in no way intended
to be a depiction of any real events.

“The Steinway Quintet” was previously published in different form in *The Steinway Quintet Plus Four* in 1976 by Little, Brown & Company. Portions of “Music of the Spheres” appeared in the Winter 1985 issue of *The Georgia Review*. Portions of “The Magic Flute” appeared in the January 1985 issue of *Moment* magazine. *Goldkorn Tales* was previously published in the United States in 1985 by E. P. Dutton, Inc., New York, N.Y. and simultaneously in Canada by Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, Toronto. *Ice Fire Water* was originally published by W. W. Norton & Company in 1999. Portions of *Ice Fire Water* have appeared in different form in *Harper’s Magazine* and *TriQuarterly*. *Liebestod: Opera Buffa with Leib Goldkorn* was previously published by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, N.Y. and London in 2012; and was previously published, in part, in *Superstition Review* and *The Seattle Review*. The original manuscript of Gustav Mahler’s libretto for *Rübezahl* is in the Osborn Collection of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Permissions obtained for *Liebestod* as follows: “On a Slow Boat to China” by Frank Loesser, copyright ©1948 (renewed) by Frank Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Hal Leonard Corporation. “Pagan Love Song,” words and music by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown, copyright © 1929 (renewed 1957) by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc. All rights administered by EMI Robbins Catalog Inc. (publishing) and Alfred Publishing Co., Inc. (print). All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc. “I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi (I Like You Very Much),” lyrics by Mack Gordon and music by Harry Warren, copyright © 1941 (renewed) by Twentieth Century Music Corporation. All rights administered by EMI Miller Catalog Inc. (publishing) and Alfred Publishing Co., Inc. (print) All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Publishing Co., Inc. “The Continental,” words by Herb Magidson and music by Con Conrad, copyright © 1934 (renewed) by WB Music Corp. and Bernhardt Music. All rights administered by WB Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Epstein, Leslie.

The Goldkorn Variations: a trilogy. / Leslie Epstein. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Goldkorn, Leib (Fictitious character)—Fiction. 2. Jews—New York (State)— New York— Fiction. 3. Holocaust survivors—Fiction. 4. Jewish musicians—Fiction.
5. Mahler, Gustav, 1860–1911—Fiction. 6. Opera—Fiction. 7. New York (N.Y.)— Fiction. 8. Jewish fiction. 9. Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3555.P655L54 2021

813'.54—dc23

Published in the United States by
Un-Gyve Press 139A Charles Street, Boston, MA 02116

Designed by Un-Gyve Limited

Manufactured in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Control Number:
2021948860

ISBN: 978-0-9993632-4-9

For Anya, Paul, and Theo.
Reasons for living.

And for Sylvie and Eve, Annika and Ezra, Jack and Drew.
Providers of joy.

And for Ilene.
For everything.

CONTENTS

ONE

Goldkorn Tales: Three Novellas

I

TWO

Ice Fire Water: A Leib Goldkorn Cocktail

217

THREE

Liebestod: Opera Buffa with Leib Goldkorn

477

LAST NOTES

Leib in Love and Afterword

714

Goldkorn Tales: Three Novellas

For Uncle Julie

CONTENTS

ONE
The Steinway Quintet

I

TWO
Music of the Spheres

55

THREE
The Magic Flute

119

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.

—*The Tempest*

The Steinway Quintet

There's many a beast, then, in a populous city.

—*Othello*

1

Good evening, my name is L. Goldkorn and my specialty is woodwind instruments, with emphasis on the flute. However, in 1963, on the Avenue Amsterdam, my instrument was stolen from me by a green-trousered youth and has not in spite of strong efforts been to this day restored. This is the reason I play at the Steinway Restaurant the Bechstein piano and not the Rudall & Rose-model flute with which my career began at the Imperial and Royal Hof-Operntheater Orchester. An example of my work on this instrument may be found on gramophone recordings of the NBC Orchestra, A. Toscanini conducting, in particular the lively overture to *The Secret of Susanna* by E. Wolf-Ferrari, in which exists, for the flute, a definite solo passage.

I wish to say that I am an American citizen since 1943. My wife is living, too. At this time she spends most of her day in bed, or on the sofa, watching the television; it is rare that her health allows her to walk the five flights of stairs to the street. In our lives we were blessed with a single child, a daughter, who did not upon birth thrive. Although the flute was in a case, and the case was securely under my arm, a black man took it from me and at once ran away. It was a prize upon graduation from the Akademie für Musik, Philosophie, und darstellende Kunst, when I was fourteen. Only a boy.

Nineteen sixty-three. That is what Americans call ancient history. Let us speak of more recent events.

It was at the Steinway Restaurant a quiet night, a Tuesday night,

raining, only four tables, or five tables, occupied. The opinion of experts was that soon the rain would turn into snow. Mosk, a waiter, came to the back of the room.

“You got a request,” he told Salpeter, our first violinist.

“Yes?” Salpeter replied.

“From the lady. Purple dress. Pearls. Onion herring.”

This lady was a nice-looking young person, a nice dress lacking straps, her hair a mixture of red and brown. She smiled—what bright, dazzling teeth!—at the Quintet members.

“Yes?”

“ ‘Some Enchanted Evening.’ ”

Salpeter picked up his bow. Marmelstein, second violinist, put his instrument under his chin. Also present were Tartakower, a flautist, and the old ’cellist, A. Baer. For an instant there was silence. I mean, not only from the Steinway Quintet, which had not yet started to play, but from the restaurant patrons, who ceased conversation, who stopped chewing food; silence also from Margolies, Mosk, Ellenbogen, still as statues, with napkins over their arms. You could not see in or out of the panes of the window, because the warmth had created a mist. Around each chandelier was a circle of electrical light. Outside, on Rivington Street, on Allen Street, wet tires of cars made a sound: *shhhh!* Salpeter dipped one shoulder forward and drew his bow over the strings. The sweet music of R. Rodgers filled the room.

It was during the performance of this selection that the door opened and two men, a tall Sephardic Jew and a short Jew, also of Iberian background, came in. Their hats and the cloth of their shoulders were damp. They walked through the tables to the bar, which is located directly opposite the platform where the musicians are seated. It is possible for my colleagues and me to see ourselves in the mirror of this bar while playing. Without removing their hats, the two men ordered some beer to drink.

After a time a party of four, who had dined on roasted duck, on famed Roumanian broilings, stood up, then departed; as they did so, snowflakes came in the door. The night in the crack looked dark. Marmelstein, by no means unskilled, received a specific request: “September Song.” Of course from *Knickerbocker Holiday*. When this selection came to an end, the lady in the purple dress put on a raccoon-type coat and, with a gentleman companion, went out to Rivington Street. The chimes of the First Warsaw Congregation

sounded eleven o'clock. The members of the Steinway Quintet had then some tea. The figs and the cakes were removed from the window. At a side table Martinez, the cook, was eating a plate of potatoes. Tartakower smoked. The heat went off; the temperature dropped. It helped to warm clumsy fingers on the outside of a glass. At eleven fifteen Salpeter nodded. We played selections from Mister Sigmund Romberg's *The Student Prince*.

At this moment the mouth of Ellenbogen's wife, who mixed liquors at the bar, dropped completely open and her hands rose into the air. The explanation for this was in the mirror behind her: both Sephardim were holding big guns. Out of the open mouth of Madam Ellenbogen came a scream. The music, except for the violoncello, ceased. The tall man stood up and put his hand over the barmaid's face. Ellenbogen himself allowed a tray of something, strudel perhaps, to tip slowly onto the floor. Tartakower leaned toward the old musician.

"Mister Baer, time to stop."

The short man climbed to the top of the bar. "We don't want no trouble and we don't want nobody hurt. But you gotta cooperate with us. Anybody who don't cooperate completely is gonna be hurt very bad." This man had still his hat low over his eyes. However, it was possible to see that he had a thin moustache on his lip, and at the end of a long chin were a few added hairs, just wisps. A young man, then. In profuse perspiration.

"The first thing is to cut out that music."

This was a reference to A. Baer, who had come to the end of the vigorous "Drinking Song" and was now beginning again.

"Pssst! Pssst! Mister Baer!" said Tartakower, pulling on the 'cellist's shoulder.

"Mister Baer!" Salpeter echoed. "I insist that you stop!"

"No! No! Reprise!" said A. Baer, and hunched farther forward, peering at the music on the music stand.

The tall man—it was now possible to see that he had also a moustache; yet he was older, not so slight in his physique, with eyes that seemed almost sad, that is, they were close-set, drooping, filled with liquid: this man came quickly toward us, seized the bow from the aged musician, and broke it over his knee.

"Er hat gebrochen de strunes fin mein fiedl!"

Murmelstein stood up. "That ain't right what you done. He doesn't hear."

“*Er hat gebrochen mein boigenhaar!*”

“I am the Quintet leader,” Salpeter said. “What is it you want? Why have you done this? Never has such a thing happened before. Do you know what Goethe said about music?”

“And H. W. Longfellow?” added the Bechstein artist.

“Up with the hands! Up! Up! Onto the wall!” The sad-eyed man held his pistol in front of the face of the first violinist. Salpeter turned; he joined Tartakower, who was already leaning against the famous murals, by Feiner, of classical Greece. And I? I stood up, I also turned about. From the corner of my eye I observed the first man, the young one, still standing on the bar top, motioning with his gun. He was making the others, the waiters and patrons, face the wall, too. “Oh! Oh!” cried Pearl Ellenbogen, again and again: “Oh! Oh!” Before me was Socrates—Feiner was an artist who put real people into his paintings—with a group of young men beneath a tree. Murmelstein turned around, toward where A. Baer was still talking.

“Young man! You have broken my bowstring. *Mein boigenhaar!* Now how can I play? Do you know what it costs such a bowstring? The horsehairs? I paid for this seven dollars. I am Rothschild? I have such a sum in the bank? *Ai! Ai! Er reis mein bord!*”

Without thinking, Ellenbogen, Salpeter, Tartakower, and I, we all turned our heads. Terrible vision! The tall individual had taken our colleague by the hair of his beard. In only a moment he pulled the old man off his chair onto his knees. What happened next is almost too painful to speak of. The gunman released his hold upon A. Baer and leaped into the air and came down with both feet through the back of his violoncello.

“I am an American citizen since nineteen forty-three!” some person cried. The voice was familiar. Without doubt that of Leib Goldkorn.

“This was no accident! No, no, it was a purposeful act!” Tartakower speaking.

Murmelstein, a young man, not even sixty, began to advance on the terrorist, who, still with sad eyes, was nonetheless smiling. “You done that to an old man. You got no idea how old this man happens to be. Aren’t you ashamed? A venerable man? To pull his beard!”

Salpeter reached out his hand. “No, stay, Mister Murmelstein. He does not appreciate music.”

“There is a hole in it. A hole in it.” A. Baer held his instrument

in his lap as if it had been an injured child.

“What’s so funny? What is the joke here? This is a tragedy. A tragedy!” The second violinist stepped in front of the man, who, under his hat, still smiled; then that villain raised his pistol so that it pointed straight at young Marmelstein’s chest.

Suddenly from across the room his partner cried out in Ladino, “*¡Jesús! ¡El cocinero! ¡Está tratando de usar el teléfono!*”

The gunman whirled about to where his colleague was pointing. There, next to the door to the kitchen, Martinez was dropping nickels and dimes into the box of the pay telephone. The next thing we knew the hoodlum was flying in the air, Martinez was shouting, the weapon was raised and—in front of everyone’s eyes—brought down upon the cook’s head. More than once. Twice. And the victim fell to the floor. Is this not in many ways an act as terrible as the destruction of a violoncello? To attack a man’s head, where great thoughts often are born? Everyone was still. No person dared breathe. Then Tartakower spoke:

“Friends, these two are not Jews.”

I felt a chill on my neck. Like a cold hand. Then Salpeter said what we dreaded to hear:

“Hispanics!”

From Marmelstein: “Puerto Ricans!”

The tall man’s hat had fallen onto the floor. He put it back on his head, which was pomaded. Without difficulty, with a swipe of his hand, he tore the phone box off the wall.